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Naming the unnameable and knowing the unknown: the status of Dionysius' processions

Nomear o inominável e conhecer o incognoscível: o estatuto das processões de Dionísio

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Abstract

Since, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, God is unnameable, what is the status of the terms applied to him? To what the names attributed to God refer? On the other hand, do these names grant a knowledge of the divine being? In what way? My aim is to elucidate the meaning and the arguments of Dionysius' perspective on the possible knowledge of God through the processions or energies. This concept will be crucial for the development of the fourteenth century hesychast philosophy. The correct interpretation of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* will be one major topic of contention between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam the Calabrian. Palamas evokes Dionysius Areopagite's notion of "processions" to substantiate the distinction between essence and energies in God. These $\pi\rho\acute{o}\delta\omicron\iota$ are the "extension" of God outside of himself; they are several, distinct from each other and uncreated.

Keywords

Energies. Dionysius the Areopagite. Knowledge of God.

Resumo

Uma vez que, segundo Dionísio, o Areopagita, Deus é inominável, qual é o estatuto dos termos aplicados a ele? A que se referem os nomes atribuídos a Deus? Por outro lado, esses nomes garantem um conhecimento do ser divino? De que forma? O meu objetivo é elucidar o significado e os argumentos da perspectiva de Dionísio sobre o conhecimento possível de Deus através das processões ou energias. Este conceito será crucial para o desenvolvimento da filosofia hesicasta do século XIV. A interpretação correta do *Corpus Areopagiticum* será um dos principais tópicos de discussão entre Gregório Palamas e Barlaão, o Calabrês. Palamas evoca a noção de Dionísio Areopagita de "processões" para fundamentar a distinção entre essência

e energias em Deus. Estas πρόοδοι são a “extensão” de Deus fora de si mesmo; são várias, distintas umas das outras e não criadas.

Palavras-chave

Energias. Dionísio o Areopagita. Conhecimento de Deus.

Introduction: Dionysius Areopagite, a mysterious figure

There is not much we can say for sure about the author of the collection of texts, which include four treatises: *Divine Names* (Περὶ θεῶν ὀνομάτων), *Mystical Theology* (Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας), *Celestial Hierarchy* (Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίου ἱεραρχίας), *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (Περὶ τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς ἱεραρχίας), and ten *Letters*¹. This collection of texts started to circulate in the early sixth century in Syria.

It is the author of these texts himself who suggests that he is Dionysius, the disciple of St Paul, who, according to the *Acts of the Apostles* (17:22-34), was converted to the Christian faith after hearing the apostle’s discourse to the Athenians on the “unknown God”. The addressees of his letters are, for the most part, mentioned in the New Testament’s *Epistles* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. For instance, the first four are addressed to Gaius (monk), Paul’s collaborator (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14), the sixth to Sosipater (deacon) (Rom 16:21), the ninth to Titus (bishop) (Letter of St. Paul to Titus, 2 Cor 2:13), the tenth to St. John (theologian, apostle, and evangelist), exiled on Patmos. It is possible that these addressees constitute an ascending hierarchical sequence – monks, deacons, priests, bishops, and apostles. The eighth letter represents a rupture with this ascending hierarchy, since it is addressed to a monk called Demophilus, who, however, is accused in the letter itself of endangering the hierarchical order (cf. HATHAWAY, 1969, p. 65). In the seventh letter, the author claims to have witnessed the eclipse caused by Christ’s crucifixion (Mt 27:45) and in the *Divine Names* the dormition of the *Theotokos*.

¹ There is a discussion on what is the correct order of the texts. Vid. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid and P. Rorem. London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1987. I used the Migne edition of the *corpus areopagiticum* in *Patrologia Graeca*, 3, and, mainly, the translation into English of Luibheid and Rorem (with modifications of the translation of some terms which I considered not satisfactory).

With so many “testimonies” of the author of the *corpus* himself, it was not surprising that its authorship was not disputed. Consequently, throughout the Latin Middle Ages, the authorship of the *corpus* was not significantly contested. And I use the term “significantly” because there were, at a very late stage, those who suspected that the texts contained some elements that indicate that they could not have been written by Dionysius, the contemporary of St. Paul. Among these who doubted the authorship of the texts were Peter Abelard and, later, Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus of Rotterdam.

In the Byzantine East, almost since the beginning of the dissemination of the *corpus*, there was suspicion. In 532, Hypatius of Ephesus asserts, during a synod with the Monophysites, that the writings are pseudepigraphs. Later, Photius (ninth century) was also sceptical regarding the authorship (cf. SCHÄFER, 2006, p. 14-15).

In the ninth century, Hilduin, abbot of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, near to Paris, whose patron was, precisely, Dionysius, translated the *corpus* into Latin². Charles II ordered a new translation from Scotus Eriugena. But it was not until the thirteenth century that Dionysius’ works were widely commented by authors such as Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio.

About this mysterious personage, I will mention only the aspects that are consensual: He is probably of Syrian origin. The earliest reference to Dionysius can be found in a report on a synod, which took place in 532, between a group of followers of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and a group of followers of Severus (known as Monophysites) (cf. PELIKAN, 1987, p. 13). In this meeting, the Monophysites quote several authorities who supposedly confirm their doctrine of the single nature of Christ, among them is Dionysius Areopagite. For Christian Schäfer who follows the German Suchla, the first reference to Dionysius occurred in 528 in the

² In Eusebius’ *Church History* (IV 23), the converted Dionysius of Acts 17, 34 is considered to be the first bishop of Corinth. In the ninth century, the abbot Hilduin of Saint-Dionysius identifies the Areopagite and first bishop of Corinth with the first martyred bishop of Paris, Dionysius, who had been buried in his abbey. This led to an intense activity of translation and commentary of Dionysius’ writings in the West; first in the Carolingian France but rapidly expanding throughout Western Europe.

work of the Patriarch of Antioch, Severus (SCHÄFER, 2006, p. 12). In any case, both scholars connect Dionysius to Monophysite milieus.

The author of the *corpus* is not Dionysius, the contemporary of Paul, for several reasons. First, because his texts use passages from Proclus several times. In fact, the final part of the chapter four of the *Divine Names*, which deals with the problem of evil, is almost a paraphrase of Proclus' *De Malorum subsistentia*. Well, Proclus died in 487, therefore the *Corpus Areopagiticum* cannot be earlier than this century.

It is also possible to find traces of other traditions, including not only the Neoplatonic philosophy but also the Alexandrian school of Philo, Clement, and Origen, as well as Gregory of Nyssa, and also the traditions of Egyptian and Syrian monasticism. The theological vocabulary shows a dogmatic precision ignored by the apostolic age, such as, for instance, the use of the term "hypostasis" to designate the persons of the Trinity. In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the author describes rites which were only instituted later, such as that of monastic consecration, which is not earlier than the third century, and the recitation of the Creed during the liturgy, which was only introduced into the liturgical rite in 515 by Timothy, Patriarch of Constantinople.

I will not explore the controversies about the identity of the author of the *Corpus*. Several possibilities have been set forth: Severus of Antioch, Peter Fullo, a disciple of Proclus, Dionysius Exiguus, a disciple of St. Basil, Dionysius Rhinocolura, Petrus Ibericus, Dionysius Scholasticus, Sergius of Reshaina, or John of Scythopolis. Lately, Carlo Maria Mazzucchi set forth the thesis that the author of the *corpus aeropagiticum* is, in fact, the Neoplatonist Damascius (MAZZUCCHI, 2006)³.

1. An interpretation key: Jean Borella

It is not by chance that the author hides his identity under the name of Dionysius, converted by Paul. However, contrary to the predominant modern reading, and according to

³ Gioacchino Curiello (2013) states that Mazzucchi's thesis is not convincing.

Jean Borella, position I subscribe, the author of the *corpus* did not intend to ensnare or undercover a personal theological agenda, but to symbolise (BORELLA, 2002, p. 36-37).

Consequently, all the characters and places mentioned in the corpus of texts have a symbolic function. More specifically, the very name of Dionysius shows that the author's gnosis is Pauline. His gnosis is the true gnosis of which Paul speaks about to the Athenians at the Areopagus, but his ultimate spiritual direction is the entry into the secrets of the heart of Christ and that is why he addresses his last letter to St. John, prisoner on the island of Patmos, the disciple who reclined on the heart of Christ. Dionysius' four works are dedicated to Timothy, and this is not by chance either. According to Borella, and confirming his thesis, it is to Timothy that Paul of Tarsus advises to avoid "false gnosis" (*pseudonumos gnôsis*) (BORELLA, 2002, p. 43). Therefore, Dionysius' aim is to lead to true gnosis. It is bearing in mind this symbolic significance of the name chosen by the author of the *corpus* that I argue the texts should be interpreted.

2. Naming the unnameable

In Dionysius' view, the human intellect naturally desires the theological truth (cf. DN, 684C)⁴, that is, to know God, given that it is made in his image and likeness. This condition endows the human beings with an interior inclination that disposes them, using the faculties they possess, to pursuit their ultimate end, which, for Dionysius more than the knowledge of God, is the union (ἔνωσις) with the divine being. It is the power of divine similitude, Dionysius affirms, that makes all things return to their Cause: "It is the power of the divine similarity which returns all created things toward their Cause, and these things must be reckoned to be similar to God by reason of the divine image and likeness" (DN, 913C).

The yearning to fulfil the union leads human beings through a process that includes the desire to know the divine being. Consequently, the human mind, from the Revelation, the

⁴ DN = *Divine Names*.

Tradition, and the created beings, reaches conclusions or affirmations about God. But also realizes what God is not.

Dionysius begins his most extensive and elaborate work, which deals with the names that can be attributed to God, with, precisely, the paradoxical assertion that nothing can be said about God. Immediately one might ask about the pertinence of a work on the divine names that begins by stating, peremptorily, that nothing can be said about God:

The inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence... (DN, 588B).

Dionysius himself refers the problem of God's ineffability and nominability:

And yet, if it surpasses all discourse and all knowledge (γνώσεως), and if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things but Itself is altogether incomprehensible to all, and of It, there is neither perception (αἴσθησις), nor imagination (φαντασία), nor opinion (δόξα), nor name (ὄνομα), nor discourse (λόγος), nor apprehension (ἐπαφή), nor science (ἐπιστήμη), how then is our discourse concerning the divine names to be accomplished, since we see that the superessential Godhead is unspeakable and unnameable? (DN, 593A-B).

Dionysius states that the very unknowability of the Godhead, that he is beyond being, is revealed in the Scripture. God reveals himself as the super-essential principle of all principles (cf. DN, 589C). Yet, this is also a conclusion that the reasoning experience can achieve after the unsuccessful attempt of the mind to circumscribe the deity with affirmations and negations about its nature.⁵ One of Dionysius' aims is to demonstrate what can be known of God using human cognitive power. However, the human mind can only know what belongs to the realm of being. God is beyond being, so the problem that arises is how to know God, since he cannot be touched either by the senses nor by thought: "If God cannot be apprehended by the mind

⁵ Perl (2007, p. 1) points out that to affirm that God is "beyond being" is not merely a vague assertion of divine transcendence. It is, rather, within the Neoplatonic context, "the conclusion of a definite sequence of philosophical reasoning". The same is true for other Dionysian themes such as the procession, and mystical union. These are all constructed following a line of reasoning; therefore, they are philosophical.

(νοητὸν) nor by sense perception (αἰσθητὸν), if he is not a particular being, how do we know him?" (DN, 689C).

The possibility of naming God refers to the possibility of knowing him. If there are names that can be attributed to God, this means that there is something of God that is knowable. However, since God is beyond existence and essence, there are no names that can properly exhaust what he is in his very being. Consequently, to what reality the names of God refer to? And how is it possible to name him?

2.1. The manifestation of God

It is possible to know some attributes of God because he manifests himself in the creation, in the very act of creating, and in the Revelation. God does not remain enclosed in his own transcendence. It does not remain enclosed in its transcendence because he is good. The name of God, celebrated prominently by the sacred writers and with which Dionysius begins the *Divine Names* is, precisely, the Good [τάγαθόν]: "In the sacred oracle the Divinity benevolently taught us that the science and contemplation [ἐπιστήμη καὶ θεωρία] of itself is inaccessible to beings, since it actually surpasses beings. Many of the theologians will tell you that divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also "unsearchable and inscrutable," (...). And yet, on the other hand, the Good is not incommunicable. From itself it generously reveals a transcendent ray, granting illuminations proportionate to each being and thus draws the sacred intellects [ἱεροὺς νόας] to contemplation, participation and likeness to itself" (DN, 588C). The Good, Dionysius claims, by its very nature, communicates itself (this idea was expressed in the Middle Ages by the axiom "*Bonum est diffusivum sui*"). And what does it communicate? It does not communicate his own super-essential essence, but illuminations proportional to each being so as to elevate them to the contemplation of himself, to the participation in himself, to the similarity to himself, in a word to deification.

And yet, since it is the underpinning of goodness, and by merely being there is the cause of everything, to praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation. It is there at the center of everything, and everything has it for a destiny. It is there "before all things and in it all things hold together". Because it is there the world has come to be and exists. All things long for

it. The intelligent and rational long for it by way of knowledge, the lower strata by way of perception, the remainder by way of the stirrings of being alive and in whatever fashion befits their condition (DN, 593D).

Therefore, the names that are attributed to God stem from the whole of creation. This is the matter from which the “holy writers”, after God has revealed himself to them, and, by condescension revealed himself and became by his will revealed divinity, determined in relation to creatures, elaborated their discourse on what they have contemplated. These “holy writers” because their will is unified with God, Dionysius states, ardently desire to elevate other souls. That is why they wrote the Scriptures and elaborated the liturgical rites.

2.2. The symbols

Liturgical, and Scriptural symbols (images) are, at the same time, however, means of elevation to the divine, when contemplated by those initiated into the mysteries, and a way of concealment of the divine, when seen by the profane: “In Symbolic Theology I explained in detail all those scriptural passages concerning God which to the vulgar appear monstrous. To the uninitiated soul it makes an impression of terrible absurdity that the Ancients reveal through secret and audacious enigmas this mystical truth of inaccessible Wisdom which remains incomprehensible to the profane” (Epistle IX, 1104B).

Or, to put it another way, divinity is revealed and hidden through symbols: “Nor have the inspired Hierarchs conveyed these things to the vulgar through clear concepts, but through sacred symbols. For not all are saints, and, as Holy Scripture affirms, knowledge is not for all” (EH, 376C).⁶

In fact, several times Dionysius states that it is necessary to hide the holy things from the profane and uninitiated: “But take heed, that none of the uninitiated hear you speak of this” (MT, 2).⁷ And: “Keep these things of God away from the uninitiated. Let them be transmitted through enlightenment to holy men only” (EH, 372A). “Let these things be kept from the

⁶ EH = *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

⁷ MT = *Mystical Theology*.

mockery and laughter of the uninitiated ... and you must never speak or divulge divine things to the uninitiated” (DN, 597C).

According to Dionysius, Sacred Scripture is a privileged image of God. Therefore, in order to speak about him, one must turn to the Sacred Discourse [ιερωτων λογιων] or Holy Scripture (DN, 588A).

It is possible to state that, in Dionysius, in the beginning it was the Revelation of God. It is the Divinity, the *Tearchia*, in Dionysius’ expression, that first shows itself, reveals itself. And to whom does it reveal itself? First, to the “sacred initiators”, the apostles and writers of the Scriptures. To them, the Divinity granted the fullness of the sacred gift, and then sent them to lead others to the attainment of this same gift. After having experienced the Revelation of the divinity, they try to express it by means of symbols derived from the senses, because the human being’s nature, Dionysius states, comprising matter and spirit, needs perceptible and aesthetic mediations, in order to be elevated to the level of the intelligible [νοετα]:

The first leaders of our hierarchy received the fullness of the sacred gift of transcendent Divinity. Then divine goodness sent them to lead others to this same gift. As gods, they had a fiery and generous urgency to secure elevation and divinization for their subordinates. And so, using images derived from the senses, they spoke of the transcendent. They conveyed what was one through variegation and plurality. By necessity, they made human what was divine. They transformed into material what was immaterial. In their written and unwritten initiations, they brought the transcendent down to our level. As they had been commanded to do, they did this for us, not only because of the profane from whom symbols must be kept out of reach, but because, as I have said before, our hierarchy is by its nature symbolic and adapted to what we are. In a divine way it needs perceptible things in order to rise to the realm of the intellectual (EH, 376D).

There are, therefore, two reasons, Dionysius claim, to produce types for the typeless and forms for the formless. One reason relates to the very limitation of human reason, which lacks the capacity to rise directly to the contemplation of the intelligible. The other one relates to the need to conceal “the sacred and secret truth about the heavenly intelligences” from the multitude (CH, 140B)⁸, for “not all are saints”.

⁸ CH = *Celestial Hierarchy*.

The different names of God are also, therefore, symbols of that which transcend all being and thought. There are names that refer indistinctly to the Godhead (*theion*), such as “God”, “Good”, “Existent”, but there are names that refer not to the undifferentiated Godhead but to certain eternally differentiated elements of its manifestation, i.e., the names of the three persons of the Trinity.

The term Father denotes something different from the term Son, etc. The Absolute-manifested, as a whole, is God, Creator, Saviour, Lord, Eternal, Perfect, etc., but only one of the persons of the Godhead is Father, or Son, or Holy Spirit. It is because of the limited capacity to understand the manifestation of the Godhead that the undifferentiated names appear to human beings as distinct from one another. It is the limited capacity of human reason that attributes multiple names to the manifestation of the Godhead. Consequently, different terms such as “God”, “Perfect”, “Good”, denote the same reality, the Godhead. On the other hand, the differentiated names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in fact, represent distinctions in the eternal manifestation of the Godhead. Thus, the concealed-Absolute is super-essence, and the eternally-manifested-Absolute is Trinity. However, this division between the concealed-Absolute, forever unknowable, super-essential, and the Manifested-Absolute, *Unitrinity*, in Dionysius’ expression, are the Same. They are separable only because of the linguistic weakness in translating the mystical realities. The very persons of the Trinity are, in Dionysius’ view, super-essential (DN, 821D). Dionysius calls Christ the “super-essential Jesus”: ὁ ὑπερούσιος Ἰησοῦς (cf. MT, 1032D).

And how is it that from images, from symbols, the intellect can rise to the contemplation of God? And if God cannot be at all encompassed, what is the intellect contemplating when it rises, its super-essential essence or other reality?

3. The processions of God

God’s nature cannot be known, that is, his super-essential essence, but God can be known through his activity in things, his creative activity:

Perhaps it is more correct to say that we cannot know the nature (φύσεως) of God, since it is unknowable and beyond the reach of reason (λόγον) and intellect (νοῦν), however, through the order (ταξει) of things, which bear a certain image and resemblance to His Divine Exemplars (παραδειγμάτων) by being in a sense a projection of Him, we may rise, as far as we can, by advancing through the negation and overcoming of all things and the conception of the cause of all things. He is therefore known in all things and while distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him, there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand, he cannot be understood, words cannot encompass him, and no name can define him. He is not one of the things that are and cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things, and he is none of them. He is known by all from all things and from all things he is known by none (DN, 869D-872B).

What Dionysius intends here is to show that God makes himself known by distinctions outside of his nature, the concealed and secret “part” of God, his super-essence. God communicates himself in the processions that are his manifestation in which created beings also can participate. Thus, when the divine being is designated by “God”, “Life”, “Substance”, etc., what is being referred are the deifying, vivifying, etc., processions or activities (δυνάμεις) by which God communicates himself while remaining incommunicable by nature, makes himself known while remaining unknowable (DN, 645A). Although these processions or activities are distinguished from the divine substance (ὑπαρξις), they are not separated from it, because in God “unities prevail over distinctions (διακρίσεις)” (DN 652A). The processions are God himself though “outside” his substance. For he “distinguishes himself while remaining simple and multiplies himself without losing his unity” (DN, 649B). Or, as Dionysius also affirms, God is “the One who of himself reveals himself” (DN, 712C).

Although Dionysius uses, preferentially, the term πρόοδοι, its meaning is equivalent to the meaning of energies (ἐνέργειαι), which was used by the Cappadocians, especially Gregory of Nyssa. It is possible to find in the *Divine Names* this term, that is, ἐνέργειαι and also δυνάμεις. The meaning of the three terms seems to be equivalent. However, at the same time, Dionysius seems to point out to a certain distinction between the terms. He mentions that from God arises processions and activities (προόδοις καὶ ἐνεργείαις) and he speaks about the procession of the

activities (πρόοδον τῶν ἐνεργειῶν) of God.⁹ The meaning of the term, in Dionysius, varies depending on whether it is in the plural or the singular. Thus, procession means the process or the activity in itself of flowing out and processions the relationship with the created beings and the effects of the procession. The names attributed to God refer, as I mentioned before, to the processions, not to the divine essence.

In either case, what is the ontological status of the processions? Are the processions or energies, as later was pointed out to Palamas, a “lesser God”?¹⁰ This is not so. The emanations of Plotinus from the One to matter are at the same time, degradations. Dionysius, in opposition to this idea, does not conceive a degradation. In fact, God is fully present in all his processions. It is difficult to conceive something that is both distinct and not separated. The same indistinctiveness occurs regarding the procession *ad intra* of God, that is, the persons of the Trinity. They are distinct from one another, but also one. Therefore, the divinity in Dionysius' view, being monad and triad is neither monad nor triad of any kind that is possible to be known by the human mind (cf. DN, 980D).

We can transpose the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the unitrinity of the nature *ad intra* of God to the *ad extra* processions. Consequently, when the mind accesses the processions of God, it accesses also in a certain way what God is, in a different mode than that of the essence.

In the same way and applying the metaphysical problem of the one and the many to the return to the source, that is, ἐνωσις, it is possible to state that, in fact, following the reasoning of Dionysius, if there is nothing outside of God, the procession of God is still in God. Creatures have never left God. However, there is the experience of a “not yet”. To be in God, in him to be, to move and to exist, but the human beings are not yet God. One is in God, because there is nothing outside of him, but at the same time, one is distinct from God. One is another in God because God also embraces distinctions. The return to the source is not really a return because

⁹ For instance, DN 916C: “...and that from him, providing for everything, arises countless processions and activities (πρόοδοις καὶ ἐνεργείαις) ...”. One must understand the straight motion of God to mean the unswerving procession of his activities (πρόοδον τῶν ἐνεργειῶν)”.

¹⁰ Cf. Vd. The discussion of Golitzin (1994, p. 56-59).

one has never left the Source. The return is the union of that which has never ceased to be united, and that is why Dionysius says that it is ineffable, beyond the mind. In Dionysius' perspective, the ultimate end of the human being is not the knowledge of God alone, but, precisely, the union (ένωσις) with God. And it is in this unitive state that God is known with knowledge beyond intelligence (*nous*):

At that moment Moses, freed from all that is seen and all that he sees, penetrates the darkness of non-knowledge, the authentically mystical darkness, and, renouncing intellectual perceptions, he reaches total intangibility and invisibility; he surrenders himself entirely to what is above everything and nothing, uniting in the most perfect way with what is completely unknowable through the total inactivity of knowledge, knowing beyond the spirit thanks to the act of knowing nothing" (MT, 1001A).

4. Conclusion: the radical unknowability of the divine essence

The Absolute has no proper image. The divinity, being infinite and unlimited, cannot be defined, because to define is to circumscribe. Any concept that might be attributed to God, therefore, limits him. Using the terms God, Creator or Saviour, it is never God himself that is designated, but his face turned toward the world, his processions, the way he appears to the world, his manifestation:

We learn all these mysteries in the Holy Scriptures, and you yourself will find that what the sacred writers have to say about the divine names refers to the beneficent processions [πρόοδος] of God (...). And so, the Transcendent is clothed in terms of being, with content and form over things that have neither content nor form, and numbers and symbols that are employed to suit the varied attributes of what is simplicity without image and supra-natural (DN, 589D - 592C).

It is not just a matter of the simple natural impotence of human faculties, but of the unspeakable, radically transcendent depth of the divine essence. God is mysterious, unknowable by his very nature. It is because of this ineffability that Dionysius also states that of God, one cannot even speak of essence. It would be more correct to speak of super-essence or more-than-essence (ύπερουσιας) because essence is already a determination. Essence is what makes something be what it is, it is what individualizes, what delimits, what makes one thing not to be confused with another. Well, God, because he is infinite and unlimited, cannot

be an essence. The super-essence is unspeakable, it is the absolute. The essence is the being, while the super-essence is “wider”, it encompasses being and non-being and surpasses them. The essence is contained in the super-essence, but the opposite is not true, the essence does not contain the super-essence.

Although the elevation through symbols and through affirmations and negations about God is a valid method to reach a certain knowledge of God, these are still ways in which reason is operating. Dionysius calls the knowledge obtained by the use of reason and which has Sacred Scripture as its sure foundation, philosophy: “This knowledge of beings, which we call the beautiful name of philosophy, and which the divine Paul calls the wisdom of God, must serve for true philosophers as a springboard to rise to Him who is the author, not only of all existence, but also of all the knowledge we can have about this existence” (Epistle VII, 1080B).

But beyond this philosophical approach to theology (God’s discourse) there is another one, a silent and mystical one. This way of entering the secrets of theology is symbolic and presupposes a mystical initiation. The other way is philosophical and demonstrative. Dionysius states, however, that these two paths intersect. Some truths about God are unveiled according to reason and other times in a way that subsumes the power of reason, as mysteries transmitted by God: “The human mind has the capacity to think, through which it perceives concepts, but it also has a unity that transcends the nature of the mind, through which it is united to things beyond itself” (DN, 865D).

There is only one thing to conclude: lately, there is only silence, the Nothingness, which means the transcendence and unknowability of the divine essence, which is superior to being and thought. This silence imposes itself as the culmination of the rational process of attempting to apprehend God. After this, the mind is ready to loosen the rational operations and start the mystical way.

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