

THE THEOLOGICAL RECEPTION OF DIONYSIAN  
APOPHATISM IN THE CHRISTIAN EAST AND WEST:  
THOMAS AQUINAS AND GREGORY PALAMAS

*by*

BOGDAN G. BUCUR

THE theological reception of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the Christian East and West is a fascinating and very fertile area of research. This paper contributes to the topic with a discussion of the divergent ways in which Dionysius' apophatism was appropriated by two authoritative representatives of the Western and Eastern theological traditions, Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas.

1. *Ps.-Dionysius Areopagites*

Ps.-Dionysius' theology is grounded in a non-ontological, or rather supra-ontological, understanding of God. Like the Plotinian One, the God of the Ps.-Areopagite transcends all categories of being – whence Dionysius' abundant use of terms compounded with the preposition ὑπερ. Indeed, if created beings are 'beingly' (οὐσίως), God must be spoken of as 'beyond any manner of being' (ὑπερουσίως). John Jones explains:

How are we to understand this adverb ὑπερουσίως? If, as is customary, we translate it as 'superessentially', then we have translated it as an adverb of manner which tells us in what manner or how the divinity exists... in a super-essential manner, a manner which transcends every finite essential manner of be-ing, and which is pre-eminently essential or substantial. This will not do for Dionysius... ὑπερουσίως is to be translated as 'beyond every manner of being' or, more literally, as 'beyond-beingly'... far from marking the divinity as existing in the highest manner or way.<sup>1</sup>

To avoid any confusion, the reader should be advised that I adopt Jones's English rendering of words related to εἶμι: as he explains, 'I translate the participle ὄν or ὄν as "be-ing"... I render οὐσία as "being", τὸ ὄν and τὰ ὄντα as "that which is", or "a being", or "beings", respectively... I render τὸ εἶναι or εἶναι as *being*.'<sup>2</sup>

Since language and thought are confined to the realm of created existence, the only valid affirmation is, strictly speaking, that God is non-being. God: 'Cause of all; but itself: nothing, as beyond-beingly apart from all' (DN 1:5). DN 5 carries on and develops this theology of paradoxes, in which God 'is' not, but offers to all beings their very *being*.

God neither was, nor will be, nor has come to be,... nor, indeed, is not; but is the *being* for beings... the being itself for beings;... *Being* is of it; it is not of *being*. *Being* is in it; it is not in *being*. *Being* has it; it does not have *being*... the before be-ing is source and end of all beings... The before be-ing proceeds to all, abides in itself (DN 5: 4, 817 D; DN 5:8, 824 A; DN 5:10, 825 B).

Examples could easily be multiplied, to the point of incorporating large portions of text, from DN 1-7. God is 'beyond being' (and is, therefore, correctly described as 'non-being'), even while He is the benevolent cause of all being, beauty, wisdom, etc. In other words, God is cause of being, yet 'non-being' in so far as He is 'beyond being'. The same applies to all other names, so that they are not understood as attributes determining the divine essence, but rather as dynamic outpourings that establish the attributes of creation. In this same sense, when Dionysius invokes the Trinity beyond being and beyond divinity in the very first line of the *Mystical Theology* (τριὰς ὑπερούσιε καὶ ὑπέρθεε), he implies that God is 'non-God' in so far as He is 'beyond God', even while imparting divinity to all creation.

Dionysius is, of course, not an 'atheist'. One should not forget that these expressions occur in a work stressing the *presence* of God, detailing the individual, ecclesial and celestial levels of the *experience* of God. In fact, the discourse about God as 'nothing' (that is, 'no thing') is, for the Ps.-Areopagite, not antagonistic to the experience of purification, illumination and union, but rather the condition *sine qua non* for genuine experience and genuine theological discourse.

God is described as ‘non-being’ only inasmuch as one engages in what Dionysius dubs impossible, namely ‘to manifest the being beyond being as beyond being’ – that is, to speak about God inasmuch as He is beyond being (DN 5:1, 816 B). Such an endeavour is impossible, because ‘[o]ur language like our knowledge is fundamentally directed towards and has its limits in being (οὐσίᾳ).’<sup>3</sup> However, one *can* speak about God in so far as He is revealed in the being-producing (wisdom-producing, life-producing etc.) processions. In other words, there *is* a legitimate discourse about God, and it is precisely this discourse that Dionysius is pursuing in DN 5: a discourse of ‘the being-producing procession’ (DN 5:1, 816 B), of ‘the divine names of the manifesting providence’ (DN 5:1, 816 C).

Finally, Ps.-Dionysius is not engaged in theology understood as ‘science about God and things divine’, but, as he himself says, in a liturgical, hymnic ‘celebration’ of the Godhead. His vocabulary, ‘represented by such terms as ὑμνεῖν and ὑμνολογία points to Dionysius’s basic concern to maintain what we might call a “cultic ambience” in all his works.’<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Alexander Golitzin and John D. Jones point out, Dionysius sets out to ‘celebrate’ (ὑμνήσαι) the being-producing processions (DN 5:1, 816 B), ‘celebrate’, that is, the divine names (DN 5:1, 816 C).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. *Thomas Aquinas’s Interpretation of Ps.-Dionysian Apophatism*

Thomas Aquinas is of course very familiar with Dionysian apophatism. He offers the following summary:

Deus non est existens, sed supra existentia, ut dicit Dionysius. Ergo non est intelligibilis, sed est supra omnem intellectum.<sup>6</sup>

The historical context is, at this point, very important. On 13 January 1241, the University of Paris condemned ten theological errors, among which the first was that the divine essence in itself would not be seen by any man or angel. Almost a century later, in 1336, the Apostolic Constitution *Benedictus Deus* specified that the beatific vision of God’s essence would be granted to the pure souls immediately after death. As Christian Trottmann remarks, discussion on the beatific vision, on *what* and *when* is seen in the beatific vision, obviously preoccupied the Western Middle Ages greatly.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding Trottman's argument that the denial of a vision of God's essence may have been common to several theological parties,<sup>8</sup> what was rejected in the pronouncements of 1241 and 1336 coincided with the view that had been held by patristic authors East *and West* before Augustine, a position still present in Western Christianity thanks to Eriugena. A slight nuance is required at this point. Trottman speaks of 'the rediscovery of the Greek fathers' and of an encounter between the Latin tradition and this rediscovered Greek tradition that accentuated the theme of divine transcendence.<sup>9</sup> Now, there is no doubt that a 'retrieval' of the Greek patristic tradition occurred with Eriugena. Nevertheless, the opposition between the 'Latin tradition' and 'certain Greek fathers' does not entirely describe the situation. A certain 'Latin tradition' before and after Augustine continued to agree with the 'Greeks' on a number of issues. On the other hand, on questions such as the exegesis of Biblical theophanies, the *visio Dei*, the relation of grace and nature, Augustine was the originator of a new (at times even revolutionary) theological line, different from that of his predecessors in the Greek and Latin traditions.<sup>10</sup> Even after the ninth century, when arguably the theology of Augustine became the dominant voice, the theology of Ambrose, Cassian, or Benedict, as well as the ongoing liturgical-hymnologic tradition of the Western Church, still represented a distinct (even if minor) voice. Notable theologians in fifth- and sixth-century Gaul — starting with Cassian, whose balanced position on grace and nature won him the unwarranted label of 'semi-Pelagian' — were quite wary of Augustine's ideas.<sup>11</sup> The pre-Augustinian understanding of theophanies, which identified Christ with the author of Biblical theophanies, remained present in hymns such as the Good Friday *Improperia* or certain Nativity hymns. The possibility of vision of God *hic et nunc*, denied by Augustine — who 'by the year 400... had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God'<sup>12</sup> — was still affirmed by Gregory the Great in his description of St Benedict's vision of the divine light.<sup>13</sup> And, interestingly, Gregory Palamas in the East will later refer to Benedict's vision as an instantiation of precisely the Christian tradition he was defending.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the condemnation of 1241 can be seen as directed not only against ‘rediscovered’ elements of the Greek fathers, but also against *surviving* elements of the same. What remains certain, however, is that the surviving-and-retrieved elements of ‘Greek’ theology are being supplanted by a different theological tradition that can be traced back to Augustine.<sup>15</sup>

A victim of the theological paradigm shift, the towering figure of Dionysius (considered, at that time, the direct disciple of St Paul) had now come to occupy the position of a heretic! In reaction, Albert the Great and his school engaged in an exegesis of Dionysian apophatism, in order to make the latter understandable and acceptable to the Western tradition. The most substantial contribution in this direction was that of Albert’s disciple, Thomas Aquinas.<sup>16</sup> Aquinas’s crucial affirmation of the identity between God’s *esse* and His essence<sup>17</sup> is the axiom upon which depend all ontological and gnoseological considerations. This is perfectly illustrated by the following text:

Deus non sic dicitur non existens quasi nullo modo sit existens, sed quia est supra omne existens, in quantum est suum esse. Unde ex hoc non sequitur quod nullo modo possit cognosci; sed quod omnem cognitionem excedat... (ST 1:12:1 ad 3).

This very dense passage contains two ideas of crucial importance. First, Aquinas operates a fundamental change in the status of being in relation to God. While Dionysius places God beyond being, positing Him as radically different, although as the cause of being, ‘for St Thomas, God is the *superesse* because He is superlatively being: the *Esse* pure and simple’.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, by way of consequence, our knowledge of things is not merely a knowledge of something that God is not: ‘we can now say of everything that is...that He is it pre-eminently; that its being belongs to Him before it belongs to the creature. It is God’s manner of being that escapes us...the *invisibilia Dei* continue to transcend our knowledge; but they transcend it in being’s own line.’<sup>19</sup> This statement by Gilson is echoed by John D. Jones, who notes that the difference between God and creatures ‘is still entitative in character as a difference between two orders of beings...there is a metaphysical and epistemological continuity

between God and beings that is rooted in the analogy of being (*ens*) and extends to the essence.<sup>20</sup>

We are, clearly, in a system different from that original Areopagitic one: as Golitzin notes, this ‘identification of the Trinity with, effectively, the Neoplatonic Noûs would have been anathema for Dionysius, as indeed it was for his predecessors’ (and, one could add, as it would be for Ps.-Dionysius’ Byzantine exegetes).<sup>21</sup> As I will argue later, one of the main factors contributing to this divergent reading of Dionysius must be recognized in the theology of Augustine; I will return to this topic shortly.

One of the tools used in the scholastic reception of Dionysius in order to ‘tame’ the radical apophatism of the Areopagite was the distinction between *res significata* and *modus significandi*. This crucial distinction goes back to Peter Lombard and remained a school procedure ever since.<sup>22</sup> Consider the following fragment in Albert the Great’s commentary on Dionysius’ *Divine Names*:

[Non enim sic agitur de nominibus symbolicis, quae non proprie dicuntur de Deo, sed per quondam similitudinem;] sed de illis quae proprie nominant ipsum, secundum quod est causa, quantum ad attributa, quibus emanant res ab ipso sicut a causa univoca, participantes per posterius illud ipsum quod in eo est vere et absolute, quantum ad rem significatam per nomen, quamvis modus significandi deficiat a representatione eius secundum quod est in Deo, relinquens illud in occulto propter hoc quod significat secundum modo quo illa res est in nobis, a quibus est impositum nomen.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the divine attributes are the ‘*res significata*’. On the basis of analogy, inasmuch as things created participate *per posterius* in the same attributes which designate God *vere et absolute*, the terms employed in Dionysius’ *Divine Names* are the proper ones to designate God;<sup>24</sup> however, since our affirmations are grounded in the limited manner in which we experience the respective ‘*res significata*’ in creatures, their ‘*modus significandi*’ is deficient.

Consequently, the negation must be qualified: ‘Non est pura negatio, sed negatur modus naturalis visionis.’<sup>25</sup> Albert distinguishes between absolute or pure negation, and relative negation.<sup>26</sup> The latter points to the disparity of the predicate (the divine attribute as named by us) in relation to the subject (God); thus the negation applies only to *the way* in which attributes are signified

(*modus significandi*), not to the signified attributes themselves (*res significata*).<sup>27</sup>

Thomas Aquinas follows the same path:

In nominibus igitur quae Deo attribuimus, est duo considerare, scilicet perfectiones ipsas significatas...et modum significandi. Quantum igitur ad id quod significant huiusmodi nomina, proprie competunt Deo, et magis proprie quam ipsis creaturis, et per prius dicuntur de eo. Quantum vero ad modum significandi, non proprie dicuntur de Deo; habent enim modum significandi qui creaturis competit;...<sup>28</sup>  
...ideo dicendum est, quod omnia huiusmodi proprie dicuntur de Deo quantum ad rem significatam, licet non quantum ad modum significandi.<sup>29</sup>

This distinction between an attribute and the mode of its predication is a device that allows both Albert and Thomas to go beyond Dionysius' strictly causal use of the divine names:

Cum igitur dicitur *Deus est bonus*, non est sensus, *Deus est causa bonitatis*, vel *Deus non est malus*, sed est sensus, *Id quod bonitatem dicimus in creaturis praexistit in Deo* et hoc quidem secundum modum altiore. Unde ex hoc non sequitur quod Deo competat esse bonum in quantum causat bonitatem, sed potius e converso quia est bonus bonitatem rebus diffundit, secundum illud Augustini, *In quantum bonus est, summus*.<sup>30</sup>

According to this passage, we can name God because the qualities that we ascribe to God pre-exist in God as determinations of the divine essence. When 'super' is said of the divine attributes, this no longer places God 'beyond' them, but rather points to the 'highest' way in which these attributes characterize God: 'secundum modum altiore' or 'eminentiori modo'.<sup>31</sup> Aquinas's understanding of causality diverged significantly from that of Ps.-Dionysius – who held precisely what Aquinas refutes in the passage above.

To explain this parting of the ways between the Ps.-Areopagite and his scholastic interpreters, we have to look at Augustine. I have indicated in an earlier note that the thesis about knowledge of God in His essence, proclaimed in 1241 as the official counterpoint to the traditional patristic view that God's will ever remain inaccessible to human and angelic minds, stems from the bishop of Hippo. It is also in Augustine that one may find abundant and very bold (relative to other patristic authors)

references to knowledge of God's *essentia* or *substantia*, as well as the intimately related thesis denying the vision of God *in via*, and relegating it only to the afterlife. Both theses — the knowledge of God in His *essentia/substantia* and the postponement of the *visio Dei* for the afterlife — are fundamental for Augustine's *De Trinitate*.

The two positions, Eastern and Augustinian, are, of course, no accident, but perfectly coherent with two different ways of appropriating and christianizing the Platonic noetic world. The Apologists typically christianized Plato's forms by reassembling them in the Logos; later authors identified them with divine 'willings'. This is how Dionysius was read by the scholiasts, and by later Byzantine writers. According to Vladimir Lossky,

the ideas are not, according to this conception, the eternal reasons of creatures contained within the very being of God, determinations of the essence to which created things refer as to their exemplary cause ... In the thought of the Greek Fathers, the divine ideas are more dynamic, more intentional in character. Their place is not in the essence, but in that which is after the essence, the divine energies: for the ideas are to be identified with the wills (*thelemata*) which determine the different modes according to which created beings participate in the divine energies.<sup>32</sup>

Augustine, on the other hand, places the forms *in* the divine essence.<sup>33</sup>

In introducing the discussion on whether divine names are predicated of God 'substantialiter' (ST 1:13:2), the two authorities opposed are John of Damascus (first objection) and Augustine (the 'sed contra').<sup>34</sup> Needless to say, since the difference between the two positions is real, Aquinas's 'ad primum' will (consciously or not) turn John of Damascus's position on its head. Whereas the Damascene distinguishes what can be named in God, and what not — every divine name 'signifies not His substance, but rather shows forth what He is not, or expresses some relation, or something following from His nature or operation'<sup>35</sup> — Aquinas reworks this into a distinction between perfect and imperfect naming of God: 'The Damascene says that these names do not signify what God is, forasmuch as by none of these names is perfectly expressed what He is; but each one signifies Him in an imperfect manner, even as creatures represent Him imperfectly.'

In fairness, it must be pointed out that Aquinas may have used a defective text, which read ‘the first name [“he-who-is”] is expressive of his existence and of what he is, καὶ τοῦ τί εἶναι’ instead of ‘but *not* what he is, καὶ οὐ τοῦ τί εἶναι’.<sup>36</sup>

For Aquinas, the deficiency in naming God is grounded not in the utter transcendence of the divine, but rather in the partial (and, thus, imperfect) possession of *esse* that characterizes created existence:

...nomina divinam substantiam significant, imperfecte tamen, sicut et creaturae imperfecte eam representant (ST 1:13:2, Responsio).

As Bradshaw observes, ‘What for Dionysius had been a limitation inherent to the relation between creature and Creator becomes for Aquinas one imposed solely by our current ways of knowing.’<sup>37</sup>

For both Albert the Great and Aquinas, negation functioned as a logical corrective to the theological discourse, a ‘fine tuning’ of what fundamentally was an *affirmation*, thus enabling us ‘to approach God with a better certainty’.<sup>38</sup> Both commentators transposed the Dionysian apophatism, which for the Ps.-Areopagite constituted an intellectual *and* experiential-mystical process, ‘not so much a conceptual act as a way of leading the soul beyond concepts into the darkness where God dwells’,<sup>39</sup> into mere dialectics: ‘*une opération intellectuelle supérieurement exigeante*’.<sup>40</sup>

Thus it appears that ‘the cataphatic dependency of apophatism’ and the shift from mystical to dialectical are two characteristic features of the scholastic exegesis of Dionysius.<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, this shift reflects the transition from Dionysius’ ‘hymnic’ theology, discussed above, to a theology, which, as one reads in the very first question of Aquinas’s *Summa*, sought to establish itself as a legitimate *scientia*.

### 3. Gregory Palamas’s Interpretation of Dionysius’ Apophatism

In fourteenth-century Byzantium, Gregory Palamas was engaged in a project very different from that of the scholastics. Barlaam of Calabria had been using Ps.-Dionysius in writings against the *Filioque*, arguing that it was impossible to make any claims with respect to the inner life of the Trinity. Whatever polemical value this argument might have had, Palamas was much more inter-

ested in rescuing Ps.-Dionysius from what he perceived as a terrible misuse. His challenge of Barlaam's agnosticism and the latter's accusations against Hesychast spirituality marked a shift in the debate on the correct understanding of Ps.-Dionysius.

Responding to attacks against monastic spirituality, Palamas wrote to preserve and reaffirm the viability of the traditional (Ps.-Dionysian!) paradigm of theology as purification, contemplation and union. His argumentation reiterated the patristic view about the final goal of the christian: it is the vision of God, the deifying vision of God. Ultimately, according to Palamas, it is the union with God that teaches the saints negative theology, and not the other way around.

In this perspective, it was natural for Palamas to ascribe only relative value to negative theology:

...by negation alone (δι' ἀποφάσεως μόνης) the intellect does not attain to superintelligible things. The ascent by negation is in fact only an apprehension of how things are distinct from God; it conveys only an image of the formless contemplation ...not being itself that contemplation...

...the perfect contemplation of God is not simply an abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις ἀπλῶς), there is a participation (μέθεξις) in divine things that is beyond (μετά) the abstraction; a gift and a possession rather than an abstraction.

By 'relative value' I do not mean to say that Palamas denied the justness or utility of negative theology. On the contrary, he viewed it as a necessary step: negation shows 'how all things are distinct from God' and 'conveys an image of the formless contemplation'. However, there was much more at stake for Palamas: union not knowledge, participation in God, not merely abstraction, gift and possession, not just negation. To sum up: negative theology is certainly good and useful, but also certainly insufficient. Moreover, once absolutized as the summit of what we may know of God, negative theology may lead to dangerous misunderstandings:

...God is referred to as non-being in a transcendent sense. But one who says this for the purpose of showing that those who say God exists are not speaking correctly is clearly not using apophatic theology in a transcendent sense, but rather to the effect that God does not exist at all. This is the acme of impiety ...

Palamas's statements are directed against a view that sought to limit apophatism to a dialectic of negative and positive statements about God, because it no longer shared the monastic emphasis on theology as contemplation. In his monastic stance against the Byzantine humanists, Gregory Palamas moves in a direction opposite to that noted above in Albert the Great and Aquinas: he places negative theology back in its traditional ascetico-mystical context, where negation is a 'stripping away' (ἀφαίρησις) and a 'cessation' (ἀπόπαυσις) accomplished 'not in words, but in reality'. He constantly distinguishes 'negative theology' from 'union'. In this context, negative theology assumes a twofold role. On the one hand, the apophatism of theological discourse is a preparation for apophatic experience. It is (the incipient) part of the ascent to the paradoxical contemplation of God as 'hidden light' and 'dazzling darkness':

...beyond the stripping away of beings (μετὰ τὴν ἀφαίρησιν τῶν ὄντων), or rather after the cessation (μετὰ τὴν ἀπόπαυσιν) [of our perceiving or thinking of them] accomplished not in words, but in reality, there remains an unknowing which is beyond knowledge; though indeed darkness, it is darkness beyond radiance, and, as the great Dionysius says (Ep 5, 1073 A), it is in this dazzling darkness that the divine things are given to the saints.

On the other hand, negative theology is the most appropriate language to give an account of the experience:

Those who, in the manner of angels, have been united to that light celebrate it by using the image of this total abstraction. The mystical union with the light teaches them that this light is superessentially transcendent to all things. Moreover, those judged worthy to receive the mystery with a faithful and prudent ear can also, by means of the abstraction (ἐκ τῆς ἀφαιρέσεως) from all things, celebrate (ὑμνεῖν) the divine and inconceivable light.

In presenting the utterances of negative theology as hymnic language preparing for and also witnessing to the experience of the divinity, Palamas preserves a Ps.-Dionysian element that had gone amiss in the scholastic transformation of theology into *scientia*: the understanding of theology as celebration.

*Conclusions*

As I mentioned in the introduction, the theological reception of Dionysius the Ps.-Areopagite in the Christian East and West offers a fascinating and very fertile area of research. Dionysius' apophatic theology has been received in both the Christian East and West, eventually playing an important role in the complex theologies of authoritative representatives of the Western and Eastern theological traditions, such as Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas. The Palamite interpretation of the Ps.-Areopagite serves the purpose of reaffirming the traditional paradigm of an experiential theology, intimately linking doctrine with contemplation and liturgy. Aquinas, on the other hand, represents the emergence of a new paradigm, characterized by an emancipation of intellectual inquiry, which tends to break the hermeneutic circle of dogma, liturgy, and contemplation.

Within these two different frameworks — Western scholastic and, respectively, Byzantine Hesychast — a further difference in the interpretation of Dionysius is in large measure due to the 'Augustine factor': whereas in the West Augustine functions as the fundamental reading-lens, in the East he is completely unknown until the fourteenth century. Moreover, the view that prevailed in the East with Gregory Palamas makes at best only marginal use of Augustine, so that the theological presupposition brought to bear in the interpretation of Dionysius is that of a non-Augustinian theological tradition.

Negative theology acquires different senses in the East and the West: Albert the Great and Aquinas reshape it into a logical corrective to the *via positiva*, situated at the level of discourse, and, thus, usable as a precious tool for the emerging academic theology. Palamas retains the mystical-experiential context of apophatism, assigning it two senses (apophatism on the level of discourse, and apophatism of the experience), and utilizing the discursive type of 'negative theology' as a prelude to, and the language accounting for, the experience of God.

It is undeniable that the scholastic exegesis of Dionysius renders important service to theology understood as a primarily intellectual enterprise. With the positive and negative 'ways' being reworked to guide a negative theology at the level of discourse, the general shift in emphasis from apophatic to cataphatic, and the postponing

of the vision of God ('theology' in the patristic sense) for our future life *in patria*, the ground is cleared for a type of religious inquiry and discourse that, no matter how rigorously controlled by the 'negative corrective', will always be fundamentally 'positive'. Indeed, even if 'Thomas reminds us again and again that we are unable to know what God is... this conviction scarcely reduces him to silence... One might even find in the *Summa* a matter-of-factness in discussing things divine that seems presumptuous... None of these treatments suggests... a writer in the grips of negative theology. However imperfect the human language is to express the divine, Thomas does not counsel silence.' Palamas, on the contrary, writes his *Triads* precisely 'in defence of the Hesychasts', and the *Tomos* 'in defence of those who devoutly practice a life of stillness'.

It is clear that any attempt at 'objective' evaluation of these divergent interpretations of Dionysius is simply utopian, given that it relies on one's *a priori* conception about what Christian theology should mean. Confessional determinations are quite obvious in the evaluation of the divergent interpretation of Ps.-Dionysius in the East and West. If Aquinas 'never took over a formula without altering its content', for Gilson this means that Aquinas 'extracted from these Sybilline formulas the correct meaning' in order to 'conform his [i.e., Dionysius'] teaching to the norms of Orthodoxy'. On the other hand, Lossky — one of Gilson's eminent disciples! — views the scholastic exegesis of Dionysius as a betrayal of genuine theology with catastrophic consequences. Indeed, from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, it could be argued that the gains secured by Aquinas's interpretation of Dionysius are largely upset by what had to be sacrificed in the process. This is so because the ascetico-mystical, experiential setting of theology, and the hymnic character of theological language are precisely what the Christian East holds as the vital and inalienable heart of Christian faith and thought.

Paradoxically, however, the method used to conduct the research that has led to this conclusion is itself the product of a theology and culture that is heir to the scholastic tradition. I would like to take this paradox as a lesson about the need to overcome the temptation, quite common in the Christian East, to transform the expectation of the vision of God *hic et nunc* into an excuse for intellectual lassitude, and also a lesson in the specific charismata of Eastern and Western Christianity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John D. Jones, 'The Ontological Difference for St Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius', *Dionysius* 4 (1980), pp. 119-32, here p.123. In order to render the breach between God's be-ing and the realm of 'being', Jones eliminates 'is' from his English rendering of Ps.-Dionysius. Thus he proposes 'the divinity: beyond-beingly' and similarly, 'the divinity: beyond-having and before-having, not supremely having and pre-having'. See also Jones's most recent article: 'An Absolutely Simple God? Frameworks for Reading Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite', *Thomist* 69 (2005), pp. 371-406.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Jones, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite. The Divine Names And Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 'Introduction', pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> John D. Jones, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite*, 'Introduction', p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Golitzin, *Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Analekta Vlatadon 59; Thessalonica, 1994), p. 230.

<sup>5</sup> This point is argued by John D. Jones in '(Mis?)-Reading the Divine Names as A Science: Aquinas' Interpretation of the Divine Names of Pseudo-Dionysius', *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* (forthcoming); see also Pantéléimon Kalaitzidis, 'Theologia Discours sur Dieu et science théologique chez Denys l'Aréopagite et Thomas d'Aquin', in Y. de Andia (ed.), *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa posterité en orient et en occident: actes du colloque international, Paris 21-24 septembre 1994* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1997), pp. 457-87.

<sup>6</sup> DN 4, quoted in ST Ia 12:1, objection 3.

<sup>7</sup> Trottmann, *La vision béatifique: Des disputes scolastiques à sa définition par Benoît XII* (Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 289; Rome: École Française de Rome), 5: 'la vision béatifique est en effet une doctrine catholique qui présente l'originalité d'avoir été fixée au Moyen Âge. Elle avait fait l'objet d'un intérêt croissant de la part des théologiens à partir du début du XIIe siècle.'

<sup>8</sup> We find, for instance, a very similarly worded condemnation of Amaury of Bene: 'Item dixit quod sicut lux non videtur in se, sed in aere, sic Deus nec ab angelo, nec ab homine videtur in se sed tantum in creaturis' (Martin of Troppau, *Chronicon pontificum et Imperatorum*, in Peytz ed., *Monumenta Germaniae Historia Scriptores* 22 [Hannover, 1871], p. 478, quoted in Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, p. 128). For more details about the factors at play in the condemnations of 1241, see Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, pp. 117-31. He concludes on the following: 'millénarisme joachimite et aristotélisme naissant, constituent un premier bipôle, tradition patristique grèque teintée d'érigénisme et augustinisme des latins, le second' (Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, p. 131).

<sup>9</sup> Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, 5; 14. It should be noted that Trottmann does not regard the clash between the Augustinian and the Greek patristic traditions as the determinant factor of the dispute. Instead, he contends, the conflicting theological views were a latent factor, that became active only when another two elements were added to the mix: the reception of Aristotle (Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, pp. 117-31), and, perhaps, the scientific progress in the area of optics (Trottmann, *La vision béatifique*, p.370; he refers the reader to K.-H. Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockam. Optics, Epistemology, and the Foundation of Semantics 1250-1345* [Leiden/ New York: Brill, 1988]).

<sup>10</sup> Basil Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins. Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift 'De Videndo Deo'* (Studia Anselmiana LIX; Rome: Herder, 1971); Michel René Barnes, 'Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine's *De Trinitate* I', *Augustinian Studies* 30 (1999), pp. 43-60; 'The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology of 400', *Modern Theology* 19 (2003), pp. 329-55; Bogdan G. Bucur, 'Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. An Eastern Orthodox Perspective', *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> See Ralph W. Mathisen, 'For Specialists Only: The Reception of Augustine and His Teachings in Fifth-Century Gaul', in J. T. Lienhard, E. C. Muller, R. Teske (eds), *Augustine. Presbyter Factus Sum* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 29-41. See also Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (NAPS Patristic Monograph Series 15; Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, 'The Visible Christ', p. 342.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 2:35.6, SC 260, pp. 240-41

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Lanne, 'L'interprétation palamite de la vision de Saint Benoît', *Le millénaire de Mont Athos: 963-1963* (Chevetogne-Venezia, 1964) II, pp. 21-47.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. André de Halleux, 'Palamisme et Scolastique: Exclusivisme dogmatique ou pluriformité théologique?', *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 4 (1973), p. 413: 'La tradition apophatique grecque avait été vulgarisée dans l'Occident médiéval par des nombreuses traductions patristiques; mais le succès même de la séduction orientale finit par provoquer la réaction des augustiniens.' The condemned thesis was 'insolite dans la tradition augustinisante des Latins, mais courante dans la patristique grecque' (Edouard Henri Weber, 'L'apophatisme Dionysien chez Albert le Grand et dans son école', in Ysabel de Andia [ed.], *Demys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en orient et en occident: actes du colloque international, Paris 21-24 septembre 1994* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1997), p. 379); on the contrary, the thesis asserted in response 'consacrait la thèse augustinienne d'une connaissance bienheureuse de l'essence divine' (Géry Provost, 'La question des noms divins: Saint Thomas entre apophatisme et ontothéologie', *Revue Thomiste* 97 [1997], p. 486.)

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed treatment, see Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, *Théologie Négative et Noms Divins Chez Saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), and his 'Noms Divins: Les sources de saint Thomas au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue Thomiste* 105 (2005), pp. 411-34; pp. 551-94.

<sup>17</sup> 'Deus est idem quod sua essentia vel natura...sua deitas, sua vita, et quidquid aliud sic de Deo praedicatur' (ST 1:3:3, Responsio). The ontological difference between God and any of his creatures is that while the latter 'non sunt suum esse, sed sunt esse habentes', in God alone 'proprius modus essendi est ut sit suum esse subsistens' (ST 1:12:4, Responsio). Aquinas is appropriating Aristotelian ontology in a creative way, adapting it to the creationist framework of Christian faith: 'while Aristotle comprehends essence as actuality, he does not perceive the contingency of (finite) essences themselves. But, for Aquinas, since these essences are contingent...they must stand in a potency relationship to *esse* and be actualized by *esse* in order to be.' (John D. Jones, 'The Ontological Difference', pp. 121-2.)

<sup>18</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), p.141.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> John D. Jones, 'Frameworks', pp. 380-81.

- <sup>21</sup> Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 52, n. 52.
- <sup>22</sup> See in this respect Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, 'Noms Divins: Les sources de saint Thomas au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue Thomiste* 105 (2005), pp. 583-92.
- <sup>23</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Dionysii De div nom*, ed. Coloniensis t. 37, p. 2, 25-45, ch. 5, q.18, quoted in Fries, *Albertus Magnus. Ausgewählte Texte: Lateinisch-Deutsch*. Herausgegeben und übersetzt von Albert Fries (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), p. 232.
- <sup>24</sup> The 'proper' designations of God in the 'Divine Names' is opposed to the 'symbolic' ones in the (fictional or lost) 'Symbolic Theology'.
- <sup>25</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Super Dion. De Myst. Theol.*, in Fries, *Albertus Magnus*, p. 238.
- <sup>26</sup> Weber, 'L'apophatisme dionysien', p. 383.
- <sup>27</sup> For a more detailed treatment of apophatism in Albert the Great, see Humbrecht, 'Noms Divins: Les sources...'
- <sup>28</sup> ST Ia, 13:3, Responsio; In I Sent., Dist. 35:1 ad 2.
- <sup>29</sup> In I Sent., Dist. 35:1 ad 2.
- <sup>30</sup> ST 1:13:2, Responsio.
- <sup>31</sup> ST 1:13:2, ad 2.
- <sup>32</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p. 95.
- <sup>33</sup> '...[W]e cannot ignore the transposition of the Platonic theory of ideas into the form of eternal reasons present in the divine understanding, in which everything that is participates; Thomas received that directly from Saint Augustine...' (Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1: *The Person and His Work* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996, tr. R. Royal], p. 128). According to David Bradshaw (*Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], p. 226), 'divine simplicity in Augustine is to be understood not...like that of the Plotinian One, but rather as like that of the Plotinian Intellect'. For Augustine, indeed, the Ideas are contained in the divine intelligence and 'play a dual role: (a) epistemologically, they provide adequate objects for intellectual knowing...; (b) ontologically, they are patterns, types and, at least in that sense, the causes of physical things'. (Ralph McInerny, *St Thomas Aquinas* [Boston: TwaynePublishers, 1977], p. 108.)
- <sup>34</sup> Humbrecht ('Noms Divins: Les sources...') discusses in detail '*l'enracinement augustinien*' of *substantialiter*, and its subsequent career in Peter Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas.
- <sup>35</sup> John of Damascus, *De Fide Orth.* 1: 9.
- <sup>36</sup> Discussion in Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, p. 208, n. 72.
- <sup>37</sup> Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, p. 255.
- <sup>38</sup> Albertus Magnus, *In DN*, chapter 13, in Weber, 'L'apophatisme Dionysien', p. 383. For Thomas, '*omnis negatio de re aliqua fundatur super aliquid in re existens*' (In I Sent., Dist. 35:1 ad 2).
- <sup>39</sup> Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, p. 192.
- <sup>40</sup> Weber, 'L'apophatisme Dionysien', p. 383.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Johnson, 'Apophatic Theology's Cataphatic Dependencies', *Thomist* 62 (1998), pp. 519-31.