

# Mystical Union as Acknowledgment: Pseudo-Dionysius' Account of *Henosis*

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Stimmen, Stimmen. Höre, mein Herz, wie sonst nur  
Heilige hörten: daß die der riesige Ruf  
aufhob vom Boden; sie aber knieten,  
Unmögliche, weiter und achtetens nicht:  
So waren sie hörend. Nicht, daß du Gottes erträgest  
die Stimme, bei weitem. Aber das Wehende höre,  
die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet.  
Rilke, *Duino Elegy* 1.54–60

**P**SEUDO-DIONYSIUS does not conceive the deification of man as a transformative process of radical dehumanization or overhumanization, but rather as the awakening of awareness of the primeval and perpetual condition of union with the divine. The purpose of this essay is to help clarify this problematic Dionysian theme, which is far more theologically daring than our current understanding of Dionysian thought let us believe, underlining how rooted it is in the panentheistic *Weltanschauung* of the author. I argue that:

- (a) According to Pseudo-Dionysius' account of causality, man and God are constantly united, therefore the mystical union is not a shift into a new state of being.
- (b) The process leading to mystical union, the *via negationis*, an act of progressive removal of attributes, culminates in the acknowledgment that God transcends every positive determination.
- (c) There is a straightforward connection between the *via negationis* and deification itself: when all determinations are eliminated, so are all differences between human and divine; if the divine is not “something” (i.e. it is not a determinate being), then it cannot be “something else” either. Thus, in the

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*Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 56 (2016) 771–784

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recognition of God as Not-Other, the mystic acknowledges the presence of the highest reality of the universe in one's self. This acknowledgment is the completion of the highest beatitude and the actual realization of the *unio mystica*.

The mystical union therefore must not be understood as a process of transition into an higher state of being, but as the unveiling of a hidden state of grace, a profound realization of the soul, occurring when it has been properly purified through negations, to bear in its depth the divine nature itself. When the highest reality is thus achieved, the human soul experiences the beatitude of feeling its own life as divine and infinite, because the divine lives within it and it lives through the divine. Following this path I hope to explain these complex concepts, shedding light on such a fascinating theological idea.

### 1. *The divine causality*

In Pseudo-Dionysius' account of causality a higher level of the cosmic hierarchy is not separated from what derives from it: in some way the source, through its causal power, is contained in its effects. The cause is therefore not exterior and separated from what it produces, but rather permeates it.<sup>1</sup> As such, everything existing participates (*μετελήφει*) in the cause of everything (*De coelesti hierarchia* 4.1, 177C–D):<sup>2</sup>

πάντα μὲν οὖν τὰ ὄντα μετέχει προνοίας ἐκ τῆς ὑπερουσίας καὶ παναιτίου θεότητος ἐκβλυζομένης· οὐ γὰρ ἄν ἦν, εἰ μὴ τῆς τῶν

<sup>1</sup> This postulate evidently depends on the Platonic tradition. Plotinus describes it in the *Enneads* through the metaphor of the sphere whose simplest and originary point, the center, is the innermost part (6.5.4): καὶ γὰρ εἰ λέγομεν ἄλλο μετ' αὐτὸ τὸ ἔν, ὁμοῦ αὖ αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ μετ' αὐτὸ περὶ ἐκεῖνο καὶ εἰς ἐκεῖνο καὶ αὐτοῦ οἶον γέννημα συναφὲς ἐκεῖνῳ, ὥστε τὸ μετέχον τοῦ μετ' αὐτὸ κακείνου μετεληφέναι. πολλῶν γὰρ ὄντων τῶν ἐν τῷ νοητῷ, πρώτων τε καὶ δευτέρων καὶ τρίτων, καὶ οἶον σφαίρας μιᾶς εἰς ἓν κέντρον ἀνημμένων, οὐ διαστήμασι διειλημμένων, ἀλλ' ὄντων ὁμοῦ αὐτοῖς ἀπάντων, ὅπου ἂν παρῆ τὰ τρίτα, καὶ τὰ δεύτερα καὶ τὰ πρῶτα πάρεστι.

<sup>2</sup> Text: *Corpus Dionysiacum* I, B. R. Suchla, *De divinis nominibus* (Berlin/New York 1990); II<sup>2</sup>, G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, *De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae* (2012). Transl.: C. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (Mahwah 1987).

ὄντων οὐσίας καὶ ἀρχῆς μετελήφει. τὰ μὲν οὖν ἄζωα πάντα τῷ εἶναι αὐτῆς μετέχει (τὸ γὰρ εἶναι πάντων ἐστὶν ἢ ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι θεότης).

Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent Deity which is the existence of every being.

In *De divinis nominibus* 13.3, 980B, the following characterization of God provides further useful elements to understand this account of divine causality:

καὶ πάντα ἐπ' αὐτὴν (i.e. the θεαρχία) ἐνδίκως ἀναπέμπεται καὶ ἀνατίθεται, ὑφ' ἧς καὶ ἐξ ἧς καὶ δι' ἧς καὶ ἐν ἧ καὶ εἰς ἧν πάντα ἔστι καὶ συντέτακται καὶ μένει καὶ συνέχεται καὶ ἀποπληροῦται καὶ ἐπιστρέφεται.

So all things are rightly ascribed to God since it is by him and in him and for him that all things exist, are co-ordered, remain, hold together, are completed, and are returned.

In the Dionysian view of the universe, the life-bringing activity of the divine source operates in an eternal movement of metaphysical descent: from the unmanifest thearchy, through the intermediate intelligible realms of ἄγγελοι, to the sensible world. The divine act of existence is handed from being to being, like the reflection of light on mirrors,<sup>3</sup> downward through the continuum of levels of the cosmic hierarchy: the ultimate pale gleam of the originary<sup>4</sup> light is the life by which the beings of the sensible world are animated (ἀποπληροῦται, literally “filled”), that “through whom” (δι' ἧς) all things are maintained in existence.

Another passage states clearly that the divine is present in what exists through the pure act of existence (lit. “the being

<sup>3</sup> This metaphor appears in *De coel. hier.* 3.2, 165A.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Originary’ is used in the sense of an originating cause to distinguish it from ‘original’ as a mere first cause.

itself,” τὸ εἶναι αὐτό) emanating from it, and “never leaves” (οὐδέποτε ἀπολείπεται) any being. The Godhead enlivens everything through its existence, which exists in each existent (*De div. nom.* 5.8, 824A):

καὶ τὰ μὲν πρεσβεῖα τοῦ εἶναι νέμει ταῖς κρείττοσιν οὐσίαις, ἃς καὶ αἰωνίας καλεῖ τὰ λόγια. Τὸ δὲ εἶναι αὐτὸ τῶν ὄντων πάντων οὐδέποτε ἀπολείπεται. καὶ αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ εἶναι ἐκ τοῦ προόντος, καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ οὐκ αὐτὸς τοῦ εἶναι, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐστὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ οὐκ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ εἶναι, καὶ αὐτὸν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ αὐτὸς ἔχει τὸ εἶναι (...) καὶ γὰρ οὐ τότε μὲν ἔστι, τότε δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲ πῆ μὲν ἔστι, πῆ δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν, ἀλλὰ πάντα ἐστὶν ὡς πάντων αἴτιος καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ πάσας ἀρχάς, πάντα συμπεράσματα πάντων τῶν ὄντων συνέχων καὶ προέχων, καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ πάντα ἐστὶν ὡς πρὸ πάντων ὑπερουσίως ὑπερών.

He grants the highest measure of existence to those more exalted beings described in scripture as eternal. But beings are never without being which, in turn, comes from the Preexistent. He is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possess being, but beings possesses him (...) It is not that he exists here and not there. He does not possess this kind of existence and not that. No. He is all things since he is the Cause of all things. The sources and the goals of all things are in him and are anticipated in him. But he is also superior to them all because he precedes them and is transcendently above them.

This form of non-distinction<sup>5</sup> and immanence of the cause in its effects implies that man and God are constantly united. As a result, the mystical union cannot be understood as an ontological change into a new state: the union is a perpetual condition. What then does Pseudo-Dionysius mean by deification?

<sup>5</sup> This complex conception of the immanence of the divine in creation is not to be understood as a form of mere Pantheism, since the presence of the Godhead in everything existing does not reduce the divine to the world, but rather displays a paradoxical interpenetration of transcendence and immanence: in Pseudo-Dionysius' metaphysical system the first divine principle is still causally—and therefore ontologically—prior to creation.

## 2. *Via negationis*

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystical union can be achieved at the end of a process of progressive negations of divine attributes and names, called *via negationis*: this process, culminating in the acknowledgment that God transcends every positive determination, leads to *henosis*. The description of mystical soaring represents the heart of the *De mystica theologia*, the last work of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. In the second chapter, the process of ascent toward the divine is described through a late antique Platonic metaphor:<sup>6</sup> like a sculptor carving away matter to reveal the hidden beauty of the statue, the mystic must subtract every attribute of every being in order to reveal the most profound cause of the existence of everything (*De mystica theologia* 2, 1025B):

ὡσπερ οἱ αὐτοφυῆς ἄγαλμα ποιοῦντες ἐξαιροῦντες πάντα τὰ ἐπιπροσθοῦντα τῇ καθαρᾷ τοῦ κρυφίου θεᾶ κωλύματα καὶ αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ τῇ ἀφαιρέσει μόνῃ τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀναφαίνοντες κάλλος.

We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden.

This metaphor of the *via negationis*, expressed in such a beautiful imaginative form, may be interpreted as follows: the operation of carving away matter in order to reveal the inner sculpture corresponds to the intellectual process of progressive negation of attributes in order to reveal the true nature of God. But why exactly is this the best way to attain the divine, as far as it is possible for humans?

In a conference held in Teheran in 1977, Henry Corbin,

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus *Enn.* 1.6.9 (which according to several scholars takes inspiration from Pl. *Phdr.* 252D and 254B; this metaphor was used also by Gregory of Nyssa in *In Psalmorum Inscriptiones* 2.11 (= ΚΕΦ. Ι), ed. J. McDonough and P. Alexander (Leiden 1962) 115–117; see also J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu. Essai sur la structure rationnelle de la doctrine mystique du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite* (Brussels 1959) 66–68.

one of the greatest historians of mysticism of the twentieth century, justified persuasively the use of negative theology in Greek, Near-Eastern, and Islamic theological traditions:<sup>7</sup>

La tradition néoplatonicienne aussi bien chez le Grecs que dans le trois rameaux abrahamiques, tendra à donner la priorité à la voie apophatique, à lui subordonner la voie affirmative, kataphatique, parce que l'Être se trouve lui même subordonné à l'Absolue. Nous y avons fait allusion, il y a un instant. Sans cette priorité de l'apophatique (de ce nihil dont tout procède), on ne fait qu'accumuler sur la divinité des attributs créaturels (donc du nihil dont rien ne procède). Alors le monothéisme périt dans son triomphe, dégénère dans l'idôlatrye qu'il voulait farouchement éviter.

Corbin argues that the *via negationis* was the fundamental tool mainly used in those theological systems to preserve the transcendence of God. Even if we can easily agree that negative theology avoids idolatrous conceptions of the divinity—and Pseudo-Dionysius himself also uses it in such a way—I nonetheless believe that there is a further fundamental metaphysical reason leading the mystics, who somehow depend on the Platonic tradition, to choose this particular modality of theological speech.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius every attribute and every particular determination of every entity has a cause, transcending the sensible world, that the author calls δύναμις and παράδειγμα (*De div. nom.* 5.8, 824C):

πολλῶ γε μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τῆς καὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ πάντων αἰτίας προϋφεστᾶναι τὰ πάντων τῶν ὄντων παραδείγματα κατὰ μίαν ὑπερούσιον ἔνωσιν συγχωρητέον, ἐπεὶ καὶ οὐσίας παράγει κατὰ τὴν ἀπὸ οὐσίας ἔκβασιν. παραδείγματα δὲ φαμεν εἶναι τοὺς ἐν θεῷ τῶν ὄντων οὐσιοποιοὺς καὶ ἐνιαίως προϋφεστῶτας λόγους, οὓς ἢ θεολογία προορισμοὺς καλεῖ καὶ θεῖα καὶ ἀγαθὰ θελήματα, τῶν ὄντων ἀφοριστικὰ καὶ ποιητικὰ, καθ' οὓς ὁ ὑπερούσιος τὰ ὄντα πάντα καὶ προώρισε καὶ παρήγαγεν.

<sup>7</sup> H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris 1981) 235.

All this holds all the more truly with respect to the Cause which produced the sun and which produced everything else. The exemplars of everything preexist as a transcendent unity within It. It brings forth being as a tide of being. We give the name of “exemplar” to those principles which preexist as a unity in God and which produce the essences of things. Theology calls them predefining, divine and good acts of will which determine and create things and in accordance with which the Transcendent One predefined and brought into being everything that is.

Therefore, being good is possible because of the transcendent essence of the Good-in-itself (transcendent Goodness), being similar because of the transcendent essence of Similar-in-itself (transcendent Similarity), being beautiful because of the transcendent essence of Beautiful-in-itself (transcendent Beauty) and so with being any other attribute. With their attributes the entities participate in the relative transcendent essences (*De div. nom.* 5.5, 820B–C):

καὶ εἰ βούλει τῶν ζώντων ὡς ζώντων ἀρχὴν φάναι τὴν αὐτοζῶν καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων ὡς ὁμοίων τὴν αὐτοομοιότητα καὶ τῶν ἠνωμένων ὡς ἠνωμένων τὴν αὐτοένωσιν καὶ τῶν τεταγμένων ὡς τεταγμένων τὴν αὐτόταξιν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων, ὅσα τοῦδε ἢ τοῦδε ἢ ἀμφοτέρων ἢ πολλῶν μετέχοντα τόδε ἢ τόδε ἢ ἀμφοτέρα ἢ πολλά ἐστὶ, τὰς αὐτομετοχὰς εὐρήσεις τοῦ εἶναι πρῶτον αὐτὰς μετεχούσας καὶ τῷ εἶναι πρῶτον μὲν οὐσας, ἔπειτα τοῦδε ἢ τοῦδε ἀρχὰς οὐσας καὶ τῷ μετέχειν τοῦ εἶναι καὶ οὐσας καὶ μετεχομένας.

You could express it this way. Life itself is the source of everything alive. Similarity itself is the source of everything similar, Unity itself of everything unified, Order itself of everything orderly. So it goes, you will find, with all other things which participate in this quality or in that, in both or in many. What they have primarily is existence, and this existence ensures for them that they remain and that they are then themselves the source of this or that. It is only because of their participation in Being that they exist themselves and that things participate in them.

Now, the status of these transcendent paradigms—which evidently recall Platonic archetypes—is ambiguous: they seem to be part of an intelligible level of the cosmic hierarchy between

the Godhead and the created natures, but it is not at all clear how Pseudo-Dionysius conceives them or where specifically he puts them in his taxonomy of beings. In *De div. nom.* 7.4, 872C, they seem to be part of the Godhead itself:

“λόγος” δὲ ὁ θεὸς ὑμνεῖται πρὸς τῶν ἱερῶν λογίων οὐ μόνον, ὅτι καὶ λόγου καὶ νοῦ καὶ σοφίας ἐστὶ χορηγός, ἀλλ’ ὅτι καὶ τὰς πάντων αἰτίας ἐν ἑαυτῷ μονοειδῶς προεἰλήφε...

God is praised as “Logos” [word] by the sacred scriptures not only as the leader of the word, mind, and wisdom, but because he also initially carries within his own unity the causes of all things...

Nonetheless, in several other passages (such as *De div. nom.* 5.5, quoted above) the relation between God and the archetypical ideas resembles that existing between God and every other created nature. Corsini considers the *παραδείγματα* as the highest level of the hierarchy of created natures, whereas Brons is more cautious, not going beyond the mere indicating the ambiguity.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the actual status of these *παραδείγματα* may be, the passages quoted above are relevant to this analysis, because they show undeniably that Pseudo-Dionysius contemplates, in his system, the Platonic metaphysical law according to which every single sensible characteristic is the reflection of a cause<sup>9</sup> which lies on a higher ontological level. As logical outcome of this law, negating attributes is the

<sup>8</sup> E. Corsini, *Il trattato “De divinis nominibus” dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al Parmenide* (Turin 1962); B. Brons, *Gott und die Seienden. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von neuplatonischer Metaphysik und christlicher Tradition bei Dionysius Areopagita* (Göttingen 1976).

<sup>9</sup> I am using the word ‘cause’ to describe the intelligible archetypes even if this may seem inappropriate. It is a fact that Pseudo-Dionysius, following the Platonic tradition, establishes a necessary relation between an intelligible origin and the phenomena manifesting in the sensible world: everything appearing in the sensible world is necessarily the reflection of an intelligible reality. Nonetheless, unlike pagan Platonic theologians of late antiquity, Pseudo-Dionysius argues more than once in the corpus that the paradigmatic causes have no causal power in themselves: they are merely auxiliary to the unique original cause.



best way of ascending to the highest realities in the hierarchy of beings (*De myst. theol.* 3, 1033B):

ἐπεὶπερ ὅσῳ πρὸς τὸ ἄναντες ἀνανεύομεν, τοσοῦτον οἱ λόγοι ταῖς συνόψεσι τῶν νοητῶν περιστέλλονται.

The fact is that the more we take a flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming.

The very first cause in a Neoplatonic universe must be ontologically prior to all possible determinations: the Godhead itself has no determinations at all, and consequently cannot be a determinate being. In fact, following the metaphysical law described above, the existence of a determination inherent in the first principle would in fact require a cause, which would then be on an ontological level prior to the most originary ontological principle, and this is obviously contradictory; everything which is characterized by a determination is simply not what is absolutely originary in reality. This is why to describe the divine every positive characterization, and consequently every intellectual operation of predication, is inadequate and needs to be overcome through the *via negationis*. The intellectual and rational process of negation of attributes leads to an attainment of the divine which is, paradoxically, beyond intellect and rationality: we need the logical process of negations in order to get rid of hampering misconceptions about the Godhead, but the ultimate step into *henosis* is beyond intellect. Pseudo-Dionysius does not make clear how this ultimate step is possible or which specific faculty does the acknowledging, but since he is a mystic this is completely understandable; as Plotinus wrote, echoing the Eleusinian mysteries, ὅστις δὲ εἶδεν, οἶδεν ὃ λέγω (*Enn.* 6.9.9.46–47): as a mystic, Pseudo-Dionysius considers the deifying union a process that can ultimately only be experienced and not be described.

### 3. *The mystical union as acknowledgment*

When all determinations and characterizations are overcome through negations, so are all differences between human and divine: at the end of the *itinerarium mentis* of the negative way, the mystic acknowledges the divine as Not-Other. So far we

have seen that every time the mystic conceives the divine as characterized (through a positive attribute, e.g. God is Being, God is Good, or characterized through a divine name, e.g. God is the Lord, God is the Ancient of Days), they are not speaking of the absolute first reality, that is, not of the authentic divine, but only of either the lower levels of the hierarchy through which it communicates its causal power (viz. the *παραδείγματα*), or of the symbols or images present in the sacred texts through which it manifests<sup>10</sup> (viz. the divine names). In *De myst. theol.* 1.3, 1000D–1001A, Pseudo-Dionysius states that “the highest and most divine things, thought or seen, are but mere analogies of the things subject to him who transcends everything,” τοῦτο δὲ οἶμαι σημαίνειν τὸ τὰ θεϊότατα καὶ ἀκρότατα τῶν ὀρωμένων καὶ νοουμένων ὑποθετικούς τινὰς εἶναι λόγους τῶν ὑποβεβλημένων τῷ πάντα ὑπερέχοντι.

Conversely, when every representation is overcome—and consequently every idolatrous duality<sup>11</sup>—the divine is attained

<sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius explains that even if these symbolic names are ultimately inadequate, they are nonetheless necessary for the divine to be understandable to most people: it is then up to each person, as far as it is possible according to their particular capacities, to overcome these representations: the mystics, they who are able to overcome them all, attain union (*De coel. hier.* 1.2, 121B, τοὺς ἐπ’ αὐτὴν ὡς θεμιτὸν ἀνανεύοντας ἀναλόγως αὐτοῖς ἀνατείνει καὶ ἐνοποιεῖ κατὰ τὴν ἀπλωτικὴν αὐτῆς ἔνωσιν).

<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius seems to consider the conception of a divine alterity as a form of impure religiosity, something that the true Christian must overcome and maybe disdain as a form of idolatry and attachment to mere images and metaphors. In a long passage of *De coel. hier.* (2.1, 136D–137B) he offers a speech of blame against those who “unholily” (ἀνιέρως) consider its manifestations as the Godhead itself: ὅπως μὴ καὶ ἡμεῖς ὡσαύτως τοῖς πολλοῖς ἀνιέρως οἰώμεθα τοὺς οὐρανίους καὶ θεοειδεῖς νόας πολυπόδας εἶναι τινὰς καὶ πολυπροσώπους καὶ πρὸς βοῶν κτηνωδίαν ἢ πρὸς λεόντων θηριομορφίαν τετυπωμένους καὶ πρὸς ἀετῶν ἀγκυλόχειλον εἶδος ἢ πρὸς πτηνῶν τριχῶδη πτεροφυῖαν διαπεπλασμένους καὶ τροχούς τινὰς πυρώδεις ὑπὲρ τὸν οὐρανὸν φανταζόμεθα καὶ θρόνους ὑλαίους τῇ θεαρχίᾳ πρὸς ἀνάκλισιν ἐπιτηδεύουσιν καὶ ἵππους τινὰς πολυχρωμάτους καὶ δορυφόρους ἀρχιστρατήγους καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα πρὸς τῶν λογίων ἡμῖν ἱεροπλάστως ἐν

in its true transcendence. Pseudo-Dionysius describes this final condition as thought's "obscurity of silence" (σιγῆς γνώφον).<sup>12</sup> In this condition, God is no longer an anthropomorphic super-entity, but the absolute Not Other, as a Pseudo-Dionysius epigone, Nicholas of Cusa, will call him during the Renaissance.<sup>13</sup> This is the basis of Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical theology: if God is not a particular entity,<sup>14</sup> i.e. he is not "something" (τὸ μὴ τι),<sup>15</sup> he cannot therefore be "something else" either; the necessary absence of every positive determination of the first cause of the universe is parallel to the necessary absence of a difference, anything that could represent a threshold separating the divine from the created natures: paradoxically, the process leading to establish the absolute transcendence of the divine culminates in the acknowledgment of a form of profound immanence of it. The mystic, he who has been able to overcome every partial image, manifestation, and

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ποικιλία τῶν ἐκφαντορικῶν συμβόλων παραδέδοται. καὶ γὰρ ἀτεχνῶς ἡ θεολογία ταῖς ποιητικαῖς ἱεροπλαστίαις ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσχηματίστων νοῶν ἐχρήσατο τὸν καθ' ἡμᾶς ὡς εἴρηται νοῦν ἀνασκευασμένη καὶ τῆς οἰκείας αὐτῷ καὶ συμφυοῦς ἀναγωγῆς προνοήσασα καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀναπλάσασα τὰς ἀναγωγικὰς ἱερογραφίας.

<sup>12</sup> *De myst. theol.* 2.1, 977B. This image will have a long-lasting fortune in the patristic tradition as well as in the medieval theological tradition. In this regard see H. C. Puech, *La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite et dans la tradition patristique* (Paris 1938), esp. 33–53.

<sup>13</sup> Cusanos' main work on this topic is *Directio speculantis, seu de non aliud* (1462). The *Corpus Areopagiticum* implies, rather than articulates, the concept of *Non Aliud*: nonetheless this Cusanian idea seems to be a perfect category to interpret and understand Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical theology.

<sup>14</sup> A wider analysis of the fundamentality of the assumption according to which negative theology leads to the recognition that God is not an entity (*ens*) in Pseudo-Dionysius' works has been made by J. N. Jones, "Sculpting God: The Logic of Dionysian Negative Theology," *HThR* 89 (1996) 355–371: "I summarize Dionysian negative theology roughly as follows: 'God is not a being and so cannot be known or spoken of as beings are known or spoken of'" (369).

<sup>15</sup> On the Platonic root of this argument see L. H. Grondijs, "Sur la terminologie dionysienne," *BAssBudé* 18 (1958) 438–447, at 443.

anthropomorphic representation, attains the obscurity of silence and identifies with God, extinguishing himself in contemplation.

Pseudo-Dionysius describes this whole process through an episode taken from the Old Testament (a sort of resumé of Exodus 19–20),<sup>16</sup> which can be considered an ultimate synthesis of his system of mystical theology (*De myst. theol.* 1.3, 1000C–1001A):

καὶ γὰρ οὐχ ἀπλῶς ὁ θεῖος Μωϋσῆς ἀποκαθαρθῆναι πρῶτον αὐτὸς κελεύεται καὶ ἀνθὶς τῶν μὴ τοιούτων ἀφορισθῆναι καὶ μετὰ πᾶσαν ἀποκάθαρσιν ἀκούει τῶν πολυφώνων σαλπύγγων καὶ ὄρα φῶτα πολλὰ καθαρὰς ἀπαστράπτοντα καὶ πολυχύτους ἀκτίνας· εἶτα τῶν πολλῶν ἀφορίζεται καὶ μετὰ τῶν ἐκκρίτων ἱερέων ἐπὶ τὴν ἀκρότητα τῶν θείων ἀναβάσεων φθάνει. κὰν τούτοις αὐτῷ μὲν οὐ συγγίνεται τῷ θεῷ, θεωρεῖ δὲ οὐκ αὐτόν (ἀθέατος γάρ), ἀλλὰ τὸν τόπον, οὗ ἔσται. (τοῦτο δὲ οἶμαι σημαίνει τὸ τὰ θεϊότατα καὶ ἀκρότατα τῶν ὀρωμένων καὶ νοουμένων ὑποθετικούς τινὰς εἶναι λόγους τῶν ὑποβεβλημένων τῷ πάντα ὑπερέχοντι, δι' ὧν ἢ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν ἐπίνοιαν αὐτοῦ παρουσία δείκνυται ταῖς νοηταῖς ἀκρότησι τῶν ἀγιωτάτων αὐτοῦ τόπων ἐπιβατεύουσα). καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὀρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὀρώντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν, καθ' ὃν ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις, καὶ ἐν τῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ γίγνεται, πᾶς ὢν τοῦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ οὐδενός, οὔτε ἑαυτοῦ οὔτε ἑτέρου, τῷ παντελῶς δὲ ἀγνώστῳ τῇ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον ἐνούμενος καὶ τῷ μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκων.

It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes

<sup>16</sup> The reference to the “place in which God dwelt” (θεωρεῖ δὲ οὐκ αὐτόν (ἀθέατος γάρ), ἀλλὰ τὸν τόπον, οὗ ἔσται) seems however to refer to Ex 33:21.

ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but rational which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.

The adverb ἀπλῶς, in the first line of the passage, underlines the solidity of the connection between the elimination of predications<sup>17</sup> and the achievement of union.

#### 4. Conclusions

The mystical union is the acknowledgment of the divine non-alterity, of its eternal presence in everything, in ourselves as well. In the sixth century, during the twilight of Greek pagan thought, a fundamental statement of the very first philosopher of the western world seems to rise once again: πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι, “Everything is full of the divine.”<sup>18</sup> This acknowledgment occurs at the end of the *via negationis*, the privileged path of mystical ascent throughout the entire history of western theology: when all determinations are eliminated, so is every difference between human and divine. The divine is the Not-Other, *non aliud*: this ultimate recognition is the mys-

<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius uses ἀπολύομαι when Moses “abandons” visible things (καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρώντων) and ἀπομύω when he “silences” every predication, literally “all intellectual operations” (ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις).

<sup>18</sup> Thales, quoted by Aristotle *De anima* 411a8.

tical *henosis*, and not some sort of phenomenal transition into a new and exceptional state. The mystic, he who has had the spiritual strength to overcome every idol as well as the profundity of thought to investigate the abyss which opens behind every literal meaning of the scriptures, recognizes his identity with God, thus reaching the completion of the highest life of the spirit.

*July, 2016*

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