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Kevin Teed Millsaps
East Tennessee State University

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Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 2178. https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/2178

The Development of Apophatic Theology from the Pre-Socratics to the Early

Christian Fathers

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of History

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in History

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by

Kevin T. Millsaps

May 2006

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Dr. William Burgess, Chair

Dr. Leila al-Imad

Dr. Henry Antkiewicz

Keywords: Apophatic Theology, Neo-Platonism, Christianity.

ABSTRACT

The Development of Apophatic Theology from Pre-Socratics to

the Early Christian Fathers

by

Kevin T. Millsaps

It is apparent that what is characterized as Christian Apophatic Theology has been poorly related to its antecedents existing in Greco-Roman philosophy. This study proposed the following research hypothesis: Greco-Roman philosophy exerted a structural and terminological influence upon Christian apophatic theology.

To prove or disprove this hypothesis, apophatic terminology and textual structures in Greco-Roman philosophical texts were compared to classic Christian apophatic texts, primarily from the Apostolic and Cappadocian Fathers. Throughout this process, Michael Sells' classic definition of apophatic language, consisting of the appearance of the metaphor of emanation, dis-ontological language, and dialectical language of immanence and transcendence, was used as a benchmark for the occurrence of apophatic language in the texts examined.

It was found that Greco-Roman pagan apophatic philosophy exerted significantly less structural than terminological influence. Thus, this research will strengthen claims that Platonic and Neo-Platonic terminology was simply overlaid atop a pre-existing Semitic-Christian apophatic framework.

CONTENTS

Should any thought arise and obtrude itself between you and the darkness, asking what you are seeking, and what you are wanting, answer that it is God you want: 'Him I covet, him I seek, and nothing but him'.[1]

Anonymous,
The Cloud of Unknowing, 68

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is an apparent contradiction to assert that by "unknowing"-by purging one's self of the conventional processes of thought and discourse, the true essence of the transcendent may be grasped and understood. Such an approach would at first glance appear to transgress not only modern, analytical, and scholastic theology in the Western Christian tradition of Anselm of Canterbury or Thomas Aquinas but also the utilitarian rationalism, logical positivism, and scientific empiricism that has since become the very foundation of the contemporary Western paradigm. Some modern skeptics even warn that such a method of contemplation leads to the eventual breakdown of the relationships between cognitive subjects and the language with which they may be described. Within the fields of theology or even theoretical physics, this methodology may ultimately persuade the investigator to embrace outright agnosticism[2] or resort to language that is seemingly contradictory in nature. Simply stated, the process of

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[1] Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 68.

"unknowing" may be characterized as an approach to cognition that refuses to exhaust the content of knowledge in its formulation or to exhaust the reality of the things signified in the language used to describe them.[3] Moreover, in a religious context, the act of "unknowing" is taken beyond the boundaries of verbalization itself into complete and utter silence and the absence of all logical or rational processes.

In the aforementioned quotation, the anonymous mid-fourteenth century English Christian author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* seems to make the radical assertion that the transcendent can only be encountered by first discarding all obtrusive thoughts and making an allegorical journey, if you will, into the "darkness" of ignorance. Here and only here is where God makes his ultimate abode. Likewise, many early Christian writings, among them St. Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, written in the mid to late fourth-century, and the sixth-century Syriac work by the mystic Pseudo-Dionysius entitled the *Mystical Theology*[4], saw the accent of Moses up the slopes of Mount Sinai and into "the darkness where God was"[5] as analogous to an ascent into ignorance.

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[2] Denys Turner, "The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism," *Modern Theology 14*, no. 4 (October 1998): 473.

[3] Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004), 84.

[4] The anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was directly influenced by a later Latin translation of this Pseudo-Dionysian treatise.

[5] Ex. 20:21 LXX (Septuagint)

While such a path to the divine would seem to border on the brink of absurdity by violating the logical rules of non-contradiction, it is saved from that implication by the essence of its subject. The method of "unknowing" assumes that God, or that which is transcendent and ineffable, is a "non-object" or "no-thing" and is thus exempted from conventional rules of logic. The Fathers of the Eastern and Western Christian Churches, as well as various Islamic and Jewish mystics, have long realized the resistance that the unfathomable mystery of God offers to conventional methods of investigation and have therefore embraced the great potential of "unknowing" in their own theological schemata. Over the last two thousand years, numerous mystical writers and thinkers within these distinct religious traditions have employed this method, whereby human logic is contravened so that the sublime heights of transcendent being may be grasped. The method of "unknowing" becomes the undetermined boundary between knowledge and utter ignorance or delusion. It is the finite point before the infinite where human thought breaks down before the radical transcendence of God.[6]

Apophasis Defined

Traditionally, the modes and rites of the three great monotheistic religions have had as their goal an ever-increasing knowledge of God attained by climbing, if you will, a ladder of positive attributes. We may choose to ascribe characteristics to the divine such as "all-good", "all-knowing", "all-loving" and so

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[6] Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 24.

on. But, by doing so, one ultimately arrives at an irresolvable dilemma. How is something that transcends creation able to be described in terms of ideas, concepts, or labels that have relevance only in that which is created? However, a practitioner of "unknowing" would assert that the individual can only "climb the ladder" by inactivity of all knowledge. It is here, in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius, that "one knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing".[7]

Negative or apophatic theology, by which this art of "unknowing" has come to be designated, has by no means been confined only to Western thought. If the notion of *apophasis* ($\alpha\pi o\phi\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma$)[8], the foundational language of apophatic theology, is viewed conceptually rather than in a more formal context whereby the exact term itself is used in a particular body of writing, then a large number of Far Eastern texts outside the Western World may be considered apophatic.[9] For example, the Chinese mystic poet Lao-Tse begins his *Tao Teh Ching* with the statement that "the *Tao* that can be spoken is not the *Tao*". Here, it is implied that the *Tao* cannot be named; to name is to define and thus delimit, and the *Tao* is without limit.[10] We see the further development of this apophatic notion in later

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[7] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, a volume of *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. John Farina (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 137.

[8] *Apophasis* ($\dot{\alpha}\pi\acute{o}\phi\alpha\sigma\acute{\iota}\varsigma$), or "negation" is the Greek term for the language that becomes the method of discourse by which one begins to "un-know". Thus, it is the foundation of apophatic theology. A more precise etymological characterization of the term would be *apo phasis* (speaking-away).

[9] Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

Taoist writings by Chuang Tzu. In his parable *The Pivot*, Chuang Tzu uses a dialectic of positive and negative language in an attempt to circumscribe the Tao without actually defining it:

> "Tao is obscured when men understand only one pair of opposites…There is nothing that cannot be seen from the standpoint of the 'Not-I.' And there is nothing which cannot be seen from the standpoint of the 'I'…The pivot of the Tao passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge."[11]

Tibetan Buddhism also provides another interesting parallel to this idea. To attain enlightenment, the eighth-century Master Mo-ho-yen proscribed that one must reach a point of non-duality between utter delusion and enlightenment. Repeatedly, he used apophatic terms to describe the methods to reach this median: no-thought (pu-ssu), no-reflection (myi-bsam), and no-examination (pu-kuan).[12] Here, one is reminded of the similarity of this language to Pseudo-Dionysius and his call for the complete inactivity of mental processes to "know beyond the mind".

Likewise, in Western and Eastern Christianity, to delimit God with applied attributes and labels causes us to lose sight of the divine whenever we accept as final or complete any conceptual representation of it.[13] Thus, the goal of

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[10] James K. Feibleman, *Understanding Oriental Philosophy* (New York: Horizon Press, 1976; reprint, Scarborough, Ont.: Mentor Books, 1977), 109.

[11] Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 40-41.

[12] Luis O. Gomez, "Purifying Gold: the Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought and Practice," in *Sudden and Gradual : Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 102.

apophatic theology is to affirm the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent by shedding all ontological conceptions and semantic formulations. It should be noted that these ontological conceptions and semantic formulations, although having relative, indicative, and referential aspects, nevertheless do not represent the transcended in a definitive and exhaustive manner.[14]

In its Christian form, apophatic theology is quite distinct from earlier negative systems existing in Taoist and Buddhist thought or later among the Neo-Platonists. Within these constructs of what is instead appropriately called apophatic philosophy, a series of negations are imposed on all thoughts that turn to God. As Vladimir Lossky has demonstrated, this method culminates in the apophatic philosophy of Plotinus in which the philosopher must surrender before the radically transcendent God. Outside of a Christian context, this method "ends with the utter depersonalization of God and the human being that seeks him."[15] This is the vast gulf that separates Greek Philosophy from Christian thought. Although Christian negative theologians use the language of Plotinus and Proclus, the Christian apophatic method does not end with an abyss of despair where cognitive subjects and the object of their knowledge are shattered and reabsorbed. Neo-Platonism and the Eastern religions espouse this teleological

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[13] John Peter Kenney, "The Critical Value of Negative Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (October 1993), 440.

[14] Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, 84.

[15] Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 32.

goal. Within the confines of Christian thought, "the human person is not dissolved but has access to a face to face encounter with God, a union without confusion according to grace."[16] This is the distinguishing characteristic of Christian apophatic mysticism. The individual is not annihilated or appropriated by God but rather maintains all personal identity and individuality in the process of mystical union.

<div align="center">Methodology of "Unknowing"</div>

Apophatic theology, or the employment of the language of *apophasis*, assumes that in describing the transcendent, an $\alpha\pi\omega\rho\iota\alpha$ (*aporia*, i.e. unresolvable dilemma) is generated. In order to claim that God is beyond all description, it must be given the name "God". Yet by doing so, the human mind has already limited that which is limitless and eternal by ascribing a label of reference to it.[17] By describing God as "God", the apophatic theologian would claim that we have already lost sight of the veiled and unknowable aspect of the Deity by attributing this label, or any label for that matter, to describe what is, in its very essence, indescribable. Simply put, "God" as he is in his essence remains unfathomable in the darkness of ignorance and the human being has failed to pierce the darkness by use of this mental "guidepost". The same *aporia* is generated whenever any adjective is applied to "God", be it "almighty", "all-good", "all-knowing", etc. How is

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 2.

something beyond the "good" or above "knowing" able to be known or be experienced as good? Before we throw up our hands and surrender to the seemingly inevitable agnosticism we have been forewarned about, let us turn to the mode of theological discourse that, while affirming the *aporia*, seeks to mitigate the effects of it.

Mechanism of Apophatic Discourse

If we make the simple statement that "X is beyond names" and acknowledge this to be true, then we have already violated this statement by ascribing it a name "X". In this example, the statement of ineffability has turned back upon itself and undone itself. To avoid this *aporia*, one may substitute the pronoun "it" or even the prepositional phrase "*εγο ειμι*", or as it is translated in English, "I am", in place of "X".[18] But again, this fails to bring us out of the linguistic regress we are caught up in. Each statement we make, positive or negative, must then be corrected and the correcting statement itself must be corrected, *ad infinitum.*[19] Thus, the subject of our discourse continually slips back beyond each effort to name it or even to deny its indescribability. It is the very tension of this linguistic regress that becomes the underlying mechanism for the whole process of apophatic discourse.[20]

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[18] The reader will be reminded that "I Am" (*εγο ειμι*, LXX) is what God referred to himself as to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus III:14. Likewise, Jesus also used this name to demonstrate his equivalence to God the Father throughout the New Testament (Mark 14:62, John 8:59).

[19] Sells, *Mystical Language*, 2.

[20] Ibid., 2.

To be effective, the language of *apophasis* must be employed alongside its antithesis. Kataphatic Theology, or the employment of the discourse of *kataphasis*,[21] is language whereby positive or affirmative statements are made about the transcendent. In the context of apophatic discourse, once any affirmative statement concerning the transcendent is made, it immediately demands an act of "unsaying". The discourse between apophatic and kataphatic language can reach an intensity such that no single proposition concerning God can remain by itself. The corrective "unsaying" which cancels the previous proposition is in itself a "saying" that must be "unsaid". If this process is transferred to the Hegelian plane of the dialectic, it can be visualized as the tension between kataphatic and apophatic language. In that ephemeral moment between the "saying" and "unsaying", thesis and antithesis, the mind knows nothing and encounters that which is beyond knowing. Yet, almost immediately the mind reorients itself with a new synthesis- a natural movement back to the concrete realm of delimiting ideas. Thus, the moment of divine revelation is fleeting and it must be continually recovered by ever-new linguistic acts of unsaying.[22]

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[21] *Kataphasis* (καταφασις) is the Greek term for the language that becomes the foundation of positive theological discourse. A more precise etymological characterization of the term would be *kata phasis* (speaking-with), Sells, *Mystical Languages.*

[22] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 3.

Varying Manifestations of Apophatic Discourse

The use of *kataphasis* in tandem with *apophasis* underscores the varying degrees in which the language of "unknowing" can exhibit itself. The type of apophatic theology generally found in Christian, Islamic, and Jewish mysticism, in which affirmations and negations are played against one another, is really at the center of the wide spectrum of positive and negative theology. Here, Thomas Aquinas may provide an example. Aquinas fully understood the role and value of the corrective action of apophatic versus kataphatic discourse and he certainly acknowledged the limits of human knowledge vis-à-vis the transcendent. Moreover, he was familiar with and significantly influenced by the Latin translations of Pseudo-Dionysius. However, for Aquinas, apophatic discourse becomes simply a corrective to his essentially kataphatic theological construct.[23] The de-emphasis of apophatic theology in Western Christianity may have its beginnings in the Thomist corpus of writings. Apophatic theology's role was diminished and later replaced by Aristotelian-derived systematic theology in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. As Daniel Clendenin observes, "in the West acknowledgements of apophaticism tend to be just that-acknowledgements, a tip of the hat, an introductory admission limited to

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[23] A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford US, 1999), 21.

theological prolegomena before long and rigorous [scholastic] intellectual abstractions."[24]

In 1873, as he was approaching the end of his life, Charles Darwin declared that God's existence is "beyond the scope of man's intellect".[25] By making this statement, Darwin expressed the culmination of a radical apophatic theology taken to its most extreme degree. What has resulted from this agnostic presupposition in biology, and in physics and cosmology, is an ongoing attempt by science to offer completely materialistic or naturalistic explanations for all observable phenomena. Since the nineteenth-century, the entire universe has become a completely closed loop of cause and effect, understood only in terms of itself. In this paradigm, the transcendent is completely irrelevant and has therefore become dispensable. Furthermore, modern science has completely retreated from all notions of the metaphysical and now confidently boasts that it is firmly grounded within the confines of empiricism.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, radical *apophasis* had seemingly lead to the complete renunciation of the metaphysical in science. However, the rise of the post-Newtonian physics in the form of Max Planck's quantum theory of energy, Niels Bohr's establishment of quantum mechanics, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, etc., has exposed the current limit of science's descriptive

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[24] Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 61.

[25] Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (New York: Warner, 1991), 603.

and predictive abilities.[26] As Christos Yannaras points out, the wave-particle

duality of quantum physics, which conceptualizes all electromagnetic forces

acting as both particles and waves, gives rise to serious, if not insurmountable

scientific problems.[27] The *aporia* generated by wave-particle duality must be

remedied with apophatic language that is nearly equivalent in function to Chaung

Tzu's "I"-"not-I" in relation to the pivot of the Tao or Christianity's description of

Christ as the "God-man".[28] The very use of the indeterminate descriptive "wave-

particle" is itself an attempt to reveal the unknowable through the linguistic

tension between mutually opposed terminologies.

Conversely, there also exists a positive theology that maintains the

incomprehensibility of the transcendent by the use of corrective apophatic

language. However, at the same time, the possibility of an authentic experience

of God is still affirmed. In Eastern Christian theological systems, positive

dogmatic statements remain only as fixed points or boundaries of truth. However,

these formal dogmas do not replace or exhaust the knowledge of the truth. Truth

remains experiential and practical, a way of life and not a systematized or

theoretical construct.[29] The progressive reestablishment of this divine

relationship, while concurrently acknowledging the dogmatic boundaries of

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[26] Yannaras, *Post Modern Metaphysics*, passim.

[27] Ibid.,88.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1991, reprint 1998), 17.

Christian truth, is known as *theosis* in Eastern Christian theology and has its scriptural basis in 2 Peter 1:4. In this passage, humanity is challenged to become "participants of the divine nature."[30] It must be mentioned that even in this process, absolute knowledge of God the Father lies before the seeker as something resembling a mathematical limit. It may be approached incrementally but never fully attained. St. Gregory of Nyssa, writing in the fourth-century, reiterated this idea when he recognized that the ongoing process of *theosis* has only one limitation- that it has no absolute limit.[31]

Periodically, speculation has arisen that the doctrine of *theosis* has its origins in the convergence and cross-fertilization of Neo-Platonism and Christianity. However, upon closer scrutiny this assertion cannot be maintained. One of the earliest references, outside of the New Testament, to the doctrine of *theosis* can be found in the writings of the fourth-century Syriac hymnographer and theologian St. Ephraim of Nisibis (modern Nuseybin, Turkey). However, St. Ephrem, who according to Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History* (ca 450 A.D.) was 'unacquainted with the language of the Greeks', testifies to this doctrine in his *Nisibene Hymns* (XLVIII, verse 12). St. Ephraim states that "The Most High knew that Adam wanted to become a god, so He sent His Son who put him (Adam) on in order to grant him his desire". Moreover, in his *Hymn on Faith,* verse 12, St.

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[30] 2 Peter 1:4 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)

[31] Panagiotes Chrestou, *Partakers of God* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984), 64.

Ephrem declares that God "gave us divinity", and we in turn "gave Him (the Son) humanity".[32] Thus, it would appear that a rudimentary form of the doctrine of Christian *theosis* was present outside of the boundaries of the Hellenic world and is in fact derived from the Semitic roots of Christianity itself.

<div align="center">Hallmarks of Classical Western Apophasis</div>

Michael Sells asserts that three key features distinguish apophatic philosophy/theology. These features are by no means all-inclusive and depending on which body of writings is examined, they may each appear to a greater or lesser degree. The first is the appearance of the metaphor of overflowing or emanation.[33]

Metaphor of Emanation

The prayers of the twelfth century Islamic Sufi mystic Muhyiuddin Ibn 'Arabi depict this first feature: "Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness". Throughout the writings of the Sufis, this "ocean" is mentioned again and again and it becomes the medium through which the human and the divine merge.[34] From time to time a divine revelation may flow or emanate like a tidal wave from this "ocean" of eternity to the shores of our temporal realm. Thus, Sufism itself becomes the vocation of plunging into one of

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[32] St. Ephraim the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. and Intro. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 73-74.

[33] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 6.

[34] Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975; reprint, Great Britain: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975), 10.

these emanations and being drawn back with it to its eternal and infinite source.[35]

Although outside the Western apophatic tradition, the *Tao Teh Ching* also shares

this feature in common. Sometimes directly or indirectly, Lao-Tse uses the

metaphor of overflowing or emanation: "Tao is like the emptiness, the capacity of

a vessel. It uses cannot be counted. It is deep and inexhaustible, the fountain

source of all things…A spring continuously pure and still."[36] Furthermore, the Tao

is characterized as the producer of all things on earth and the outflowing of Teh,

the manifested energy of Tao, sustains them. Thus, Teh becomes, like the waves

of the "ocean", the vehicle by which the mystic is drawn back to the transcendent,

ineffable one.[37]

<u>Dis-Ontology</u>

The second feature of Western apophatic theology is a conscious dis-

ontological discursive effort to avoid portraying the transcendent as an entity,

being, or thing.[38] Although this concept appears to have its beginning in the mind

of the first-century Alexandrian philosopher Philo Judaeus, it is expressed clearly

in the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise entitled *The Divine Names,* which appears

around 500 years later:

> "He is the being immanent in and underlying the things which are,
> however they are. For God is not some kind of being. No. But in a way

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Sheldon Cheney, *Men Who Have Walked With God* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 13.

[37] Ibid., 14.

[38] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 6.

that is simple and indefinable he gathers into himself and anticipates every existence...for in him and around him all being is and subsists."[39]

The passage implies that the transcendent is a "non-entity" or "no-thing" above being. Here, God cannot be defined; he is above or even totally independent of being. As Philo Judaeus had earlier reasoned, no concept of God's essence could be formed in the mind, for the concept of the essence of a "thing" is formed by its definition.[40] In his other writings, Pseudo-Dionysius makes the distinction between entity and non-entity, thing and "no-thing", by placing the Greek preposition $\dot{\upsilon}\pi\varepsilon\rho$ (hyper, i.e. beyond or above) in front of all predicates concerning the transcendent. Yet, even this distinction ultimately fails because "hyper-being" or "hyper-essence" leads the mind to conceive of a thing or entity to which these adjective may be applied. Therefore, such labels only send one back to the conceptual prison from which apophatic discourse attempts to escape. Moreover, this passage from *The Divine Names* is also an excellent example of the aforementioned tension between propositions that is critical to the underlying mechanics of apophatic theology. In this passage, we are faced with the statement that God "is the being immanent" yet in the very next sentence, God is defined as "not some kind of being". It is in the interstices of this text, and other apophatic texts like it, that the transcendent may be seen, if only briefly.

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[39] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 98.

[40] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 2, *Structure and Growth of Philosophical Systems from Plato to Spinoza*, (Cambridge,MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 111.

Likewise, within Sufism a distinction is made between the divine, transcendent being and all human conceptualizations of it. The Sufi mystics held that the transcendent was the opposite of everything that can be imagined in the mind. For them, the transcendent cannot be described just as an anthropomorphic Creator, Sustainer, or the One who is greater than all things. Rather, the transcendent is equally as distant from anthropomorphism as it is from total abstraction.[41] As the Koran states in Sura 57 verse 3: "He is the first; he is last; He has Knowledge of all things."[42]

Dialectic of Transcendence and Immanence

The aforementioned passage from *The Divine Names* also provides a glimpse into the final feature of Western apophatic theology; a distinctive dialectic of transcendence and immanence in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent.[43] God, or the transcendent, "is the immanent being in and underlying the things which are." Although God is truly transcendent, all reality, all material creation is sustained by him. Yet, these notions of the transcendent and immanent are in close spiritual proximity with each other. This idea is also expressed in Sufism in which the entire universe becomes the very synthesis of the transcendent and immanent. Starting with the precept that the

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[41] Annemarie Schimmel, "Sun at Midnight: despair and trust in the Islamic mystical tradition," *Diogenes* 42, no. 165 (Spring 1994): 3-4.

[42] *The Koran*, trans. N.J. Dawood (London: Penguin Ltd., 1956; reprint, London: Penguin Ltd., 1999), Sura 57:3 (381).

[43] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 6.

Koran speaks of *nafas*, the "breath" of the Lord, it is reasoned that the pure essence of the transcendent God would be as if he had held his "breath" until he could no longer do so. Thus, material creation appeared as *nafas ar-Rahman*. Just as with the rhythm of breathing, the universe is annihilated and re-created every moment; it is taken back into its transcendent origin just as breath is taken back into the lungs.[44]

It is perhaps in the central belief of Christianity, the human incarnation of the transcendent Word, which provides the example, *par excellence*, of the dialectic of the utterly transcendent revealed as the utterly immanent. This idea is clearly communicated in the Gospel of Saint John written sometime in the late first century:

> "And the Word Became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth."[45]

In the Christian conception of the person of Jesus the Christ, one arrives at the paradoxical synthesis of the transcendent and immanent. This notion is further elaborated upon by the formulary of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D., the standard of Christian orthodoxy, which pronounced the Christ to the be perfect God and perfect man, being fully consubstantial with the radically transcendent Father in his Godhead, and immanently equal to us in his humanity. Furthermore, the definition of Chalcedon employs language that is purposely contradictory. For

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[44] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 270.

example, it proclaims Christ to be of two natures that are without confusion, change, division, or separation. The difference between the two natures is in no way abolished by the union and is still able to come together to form one *hypostasis.*[46] While political reasons for the language of Chalcedon definition cannot be discounted, the indeterminacy and ambiguity of these definitions nevertheless expresses the true $\mu\nu\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\nu$, the great mystery, of the God-man. In a dialectic of terms intentionally placed in opposition to one another, the formulary of Chalcedon allows for the true nature of Christ, incomprehensible and unknowable, to be glimpsed but not exhausted in its acquisition.

Research Objective

It will be the purpose of this study to answer a number of significant historical questions concerning the aforementioned theological system known as apophatic theology, or as it is commonly referred to as in the Christian West, negative theology. First, what is the derivation of apophatic theology; is it something having only been revealed to the Christian intellect, or does it have its origins elsewhere? I wish to demonstrate that the rudiments of apophatic theology make their appearance in the West in the writings of the fifth century B.C. pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. I will also show that his elaboration on the unknowability of the transcendent, the prime axiom of Eastern and Western apophatic theology, is foreshadowed by like concepts in Classical Greek

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[45] St. John 1:14 NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)

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philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Moving some six centuries forward, I will demonstrate the further elaboration and refinement of the components of apophatic philosophy, the distinct precursor of apophatic theology, in the writings of the late Neo-Platonic philosophers Plotinus and Proclus.

From apophatic philosophy's non-Christian origin, I will progress into the appearance of its language in the body of Christian scriptures and writings of the early Fathers of the Christian Church. I hope to emphasize the point that although Christianity uses the terminology of prior negative philosophies, it is wholly distinct in its application of it. It is with these early Eastern Christian fathers that apophatic philosophy ends and apophatic theology, properly speaking, begins. Perhaps most important in this section are the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, the major artery for the conveyance of apophatic philosophical terminology into Christian orthodoxy. They will become the primary bridge between Late Neo-Platonism and the Christian Patristic Age. More specifically, it will be shown that their incorporation of the language of Neo-Platonism only further refined the already existing apophatic theology present in the early Christian fathers.

Having now thoroughly discussed the rudimentary operations within apophatic discourse and the common characteristics of all apophatic systems in the West and laying out the research objectives of this study, let us now begin the process of piercing the enigmatic shroud that surrounds the development of

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[46] Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Pelican, 1967; reprint London: Penguin,

this philosophical and theological system. From the rain-swept and gloomy pastures of the East Midlands of fourteenth-century England, the residence of the anonymous author of The *Cloud of Unknowing*, let us now travel a few thousand miles and 1800 years back in history to the Ionian city of Ephesus in approximately the year 500 B.C. It is here where will begin our historical journey into the "Darkness".

1993), 204.

(God) is unapparent, unseen, and unrecognized for men he says in these words: An unapparent connection is stronger that an apparent. Man praises and admires the unrecognized and unseen side of God's power, rather than the recognized.[47]

Quotation from Heraclitus by Hippolytus,
Refutatio, IX, 9, 5

CHAPTER 2

PRE-CHRISTIAN APOPHATIC PHILOSOPHY

Prior to the first-century, before a definitive system of apophatic theology is conceived in its Christian form, there existed little evidence for the existence of this method of transcendental contemplation in any prior classical writings, with perhaps the exception of Heraclitus. From this point in Western History forward, I will argue that there exists two distinct streams of development of apophatic thought. This chapter will be devoted to describing the philosophical stream beginning with Heraclitus, which will be further developed and refined through the work of Plato and Aristotle and finally culminating in the writings of the Neo-Platonic philosophers Plotinus and Proclus. Within the writings of the Neo-Platonists, to be covered in Chapter 3, the goal of apophatic discourse is a union or reabsorbing of the soul with what is termed the "One". Apophatic discourse and the discarding of the mental conceptions of the "One" become the means by which this may be accomplished. As we will see, the "One" cannot be thought of as equivalent with the Judeo-Christian God. On the contrary, the concept of the

"One" is similar to the deities of the Eastern Religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism. Subsequent chapters will examine the development of what is properly termed apophatic theology in the context of Christian thought. There, mystical union with the Trinitarian Godhead will become the teleological goal. Until one reaches the writings of the Neo-Platonists, much of the discussion will therefore have to be limited to the development of the ideal of the unknowability of the transcendent. Only when this ideal has been fully developed along with the philosophical language necessary to express it properly, will one be able to speak of the dialectic between negative and positive language that is indicative of apophatic discourse.

<div align="center">Heraclitus</div>

Like some ancient Rorschach test meant to evaluate the sanity of Classicists and historians, the fragmentary nature of the writings of pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus makes him the object of much speculation and subjective interpretation. What still exists of his work is mostly in the form of quotations used by Plato and Aristotle for the sake of refutation, and later by Christian thinkers in support of Christian concepts. This makes an adequate evaluation of him tenuous at best. Nevertheless, let us add to the multitude of inferences already made about him by determining if he may be considered the beginning point of our quest to understand the origins of apophatic philosophy.

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[47] G.S. Kirk, ed. *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970), 222.

From the writings of Plato, one learns that Heraclitus was an Ionian Greek from the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor. Because Plato is not far removed in time from his subject, he must have taken for granted the knowledge his intended readers had of the recent life of Heraclitus because he elaborates no further. The only substantial biographical account of his life is found in Diogenes Laertius' writings of the third-century A.D. Drawing on a number of biographical and chronological sources that had been compiled and revised between the early third century B.C. and his own day, the account of Diogenes can, therefore, only be considered with much hesitation.[48] From this "biographical" account, we learn that Heraclitus, son of Bloson, was in the prime of his life (i.e. forty years old) between the years 504 to 500 B.C.[49]

Any attempt to classify the philosophical system of Heraclitus must also proceed with the same measure of caution, as does a biographical evaluation of his life. Although he was an Ionian Greek, he was not from the scientific/ rationalist Milesian School that produced the thinkers Thales and Anaximander. Yet, like Thales, he did have a theory about the origin and composition of matter. Fire, according to Heraclitus, was the primordial element out of which all material

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[48] Ibid., 4.

[49] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, vol. 2*, trans. R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925; reprint, 1995), 409.

reality arose.[50] Perhaps as a natural extension of this belief and analogous to the movements of a flame, Heraclitus felt that everything was in a state of flux.[51]

In the realm of metaphysics, he appears to have exhibited monotheistic, or at the very least, henotheistic tendencies. He repeatedly speaks of "God" as opposed to "the gods". However, "God" to Heraclitus is quite distinct from the Judeo-Christian concept of a personal deity. He is more akin to an impersonal force that gives teleological order to the flux of the Universe. For Heraclitus it is likely that this force simply gives order to already existing matter. Foreshadowing the later Hellenistic elucidation of this idea, the universe is entirely composed of eternally pre-existent matter requiring simply an artificer to give it ultimate form.

Heraclitan Apophasis

Out of his belief in this "God", Heraclitus formed his own personal system of beliefs by which he evaluated all current Greek religious practices of his day. Naturally, his attitude toward the popular polytheistic religions of Ephesus, specifically the hedonistic Bacchic cults, was largely hostile.[52] It is in his criticism of these cults that one may perhaps see the very first glimmer of apophatic theology in Western thought:

> "Night-walkers, magicians, priests of Baccus and priestesses of the vat, the initiated. The mysteries that are celebrated among men it is

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[50] Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 41.

[51] Ibid., 43.

[52] Ibid., 42.

unholy to take part in. And to these images they pray, knowing not the nature of gods and heroes"[53]

It is specifically the phrase, "knowing not the nature of gods and heroes", that concerns us. To support his hypothesis that there existed a conception of the unknowability of God before Philo Judaeus, Norden used this phrase along with the biblical reference to the book of Acts where Saint Paul addressed the men of Athens concerning their altar to an unknown God.[54] Here, Norden assumes that "To an unknown god" is referring to an unknowable, ineffable God in the apophatic sense.[55] However, a problem is apparent in this argument; to accept his hypothesis, one has to discard the traditional interpretation of Acts 17:23 as referring to a god whose name happened to be unknown to those who set up the altar. As for the fragmentary evidence from Heraclitus, this tends to support Norden's hypothesis with a greater degree of certainty than does his biblical supposition. 'Knowing not what gods... are' suggests that there was a proto-apophatic conception of "God" in the mind of Heraclitus. Taken with the quotation appearing at the beginning of this chapter, where "God" is characterized as 'unapparent, unseen, and unrecognized', we may posit that some antecedent form of apophatic philosophy existed as early as sixth century B.C. Perhaps

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[53] This sequence of fragments is quoted by St. Clement of Alexandria in *Protrepticus* and Eusebius of Caesarea in *Præparatio Evangelica*.

Heraclitus, *On the Universe, vol. 4*, trans. W.H.S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931; reprint, 1992), 507.

[54] Ironically, Thomas Huxley utilized this same biblical passage (Acts 17:23) to coin the word *agnostic* in 1869.

more than any other, Heraclitus used the apophatic method to dispose of the gods of Hesiod's *Theogony* while affirming the existence of an Unknown, transcendent God. As Richard Geldard has stated in *Remembering Heraclitus*:

> "…more than any other pre-Socratic thinker, Heraclitus embodies the apophatic method. He "unsaid" the myths of the Archaic tradition on his way to transforming the ideas of divinity through the divine Logos."[56]

One may argue then from the writings of Heraclitus that "God", or the ordering principle of matter, is unknown and distinct from all physical reality. Thus, it is not a great leap of thinking to deduce that this entity in incorporeal or not inhabiting space within this universe. Aristotle will firmly declare this by stating that his "first mover" does not have size and is thus incorporeal as well. Yet, this notion will not be fully developed until the appearance of Philo and Hellenistic Judaism. It will be Philo who presides over the marriage of "incorporeal ideas" and God, who by implication is also incorporeal as creator of them.[57] Nevertheless, a full treatment of this concept will be reserved for chapter three where this will become necessary for a proper understanding of Christian apophatic theology. Let us therefore turn back to the theme of this chapter to determine the extent that the unknowability of God, whether "God" be impersonal force or pure idea, is developed in the mind of latter Greek philosophers.

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[55] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, 115.

[56] Richard Geldard, *Remembering Heraclitus* (New York: Lindisfarne Books, 2000), 23.

[57] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, 94.

The latter works of Plato, composed in the last twenty years of his life (ca 367 BC to 347 BC) are often considered the catalyst for the eventual development of Neo-Platonic thought. Plato's intended trilogy, *Timaeus, Critias,* and *Hermocrates*, belong to this period. It is specifically the first book of this trilogy that will be essential for an understanding of latter Neo-Platonic apophatic philosophy. As preface to this trilogy, *Timaeus* was meant to recount Plato's conception of the origin of the universe ending with the birth of humanity itself. Having no notion of creation *ex nihilo*, Plato begins from the pre-existent realm of eternal forms, and descends down a "chain of being", if you will, to the frame of the visible universe and the nature of man himself. The next work, *Critias*, begins where *Timaeus* ends. For reasons still unclear, Plato abandoned the trilogy less than halfway thorough. The *Critias* concludes in an unfinished sentence and *Hermocrates* was never written.[58]

Platonic Conception of God

Before one proceeds to discuss the unknowability of God in the Platonic writings, it is necessary to define the very idea of "God" as perceived by Plato himself. From his written legacy, a number of conclusions can be inferred. First, Plato conceived of "God" as the benevolent ordering force creating the cosmos from the pre-existent forms. It is assumed that the cosmos was simply

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[58] Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. Oskar Piest, trans. Francis Cornford (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), xvii.

refashioned from material that had existed in perpetuity. Here, Plato's debt to the Pre-Socratics is clear especially to Heraclitus who held nearly the same idea. Of further significance, Plato had begun to envision the Creator as somehow transcending the creation. In the *Laws,* he stated that the souls need not reside in the stars that they move. Within *Timaeus*, the Creator is even less within the universe or a part of it.[59] This is the uppermost link of the "chain of being". Proceeding downward from the Demiurge, as Plato designates this immanent Creator, we arrive at the world's soul and body. If we may use the English word universe to translate the Plato's Greek word $\kappa o \sigma \mu o \sigma$ (i.e. cosmos, world), then the concept of the world soul and body become clearer. By soul, the perceived essence behind the material realm is implied. This is loosely analogous to the perception of the artist's intent behind a piece of art. Body, of course, refers to the substantive aspects of the visible, material universe. Descending further down the "chain of being", the level of the heavenly gods, the fashioners of human and animal life, is reached. Paying service to the Greek pantheon of Indo-European deities, Plato's "heavenly gods" are derived from those long worshiped by the earliest Mycenaean and Dorian invaders of the Peloponnesus. Here, one is reminded of the close resemblance Plato's system shares with the theological complex of Zoroastrianism in which a similar relationship exists between the

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[59] Friedrich Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, vol. XXVII of *Cornell Studies in Classical Philology*, ed. Harry Caplan, James Hutton, and H.L. Jones (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1942), 179

Creator, Adhura Mazda, and the subordinate echelon of lesser deities such as the Amesh Spentas (divine spirits) and the Fravashis (guardian spirits).[60] Already apparent in Plato's theology is the idea of overflowing or emanation, which as we will recall, is one of the distinct precursors of apophatic philosophy. As we will see, this development will have significant ramifications for Neo-Platonic philosophy.

<u>"Unknowability" of the Demiurge</u>

Plato's concept of the Demiurge or Creator is still far different from the Judeo-Christian God. Nevertheless, much like the God of the Psalms, the Platonic Demiurge is equally obscured in an inaccessible cloud of darkness. Within *Timaeus,* specifically the section entitled the *Nature and Scope of Physics*, Socrates and Timaeus enter into a dialogue where the boundaries of their inquiry concerning physics are established. After an expression of approval from Socrates, Timaeus enters into a monologue establishing the premises of physics that must be applied to the entirety of the visible creation. It is specifically his second premise, that whatever comes to be must have a cause, which contributes the most to our discussion of the unknowability of the transcendent. After determining that the universe must indeed have a maker, Timaeus declares that "the maker and father of this universe it is a hard task to find, and having

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[60] This should come as no great surprise considering the extensive contact between the Hellenistic and Persian worlds in the second century B.C. and more importantly, the common Indo-European heritage that both share.

found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind."[61] Although this passage does not completely discount knowledge of the transcendent, Plato makes it clear from earlier works that special preparation is required to arrive at such knowledge. In Plato's *The Republic*, the assertion is made that "we do not know the model [of the good] sufficiently."[62] And later during the discussion of his famous cave analogy, Plato asserts that the end of the search for truth, the idea of the good can only be arrived at with much toil and effort.[63] Indeed, it will be these very passages that will later generate much discussion concerning the unknowability of the Trinitarian Godhead among the early Church Fathers.

Later, as part of a summary description of the components of being, Timaeus states that the ideas are 'invisible and otherwise imperceptible.'[64] Turning again to *The Republic*, we further learn that God, whether he be pure idea or something transcending the idea, is "simple ...and neither changes himself."[65] The conclusion that must be drawn from these examples is that "God", regardless of whether this term implies pure, formless idea or vacant, transcendent Creator, cannot be attained through human sense perceptions or at

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[61] Plato, *Timaeus*, 17.

[62] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. Eric Warmington and Philip Rouse, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, *Great Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Mentor, 1956; reprint, 1984), 303.

[63] Ibid. VII, 316.

[64] Plato, *Timaeus*, 53.

[65] Plato, *The Republic*, 181.

the very least, only with tremendous effort exercised after a period of much preparation. In the context of Christianity, specifically within its various forms of monasticism, this idea will appear again. It will underlie such Christian monastic texts as *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, by St. John Climacus (St. Catherine's monastery, Sinai Desert, ca 523-603 AD) and the writings of the Western Fathers such as St. Benedict of Nursia (Monte Cassino, Italy, ca 480-550 AD). In both of these examples, mystical union with God can be achieved only with rigorous spiritual preparation and ascetic labor.

From his writings, It can be inferred that Plato had begun to define this transcendence as being a undifferentiated essence that, if not superceding the pre-existent matter of the universe, must at least be the source from which all reality and being flows down the "chain of being".

Let us now briefly glance at Aristotle to examine his continued development of the idea of the "One" as being undifferentiated and hence simple and without division. Although this aspect of the transcendent would appear to be self-evident vis-à-vis the Islamic and Judaic conception of God, Christianity has faced some difficulty trying to reconcile the foundational belief of the Holy Trinity with this inherited Aristotelian idea. The Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries were a result of this difficult undertaking.

<u>Aristotle</u>

In examining the writings of Aristotle, it is possible to recognize language that will eventually be appropriated by latter negative philosophers and

theologians. This will perhaps come as a surprise considering the often-mentioned diametric opposition between the sublime, mystical writings of Plato, the primary basis of negative philosophy and theology, and the rational, proto-scientific methods of Aristotle. In fact, this opposition will become the basis for the theological gulf that separates the two geographic branches of Christianity-the West being fully indebted to the Aristotelian synthesis of Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas and the East being more mystical and Platonic in its constitution. It has often been said, without much exaggeration, that all of Western Philosophy over the last two thousand years has been a struggle between the archetypal concepts first espoused by Plato and Aristotle.

Many modern commentators have either tried to reconcile Aristotle with his mentor (after all, Aristotle was Plato's protégé at the Academy for twenty years), or to establish his works as completely different. Quite simply, Aristotle must be recognized as an individual who sought to codify and systematize the sum total of human knowledge by observation and pure rationalization. His methods eventually became the foundation of the modern scientific method. However, within his writings, one is able to recognize the seeds of the conflict between the material/rational and the spiritual/irrational that continues to plague humanity into the present day.

Aristotelian Conception of God

Regarding the indivisibility and simplicity of the transcendent in the mind of Aristotle, it is first necessary to define his conception of the "One" (τὸ ἕν). Here,

for purposes of clarity, I will substitute "God" for Aristotle's "One". In the mind of the reader, my choice of this word should not invoke Judeo-Christian conceptions of the Deity. The God of Judaism and Christianity is nothing like the Aristotelian "One." The Aristotelian "God", unlike the Platonic conception of the transcendent, is not seen as ideas, pre-existent forms, or the demiurgic artificer of pre-existent matter. On the contrary, it is the primary, fundamental substance distinct and preeminent from every other substance in the universe. Moreover, the preeminent substance comprising the transcendent is merged with ultimate knowledge. "God" is in fact the perfect and penultimate synthesis of form and matter that, in essence, precedes all lesser realities. Dibinga wa Said expresses this as "that which, being present in such things as are not predicated on a subject, in the cause of their being."[66] This idea can be illustrated grammatically with the simple sentence "X is Y". Here Y is subordinate to X by virtue of the copula verb "is". X is the subject of the verb and hence, the source of the sentence itself. Y is therefore considered the predicate of the subject. This is analogous to the Aristotelian concept of "God" as the primary substance. "God" is not predicated on some subject but rather, universally predicates all other subjects and is the underlying substratum of all that exists.[67] Aristotle's conception of "God" as the necessary first source of motion for all other things

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[66] Dibinga wa Said, *Theosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 68.

[67] Ibid., 68.

(i.e. the "first-mover") is a natural corollary to this idea.[68] It will, in fact, become one of the major arguments for the existence of God in the writings of Thomas Aquinas during the thirteenth century. For Aristotle, "God" is also the fountainhead of life itself:

> "And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God."[69]

It is from "God" that life must necessarily arise. Life, as visualized by Aristotle, is the mystical out-flowing of energy that results from the self-dependent actuality of the eternal and transcendent being.[70] Here, Aristotle's reasoning is similar to his master Plato. It is readily apparent for we detect the metaphor of overflowing or emanation that is a distinctive characteristic of apophatic thought.

Simplicity and Indivisibly of the "One"

Within Book VII of his *Metaphysics*, we also arrive finally at Aristotle's conception of the simplicity and indivisibility of the "One". He writes "The One and the simple are not the same; for 'one' means a measure, but 'simple' means that the thing itself has a certain nature"[71] Within Book VIII of his *Physics*, he adds

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[68] Aristotle, *Metaphysics, XII,* ed. Justin D. Kaplan, trans. W.D. Ross, *The Pocket Aristotle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958), 143.

[69] Ibid., 147.

[70] wa Said, *Theosophies*, 71.

[71] Ibid., 146.

that "the first agent of change has no parts and no size."[72] In other words, the

"One" must be the most basic essence of reality and is incapable of divisibility.

Also, by declaring that the "God" is without size, Aristotle has begun to conceive

of a transcendence removed from the spatial dimensions of the physical material

universe.[73] This should be recognized as an important predecessor to the same

supposition in the apophatic notions found in Middle-Platonism, Neo-Platonism,

and Christianity. Moreover, while the "One" and the simple are different, the term

one is related to indivisible, for as he says in Book V of *Metaphysics*:

> "In general when the conception which conceives what it is to be
> certain things is indivisible and cannot separate them in time or place or
> formula, they are most of all one, and those that are substances most of
> all among these."[74]

Therefore, it is clear that the term "One", according to Aristotle, has two

meanings. First, so far as it may apply to things that are divisible, it must be

distinguished from the term simple. Second, in its application to those things

divisible, it can apply only to the aspect of their essence that does not admit to

division. In this context it must be equivalent to the term simple. We can conclude

that because the "One" is without parts, hence absolutely indivisible in its

essence, it must be characterized as being simple as well.[75]

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[72] Aristotle, *Physics*, intro. David Bostock, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), 227.

[74] Aristotle, *Metaphysics: Books [Gamma], [Delta], and [Epsilon]*, trans. Christopher Kirwan (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1993), 37.

[75] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, 99.

Conclusion

The importance of understanding the idea of the simplicity and indivisibility of the transcendent will become apparent with the forthcoming discussion of Plotinus and Proclus. With the writings of Aristotle in mind, the Neo-Platonists will attempt to demonstrate that the conception of "the One" means simplicity and indivisibility as well as numerical unity. This will be one of the necessary presuppositions for the development of the unknowability of God in the writings of the Neo-Platonists and among latter Christian theologians. The apprehension and mystical union of the "One will become the teleological goal of Neo Platonism. In the writings of the philosophers Plotinus and Proclus, the idea that the "One" is in itself infinite and simple ($\alpha\pi\lambda\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$) will be of importance in describing the mystical union that occurs in Neo-Platonic mysticism.

O, Absolute Transcendent! (What else is it rightful to call Thee?)
How shallI fittingly hymn Thee, that art of all things most exalted? How
would words speak Thy Splendor? For words cannot name or denote
Thee, Sole Unspeakable Being, since Thou art the cause of all speaking.
How might the mind know Thy Nature? For mind cannot grasp or conceive
Thee…[76]

Proclus,
Hymn to God, Lines I-V

CHAPTER 3

NEO-PLATONIC APOPHASIS

The various pagan philosophies, from Aristotle to Plotinus, contribute little

to the development of the apophatic conceptions of the transcendent with

perhaps the exception of Epicureanism. The earlier schools of Cynicism and

Scepticism, foreshadowing the agnostic tendencies of the present day, allowed

for the belief in the divine and even the practice of the various rituals and cults.

Yet, these schools assumed that human beings were not equipped to perceive

beyond their naturally endowed senses. For example, it was common for ancient

Sceptics to go through the entire pagan rituals of their day and even serve as

temple priests. Yet, their Scepticism assured them that their agnostic tendencies

could not really be proved right or wrong. Nevertheless, their outward displays of

religiosity proved to be expedient in light of the prevailing social norms and

customs of the day.[77] Within the writings of Epicurus, one can detect his

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[76] Proclus, *Hymn to God* (trans. Laurence Jay Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus* [New York: Cosmos, 1949]), ix.

[77] Bertrand Russell, *Western Philosophy*, 233.

unwavering belief in the divine which he himself attributes to his inability to account for the persistence of the idea of gods or the expectation of the transcendent within collective human thought. Nevertheless, he declares that the gods do not trouble themselves with the affairs of the human world.[78] Perhaps here we detect a continuation of the process begun by earlier Greek thinkers- the re-shaping of spiritual architecture which will place the divine completely outside the realm of human temporal and spatial conceptions. The removal of the divine essence from normal human experience is a necessary presupposition to negative theology.

Stoicism, on the other hand, may be discounted outright because of its tendency to pantheism. If God exists in everything, as the Stoics contend, then it logically follows that apophatic theology must necessarily be pointless. Zeno, the founder of this school, stated that "God" (if we can even rightly attribute this label to his idea of the transcendent) was akin to a fire or life force that permeates the material universe. God becomes the individual being whose essence is derived from the sum of his parts. All that exists is a part of God's being and is at various times absorbed and recreated from him[79] Zeno, as quoted by Tertullian, conceived of the transcendent with regard to the material universe as being analogous to honey in a honeycomb.[80] Upon the arrival at the Neo-Platonic

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[78] Ibid., 247.

[79] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* 241.

[80] Bertrand Russell, *Western Philosophy*, 256.

philosophers in the third-century A.D., one may finally observe the point of contact between prior apophatic philosophical systems, existing especially in Middle-Platonism, and the developing stream of Christian theology. It is in the theological construct of Neo-Platonism that we witness the simultaneous occurrence of the three distinctive characteristics of apophatic philosophy.

The Neo-Platonic synthesis of Plotinus and Proclus encompassed and reinterpreted a number of earlier philosophical systems. Their synthesis differed from earlier systems of Classical philosophy in that it had a profoundly soteriological slant and was perhaps more concerned with the ultimate destiny of the human soul rather than the intrinsic value of mystical knowledge itself. Firmly situated in the tradition of the Platonic "chain of being", Neo-Platonism shares in the idea of a distinct hierarchy or levels of reality. These include, in ascending order, the physical Universe, the Soul, the Intellect, and finally the transcendent "One".

<u>Plotinine "One"</u>

Plotinus' conception of the "One" (τὸ ἕν) is clearly influenced by earlier Platonic and Aristotelian language which they considered the primary cause and the beginning of reality. We can ascribe to the "One" the characteristics we have already observed in *Timaeus* and *Metaphysics*. It is from the transcendent "One" that all being flows and is sustained. This is what is known as the "theory of emanation" and it is the underlying substratum of Neo-Platonism. In this regard, the "One" is above being and intelligence but is the preeminent source of both.

Descending downward, we next arrive at the intellect of the "One". Within it is contained all of the archetypal forms of reality. Here, it almost goes without saying that the influences of Plato are unmistakable. In turn, the Intellect of the "One" produces the "Soul" that contains all generic and specific ideas that become explicit in the final level of reality (i.e., the material universe.) Within the base universe, all physical and material things are contained and all logical and rational explanations of cause and effect have definition.[81]

Within this philosophical construct, each level, with the exception of the realm of the universe, can be thought of as a distinct *hypostasis* of the collective Neo-Platonic "Trinity"; each encompasses the whole in its own unique way while at the same time remaining distinct.[82] In Platonic fashion, the divinity of the "One" flows downward and in turn deifies and unifies the subordinate "persons". Almost immediately, one can detect the similar characteristics of this idea to its Christian Trinitarian counterpart. Yet this similarity is in superficial appearances only. Very little historical evidence can be produced to demonstrate the notion of syncretism between these two constructs beyond the use of a common terminology. Although the Cappodocian Fathers (St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory Nazianzus) used Neo-Platonic language to convey Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, their conception is structurally distinct from that espoused by the pagan

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[81] Robert M. Berchman, "Neoplatonism," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Vol.2, ed. Everett Ferguson., 802.

[82] Ibid., 801.

philosophers. What is occurring in the fourth-century formulation of Orthodox Trinitarianism is not the rationalization of Christianity but rather, the Christianization of reason.[83]

Within Neo-Platonism, all lesser 'persons' of the Neo-Platonic 'Trinity' are subordinated and ultimately emanate from the 'One'. Thus, the Platonic 'great chain of being' is clearly recognizable. However, we can only observe the much-touted influences of Neo-Platonism on the development of Christian Trinitarianism in the doctrines of Origen (who was taught by Ammonius Saccas, the very same teacher of Plotinus). Origen identified the Father with the 'One' and could not, therefore, distinguish the Son and Holy Spirit without first subordinating them. The divinity of the Father thus spills down to these lesser creations and ultimately to humanity. The Arian heresy, which teaches that the Father created the Son at some point in time and the Son created in his turn the Holy Spirit, will become the logical outgrowth of this Neo-Platonic idea.

Rather, it seems that the triadic division of the "One" in the Neo-Platonism can be attributed to the general atmosphere of Neo-Pythagorean speculation concerning numbers, particularly the number three, which was concurrent with Plotinus in the third-century A.D.[84]

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[83] *Lossky, Mystical Theology*, passim.

[84] Thomas Whittaker, *The Neo-Platonists: A Study in the History of Hellenism* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1918; reprint, 1970), 37.

Within the religious framework of Neo-Platonism, it becomes the $\tau\epsilon\lambda o\sigma$ (goal) of the practitioner to transcend the material world and ascend to the intelligible realm of forms and arrive finally the infinite divine realm. As one learns from the *Enneads* of Plotinus, this can only be accomplished by the cultivation of reason and the withdrawal from the external world. In this process, the external trappings of the soul are stripped away to allow for the monism of the human soul and the "One" to become apparent. Simply, the soul becomes able, by the cultivation of reason, to discern its own wellspring.[85] In contrast to Christianity, Neo-Platonism has nothing analogous to the notion of Divine "grace". The process of union with the "One" is accomplished solely by the actions and works of the soul. The "One," due to its radical transcendence, is indifferent and in no way assists in the union. Moreover, a recognition of sin, with its notion of the estrangement from God, is also absent. The "One" is always present within the soul as its nucleus and source. Thus, there is no need for divine intervention. It is only necessary to recognize the "One" within and begin the journey back "home".[86]

Much speculation has arisen concerning the relationship between Plotinus and certain Eastern religious traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. His

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[85] J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 217.

[86] Ruth Majercik, "Plotinus and Greek Mysticism," in *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience East and West.*, ed. Donald H. Bishop (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 54.

pupil Porphyry in the *Vita Plotini* (*Life of Plotinus*) relates that at age thirty-eighth, and after having spent eleven years in Alexandria, Egypt for his education, Plotinus joined the military expedition of the Roman Emperor Gordian III against the Persians in 242 A.D. Plotinus did this specifically to become acquainted with Persian and Indian wisdom. It is remotely possible that his doctrine of the union of the human soul with the 'One' was influence by the notion of the mystical union with Atman (the soul) and Brahman (the universal soul) as described in the Indian *Upanishads*. In addition to his quest to seek oriental learning in Persia, Plotinus may have become acquainted with Eastern mysticism during his sojourn in Alexandria. Since the third-century B.C., the existence of Hindu and Buddhist sages and scholars in Lower Nile Valley is well documented.[87]

Within the hierarchical structure of the Neo-Platonic "chain of being", where the "One" occupies its highest reaches, the hypostasis of *Noûs* may be said to occupy the level immediately below it. It is, therefore, synonymous with the intellect of the "One". *Noûs*, or Intellect, in turn, becomes the mechanism by which each level of reality is actualized. For example, in its contemplation of the "One", *Noûs* actualizes the Soul. And the Soul, in its contemplation of *Noûs*,

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[87] It is possible that the *Therapeutae* mentioned by Philo Judaeus as living on a low hill near Alexandria in 10 A.D. are remnants of Buddhist missionaries sent by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka some 250 years earliers. Perhaps the term *Therapeutae* is a hellenization of 'Theravada', *Author*.

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brings into existence the essence of the universe and its composition.[88] It is only through *Noûs* that the individual can attain the "One".

<u>Plotinine Apophasis</u>

As the individual ascends the hierarchy of reality, one begins to see in the language used by Plotinus the first occurrences of apophatic terminology as it is found in latter writings of Christianity and Islam. For example, Plotinus engages in what may be characterized as a conscious dis-ontological effort to portray the "One" as a thing or object. In describing the "One" as the 'author of this beauty and life, the begetter of the veritable'[89], Plotinus declares that [the source of beauty] "can be no shape."[90] Moreover, it must be "formless not lacking shape but [must be] the very source of even shape Intellectual."[91] Thus, as we can see from this passage, Plotinus has begun to strip the "One" of all notions of form or structure. It even stands above as the source of the Intellectual (*nous)* conception of form itself. To ascend to the "One", to approach the infinite simplicity of it, the practitioner must, therefore, "cut away everything"[92] and by doing so, become simple himself.[93] Moreover, Plotinus engages in pure

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[88] Ibid., 90.

[89] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Larson Publications, 1992), 662.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 457.

[93] As a point of clarification, in moving away from the "One", simplicity is diminished and multiplicity increases.

apophatic discourse in *Ennead V*, section 2: "The 'One' is all things and no one of them; the source of all things is not all things".[94] What then can one make of this seemingly contradictory statement? By engaging here in a dialectical process of apophatic and kataphatic statements concerning the "One", Plotinus is attempting to lead the reader to the point of mystical ecstasy. This is the point when each statement negates the other thereby heralding a moment of no-thought or the absence of intellect. Here is where mystical union with the "One" is consummated. Also, it is often here that the charge of pantheism is leveled against Plotinus. However, upon the arrival at *Noûs*, he informs us that there is no difference between it and the soul ascending to it. He states:

> "In two ways, then, the Intellectual-Principle (i.e. *nous)* enhances the divine quality of the Soul, as father and as immanent presence; nothing separates them but the fact that they are not one and the same."[95]

Here also one can detect the outlines of another distinctive feature of apophatic discourse. Plotinus appears to resort to a new method in which to emphasize the difference and similarity of the human soul and *Noûs*. Nevertheless, let us turn to *Ennead* VI, to fully observe the second feature of apophatic discourse and its application to the "One".

In *Ennead* VI, Plotinus informs us that the human soul is ultimately not distinct from the "One": "We have not been cut away; we are not separate."[96]

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[94] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 436.

[95] Ibid., 425.

[96] Ibid., 706.

Here we clearly observe the idea of the immanence of the "One". As if to provide a corrective to this idea, its antithesis is presented later in same section. After paradoxically stating that in the perception (or vision) of the "One" by the human soul, Plotinus asserts that "the man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it.'[97] Before one can indict Plotinus on the charge of pantheism, one should instead confirm his apophatic leanings "it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as [still] separate."[98] Thus, in these two statements, one observes the dialectic of the utterly transcendence revealed as the utterly immanent. It becomes clear that there is a sense of "otherness" that permeates the entire structure of Plotinus' philosophy that separates the products of the "One" from the "One" itself.[99] Further on, he states "There must of necessity be some character common to all and equally some peculiar character in each keeping them distinct."[100] Yet, the immanence of the "One" is necessary in order for it to become the universal cause of everything else outside of itself. It becomes the "sameness" that unites the entire Neo-Platonic hierarchy of reality.[101]

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[97] Ibid., 708.

[98] Ibid.

[99] J.M. Rist, *Plotinus*, 219.

[100] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 121.

[101] John Bussanich, *Plotinus's metaphysics of the One*, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50.

Time and again throughout the *Enneads*, Plotinus states that ascent to the "One" can only be accomplished via the faculty of reason after rigorous self-discipline in dialectic.[102] Nevertheless, even at the arrival to pure *Noûs,* there still exists a gulf between the human soul and the "One". What then is the essence of the "One" that makes it so radically transcendent? In contemplating the "One", the participant arrives at an *aporia* that cannot be overcome with human reason and logic. As William R. Inge stated:

> "The "One" is fundamentally infinite. [It encompasses] the abstract idea of absolute fullness [,which] has no determinations to distinguish it from the abstract idea of absolute emptiness. [In speaking of the "One"] we are confessedly in a region where discursive thought is no longer adequate, and we cannot leap off our shadows. To mount above *nouV*, Plotinus himself warn us, is to fall outside of it."[103]

To move beyond *noûs* toward the "One" within the framework of Neo-Platonism, is perhaps the closest antecedent that exists in the Classical world to the later notion of Christian apophatic theology. Plotinus specifically says that to transcend *noûs* is to take a leap.[104] He goes further to say that "Only by a leap can we reach to this "One" which is to be pure of all else, halting sharp in fear of slipping ever so little aside and impinging on the dual".[105]

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[102] In *Ennead* I, section 3, entitled *Dialectic (The Upward Way)*, Plotinus outlines the necessary steps required to reach *Noûs.*

[103] William R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917-1918*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1929; reprint, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 116.

[104] J.M. Rist, *Plotinus*, 220.

[105] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 467.

<u>Fear in Plotinine Mysticism</u>

The notion of fear will play a part in Western mysticism up until at least Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist *Fear and Trembling* in which the "leap of faith" becomes in itself more terrifying than physical death. Yet, in the writings of Plotinus fear is not associated with the perception of the "One" but rather the misperception of it as a duality instead of a monad. Although one could claim syncretism between Neo-Platonism and Christianity on this point, this position is nevertheless untenable. In Christian apophatic mysticism, the notion of fear is manifest in the experience of contemplating the Godhead itself, not in its mis-perception. Scriptures throughout the Old Testament reinforce this notion. For example In Psalm 18, verse 9, we are told: "The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever and ever…" [106] Moreover, in Psalm 34, verse 9: "Fear the Lord, all you his saints…" and later in verse 11: "…I will teach you the fear of the Lord."[107] Thus, Christian negative theology is not dependent upon Neo-Platonism for the introduction of this idea, as it is fully pre-existent is the scriptural foundation of the religion itself. As the Christian mystic grows ever closer to infinity, fear must necessarily increase as a result of proximity to the transcendent, infinite God. Fear is in no way related to a failure of proper discernment, as is the case in Neo-Platonism. To further reinforce this argument, Plotinus, in describing the process of "The Unity" with the "One" states:

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[106] Ps. 18 (19): 9 LXX (Septuagint)

> "The soul or mind reaching towards the formless finds itself incompetent to grasp where nothing bounds it or to take impression where the impinging reality is diffuse; in sheer dread of holding to nothingness, it slips away."[108]

Here, the innate fear of the mystical experience is even more apparent as J.M. Rist states 'lest the approach to the "One" be a deception, and a grasp of the infinite turns out to be a grasp of nothingness."[109] It is not the teleological end of the experience (i.e. the "One") that inspires fear. Rather, it is a certain "failure" in the mystical process of union itself.

<u>Plotinine Teleology</u>

The successful end of the mystical ascent of the soul to the "One" is accomplished in the transcendence of intellect, being, and thought. It is clear then that this ascension can only be accomplished by apophatic methods. To transcend intellect is to grasp non-intellect; to surpass being is to become non-being; and to supercede thought is to engage in no-thought. In striving for the "One", the soul must be spurred on by a desire for that which emanates from the same absolute source whence it came. Yet, it must not be hindered in its journey by the cognition of form or being; it must strive for the formless and interminable. Therefore, it is the amorphous Good that becomes the most sublime expression of the "One". In fact, the "One" and the Good may be used interchangeably to explain the same transcendent absolute. Elsewhere, Plotinus uses the Beauty as

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[107] Ps. 33 (34): 9,11 LXX (Septuagint)

[108] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 700.

a third descriptive label for the "One". Taken together, the "One", the Good, and the Beauty comprise the names of the same Plotinine Absolute.[110] It must be understood that the Good and the Beauty are not in themselves good or beautiful but, rather the anterior source of these attributes. In fact, the Good and the Beauty are without form or being. But, as result of their emanations, they allow what exists further down the hierarchy of reality to be ascribed with characteristics that may be labeled good or beautiful.

Thus, it is the soul's desire for the absolute Good that pushes it onward. "The ascending soul, filled with the love for the Good, participates in Intellect's erotic, supraintellectual aspiration for the Good and sees by a kind of confusing and annulling the intellect which abides within it"[111] Plotinus goes on further to state:

> " But when there enters into it [the soul] a glow from the divine, it gathers strength, awakens , spreads true wings, and however urged by its nearer environing, speeds its buoyant way elsewhere, to something greater to its memory: so long as there exists anything loftier than the near, its very nature bears it upward, lifted by the giver of that love."[112]

Thus, the soul's own love for the "giver of love" becomes the motivation for the whole mystical journey. As if recognizing that the radical transcendence of the "One" may be compromised by this overly kataphatic descriptions of it (i.e. the

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[109] J.M. Rist, *Plotinus*, 220.

[110] Inge, *Philosophy of Plotinus*, 124.

[111] John Bussanich, *Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One*, 57.

[112] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 655.

Good), Plotinus subsequently provides an apophatic corrective. After acknowledging that the "One" is wholly transcendent of form, he declares "the absence of shape or form to be grasped is but an enhancement of desire and love; the love will be limitless as the object is, an infinite love."[113] Thus, this love may become as transcendent as the object of its longing. To support this idea, Bussanich states, "The infinite, indeterminate nature of the Good requires a capacity or activity on the part of the soul that is infinite and undefined in order to be united with it."[114]

It is, therefore, union with the Good that terminates the journey. Yet, the "end" is really the opening in to eternity and the infinite participation in the Good. Finally, Plotinus provides the terminus of the mystical process "This state is [the soul's] first and its final, because from God (i.e. the "One") it comes, its good lies There, and, once turned to God again, it is what it was."[115] Thus, in union with the Good "we have won the Term of all our journeying"[116] and the soul has come full circle back to its ultimate origin.

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[113] Ibid., 663.

[114] John Bussanich, *Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One*, 57.

[115] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 707.

[116] Ibid., 709.

Proclus

Proclus was born sometime between 410 and 412 A.D. Raised as a young child in Constantinople, his parents moved back to their native city of Xanthus in Lycia (southern Asia Minor.) It was there that he received the beginnings of his formal education. In his early teens, he moved to Alexandria to begin training as an advocate. A native Greek speaker by birth, it was in Alexandria that he received formal training in the Latin language. Later, during a trip to Constantinople, he turned from a study of rhetoric, the normal preparatory curriculum for legal studies, to the study of philosophy (Marinus attributes this change of heart to the goddess Athena). Upon his arrival back in Alexandria, he immersed himself in the writings of Aristotle under the tutelage of the famous teacher Olympiodorus. After a disagreement with his teacher, the young Proclus, while still in his teens, departed for Athens where he was accepted into the Neo-Platonic Academy. During his years there, Proclus became a prolific reader and commentator of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. Moreover, among his most well known works are the commentaries he produced on *Parmenides, Timaeus,* and the *Republic*. He also produced original theological books such as his *Elements of Theology* and *The Platonic Theology*. The philosopher Syrianus also introduced Proclus to the *Chaldean Oracles* and other Near Eastern mystical writings.[117] It is these particular writings, and Syrianus' *Commentary on the*

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Orphic Writings that have influenced the apophatic theology of Proclus. The emphasis he placed on these influences is reflected in the statement he was so fond of recounting: "If I had the power, I would allow of all the ancient books only the (Chaldean) Oracles and the *Timaeus* to be preserved." [118] It was from his readings of the Chaldean Oracles and his equation of the Plotinine "One" with the Chaldean "Father" that lent operative reason to Proclus' mystical search. This is evident from the fragments of his commentaries on the oracles :

> "the good of the contemplation [of the Father] is mixed from the apprehension and the joy which naturally accompanies it…God loves the simple, unadorned beauty of form. Let us therefore consecrate this hymn to God as an assimilation to or becoming like him; let us leave the earthy sphere, which is of a transient nature; let us come to the true end; let us know the Master; let us love the Father; let us obey the one…"[119]

Indeed, the syncretism between the *Chaldean Oracles* and prior Neo-Platonic writings in own mind lead Proclus to formulate an elaborate cosmological system in an attempt to explain ultimate reality. This amalgamation also provided the consummate example of apophatic philosophy prior to the Christian formulation of Pseudo-Dionysius.

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[117] The Chaldean Oracles are mysterious fragmentary texts from the second century A.D. consisting of a single mystical poem and associated Hellenistic commentary. The original poem appears to been imported from the Persian Empire during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

[118] Marinus, *Life of Proclus*. trans. J.F. Boissonade in Laurence Jay Rosan's *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York: Cosmos, 1949) Chapter 2 passim.

[119] Proclus, *Commentary on the Chaldean Oracles*. trans. Thomas Johnson. (Grand Rapids, Phanes Press: 1988), 124.

<u>διακοσμοι (World-Orders) of Proclus</u>

In typical late Neo-Platonic fashion, the philosophical system of Proclus is ultimately concerned with what he considered the first cause on all reality. In the tradition of Plotinus, Proclus, in his *Elements of Theology*, states that "all that exists proceeds from a single first cause."[120] He goes on to label this cause the "One" (τὸ ἕν). By virtue of its position outside the universe, the "One" is the fundamental precursor of everything outside itself; it is, therefore, logically implied that it gives power to all else but is given power by nothing in return. As a result of this, the "One" anticipates and contains as a potentiality all which may become. Thus, the entire physical universe is simply an emanation of the "One" and is wholly sustained by it. [121] Moreover, the "One" is prior to the creation of space and time, and even unfathomably beyond the notion of eternity itself. Thus, modes of description bound in the notions of past, present, of future are completely useless in their application to the "One."[122] Another metaphor by which Proclus describes the "good" and by default "the One", is that of the sun that radiates outward and illumines all and reveals the form of all while remaining undiminished or unchanged itself

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[120] Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, trans. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933; reprint, 1963), 13.

[121] Laurence Jay Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus* (New York: Cosmo, 1949), 100.

[122] Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 179.

"for if, as the sovereign sun is to generation, to every thing visible, and to all visive natures according to the power generative of light, so it is necessary that the good should be [the same] with reference to intellect and intelligibles"[123]

Moreover, it is only by analogies of negation that the "One" may be approached.

Proclus affirms this method in his *Platonic Theology*:

"all the orders [proceed] from the One; but…the One is exempt from all the divine genera… it is obvious to everyone how it is necessary that the cause of the whole of things should transcend his productions."[124]

From the passage we may infer that all things emanate from the "One" and necessarily derive their own *hypostasis* from it. However, the "One" remains radically transcendent of its emanations. In fact, to approach the "One", Proclus advocates the "unsaying" of its attributes because "whatever you add, you diminish the "One" and afterwards evince that it is not the "One", but that which is passive to or participates in the "One"[125] Yet, even here the radical apophatic language of Proclus does not cease. He declares that it is necessary to "exempt the [One] from negations also."[126] In the end, "language when conversant with that which is ineffable, being subverted about itself, has no cessation, and

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[123] Proclus , *The Platonic Theology*, vol. 1, BookI-III, trans. Thomas Taylor (London, 1816, reprint New York: Selena Books, 1985), 114.

[124] Ibid., 136.

[125] Ibid., 138.

[126] Ibid.

opposes itself."[127] Rather than being forced into an infinite linguistic regress, the individual, when seeking the "One", must surrender to an equally infinite stillness and silence.

One witnesses the further elaboration of apophatic nature of "the One" when Proclus states that "[it] has no extremity…[it] is unreceptive of all figures (form)." [128] Here, he has clearly undertaken to uncouple the "One" from and all ontological conceptions. Thus according to Proclus, the "One" is without form or being and is radically transcendent of both notions. Moreover, within the overall frame work of his world-order as being conceptualized as a hierarchy of emanations from the "One", Proclus places the "One" not at the pinnacle of the hierarchy but radically removed from it. "The One will not be one, by the summit of the intellectual order, if anyone endeavors to mingle it with other things."[129] In an attempt to preserve the self-sufficiency and wholeness of the "One", Proclus emphatically states that it must be removed from its own emanations hence "the One being perfectly exempt from this summit also gives substance to it."[130] In the aforementioned quotations, the interplay between the three key characteristics of apophatic theology-philosophy is evidenced.

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.,142.

[129] Ibid..

[130] Ibid.

As Proclus descends down through his world-order in the *Platonic Theology*, he arrives at the conclusion that at various levels of being there exists an opposition of the characteristics of similarity and difference. Therefore, he concludes that, as being emanations of the "One", similarity and difference must also be contained wholly within their origin. Hence, within the "One" an *aporia* results from the opposition of these seeming opposed ideas. Proclus further states "it (the One) is not the same with other things, lest becoming the same with them, it should latently pass into their nature. Moreover, neither is the "One" different from other things."[131] Again, he arrives at the seemingly contradictory idea that the "One" is both the same and different from its emanations. Here it would appear that Proclus, by purposely placing these characteristics in direct conflict, attempts to subvert the normal means of the acquisition of knowledge. This is done simply to reveal the radical transcedence of the "One." He concludes that "All knowledge, and all instruments of knowledge, fall short of the radical transcendency of the One, and beautifully end in the ineffability of that God who is beyond all things."[132]

As with his predecessor Plotinus, Proclus concluded that the ultimate goal for everything that exists is the "Good". This "Good" becomes the motivation for the human soul's progression towards the "One". In *Elements of Theology*,

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 146.

Proclus concludes, "If all things proceed from a single cause, we must hold that this cause is either the Good or superior to the Good."[133] Later in the same proposition, he states that the "Good must be the principium and first cause of all things.'[134] Proclus finally equates the "Good" and the "One." He states, "the good is one, and the "One" is primal good."[135] Thus, the identity of the "One" with the "Good" becomes the motivating power throughout the life-history of the Universe. It becomes the unified goal of all processes and the unifying principle of the various hierarchies of the cosmological construct.[136] Anomalous and distinct from Plotinus, Proclus makes a distinction between the "One" itself and its power. He states, "Prior to all that is composed of limit and infinitude there exists substantially and independently the first Limit ($\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$ $\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\varsigma$) and the first Infinity ($\pi\rho\hat{\omega}\tau o\nu$ $\mathring{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\iota\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$)".[137] The first Limit is of course analogous to the "One". On the other hand, the primal power of "One", the first Infinity, is the cause of all the powers beneath it in the cosmological hierarchy.[138]

Descending downward from the "One" in his hierarchical construct of reality (is his appropriation of this Neo-Platonic framework, Proclus is fully

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[133] Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 15.

[134] Ibid., 15.

[135] Ibid., 17.

[136] A.E. Taylor, *Philosophical Studies* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1934), 162.

[137] Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 83.

[138] Rosan, *Philosophy of Proclus*, 102.

indebted to Plotinus.) In discussing the "henads" (ἐνάδες) or the "units", the derivation of this idea from Plato's *Timaeus* is undeniable. Yet, the henads of Proclus are even further removed from the personified "heavenly gods" of Plato. According to him they may be divided into two orders. The first order, most closely and "especially akin to the One" and fully participating in the "distinctive characteristics of godhead" are termed the "self-complete" henads. The other, lesser order of henads must be viewed, according to Proclus, as mere 'irradiations' or emanations of the greater order of henads.[139] In describing the characteristics of the "self-complete" henads, Proclus chooses distinctly apophatic language. He states that every god is above being (ὑπερούσιός), above Life (ὑπέρζωος), and above Intelligence (ὑπερνους).[140] The reasoning behind the apophatic approach here is simple- in so much as the "self-complete" henads partake of the primal Godhead, i.e. the "One", they must themselves transcend being as it does. Yet, the Proclus's use of apophatic terminology is only profitable in removing the henads from all personifications (as in the case of the Classical Greek gods of mythology) and for that matter, any ontological conceptions that may continue to obscure their true nature. Nevertheless, Proclus seems to understand that this method has limited descriptive capabilities. As a corrective to the impersonal and impotent entities that result, Proclus uses kataphatic terms to demonstrate that, while the henads are radically above reality, they still

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[139] Ibid., 101.

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possess a measure of relevance. Therefore, the "self-complete" henads reside at a point of tension between simultaneous apophatic and kataphatic languages used to describe them. They also become for Proclus an attempt to provide a philosophical explanation of the multitude of many gods and multiple religious traditions in relation to the "One."[141] In the sense that the "self-complete" henads are derived from the "One", they must, therefore, be themselves good and unified. Furthermore, Proclus states, "They are pure goodness, as they are pure unity".[142] Thus, whatever is subordinate to the henads can only partake of "goodness" as result of the overflow of this characteristic from above. At an initial level, the henads functions as foundational existence or the originators of "root-being." That is, all subordinate levels within the Neo-platonic hierarchy derive their existence or being not from the "One", itself radically removed from being, but rather the henads. In cosmological terms, the henads are the most primary state of the universe as it is prior to any conceivable beginning. At this level, all that will come into being exists as mere potentiality. Thus, with the henads, Proclus seeks the cause of plurality of things at a higher stage than the intelligible world.[143] Upon departing from the anomalous henads, we discover that Proclus continues in his description of his cosmological construct in terms that are distinctly Plotinine. The next modes of existence after the "Unities" are Being,

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[140] Ibid.,Proposition115

[141] Siorvanes, *Proclus*, 169.

[142] Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 105.

Life, Intellect, Soul, Nature, and Body and represent a further elaboration of Plotinine cosmology. Because Proclus' description of these levels is devoid of apophatic language, they will not concern us in this study.

Conclusion

Having examined selected writings of Plotinus and Proclus, one may observe one of the major points of contact between Neo-Platonism, itself fusing all of the previous philosophical legacies of the Classical world, and the emerging worldview of Christianity. Moreover, Plotinus and Proclus can be considered the last great philosophers in the Neo-Platonic tradition before it will give way almost entirely to Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries.[144] More important for the scope of this present work, the Neo-Platonic writings also influenced the negative theology of the Cappadocian Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysius and have helped to mould the whole apophatic tradition of Western Civilization from Maximus the Confessor in Eastern Christianity, to John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhard, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in Western Christianity.[145] In the following chapter, the scriptural basis of apophatic theology in a purely Christian context will be examined along with patristic antecedents of this idea before culminating in a study of the writings of Cappadocian Fathers. Moreover,

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[143] Whittaker, *Neo-Platonists*, 173.

[144] The Emperor Justinian's closure of the Neo-Platonic Academy in Athens in 529 A.D. marks the end of the old religion and the triumph of Christianity in the Eastern Roman Empire.

[145] Anthony Meredith,*The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 100.

the Neo-Platonic influences upon the Cappadocian Patristic corpus of writings will be explained using concepts having just been elaborated upon in the present chapter.

"Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty."

Pseudo-Dionysius,
The Mystical Theology

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTIAN APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

Within this passage from the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius often dated to the mid fifth-century and noted for its profound, poetic language, the ramifications of apophatic thought upon Christianity may be clearly observed. First, The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, having emerged from the long Christological struggles of the previous two centuries, is affirmed. The unknown author of this passage is clear in his invocation of this foundational doctrine of Christianity, which was already clarified at the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325 A.D. and the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381 A.D.

Let us turn to the scriptural foundations of Christian apophatic theology, upon which Cappadocians and Pseudo-Dionysius will construct their synthesis using an inherited pagan terminology and Neo-Platonic worldview.

<u>Apophatic Theology in Scripture</u>

The Cappadocian and Dionysian synthesis of Christianity and Neo-Platonism is ultimately based upon the texts of the Christian Old and New

Testaments. It is significant that the author of the Dionysian Corpus, hitherto referred to as "Pseudo-Dionysius", portrayed himself in his writings as the same Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned as a disciple of St. Paul in Acts 17:34. Therefore, by the adoption of this pseudonym, the author hoped to demonstrate the continuity of his synthesis with the apophatic language already present in Judeo-Christian scripture. It should be noted that I will attempt to offer no textual criticism of the various New and Old Testaments verses presented. I will simply show that the various passages are, in the words of Alexander Golitzin, able to be "read as either susceptible to a Dionysian interpretation or, at the least, as possible springboards for Dionysian speculation."[146] It is hoped that these scriptural references will be shown to contain the aforementioned elements that signal the occurrence of apophatic thought.

Old Testament

It is significant that the nineteenth and subsequent chapters of the Book of Exodus became one of the primary pericopes of scripture from which was formed a solid tradition of apophatic speculation within Christianity. The nineteenth chapter contains an account of the theophany of Yahweh upon Mt. Sinai and is significant in that the allegorical interpretation of the event is reminiscent of the other apophatic, mystical accounts. Within this passage, we may discern the

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[146] Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin, *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessalonika: Analecta Vlatadon, 1994), 234.

classic pattern of preparation, purification, and the setting apart of one who is especially prepared or chosen to interact with God:

> "And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai. And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death: There shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount. And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives. And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud"[147]

In this particular passage, we should note the sequence of events. First, after receiving instructions from Yahweh, Moses tells the people to purify and sanctify themselves in preparation for the manifestation of Yahweh's power. Next, the people are led to the foot of the mountain where they are instructed not to touch the sacred ground but are allowed to behold the occurrences on the mountain from afar. In a frightening display, Yahweh descends with a thick, dark cloud that in subsequent Christian apophatic works from St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, will be equated with the metaphorical darkness of ignorance that accompanies any attempt at the acquisition of Divine knowledge. This enigmatic cloud is mentioned again in chapter 24 of Exodus where Moses, accompanied by Aaron, Nadab, Abbioud, and seventy elders of

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[147] Ex. 19:10-16 AV (Authorized Version)

Israel, ascend the mountain once again. However, the text seems to make a distinction in the degree of preparation between the common people, the elders, and Moses' immediate retinue. Noteworthy is the fact that only Moses is allowed access into the dark cloud in which resides Yahweh:

> "Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abbioud, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel…And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink. And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. And Moses rose up, and his minister Joshua: and Moses went up into the mount of God. And he said unto the elders, Tarry ye here for us, until we come again unto you: and, behold, Aaron and Hur are with you…And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the LORD abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the LORD was like devouring fire on the top of the mount... And Moses went into the midst of the cloud…and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights."[148]

The aforementioned passages in Exodus 19 and 24 significantly influenced later worship in Israel's Temple. In 1 Kings, chapter 8, there are motifs within the text describing worship in Solomon's Temple that are closely related to the Theophany of Yahweh on Mt. Sinai: "And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, So that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the

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[148] Ex. 24: 9-18 AV (Authorized Version)

LORD had filled the house of the LORD. Then spake Solomon, The LORD said that he would dwell in thick darkness."[149]

In Chapter 33 of Exodus, Moses is finally allowed a vision of God. However, the true essence or nature of the divine remains as equally obscured as before because only the "back of God" rather than his "face" is revealed: "And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the LORD talked with Moses."[150] Again, the theophany is accompanied by a metaphorical symbol of ignorance in the form of the cloud or darkness. However, a number of characteristics distinguish this experience from earlier accounts in Exodus or even those occurring in latter apophatic traditions such as Neo-Platonism. Here, the manifestation of God appears spontaneously and requires no effort other than the fact that Moses has segregated the Tabernacle away from the camp. That Moses separated himself from society in his quest for God has been interpreted by many subsequent writers as symbolizing the movement away from the world of visible, comprehensible reality and into the formless, immaterial realm of the Divine Darkness.[151] In verse 10, we are told that Yahweh spoke to Moses "as a man speaketh unto his friend."[152] To understand the significance of

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[149] I Kgs. 8:10-12 AV (Authorized Version)

[150] Ex. 33: 9 AV (Authorized Version)

[151] Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 59.

[152] Ex. 33: 11 AV (Authorized Version)

this passage, it must be contrasted with theophanies existing in other philosophical or religious traditions. Such informality and familiarity expressed here between Moses and Yahweh can hardly be equaled between Zoroaster and Ahura Mazda, Plotinus and the "One", or other such interactions between humanity and the divine. However, even this extraordinary exchange has its limitations for Yahweh tells Moses that he may not behold his face (i.e. the essence or true nature.) without the consequence of death. Nevertheless in verses 21-23, Yahweh permits Moses to see his "back parts" and thus offers a fleeting glimpse of the boundary between the mundane and sublime. Later in chapter 34, Moses is required to veil his face because "the skin of his face shone; and they [the people of Israel] were afraid to come near him."[153]

Although the accounts of Moses in the Book of Exodus are the primary Old Testament texts upon which are based Christian apophatic thought, other sections contain the same images and ideas first alluded to in Exodus. Psalms 17(18):11 states: "And he [God] made darkness his secret place; round about him was his tabernacle, even dark water in the clouds of the air."[154] Likewise, Psalm 97: 2 states "Clouds and darkness are round about him"[155] Perhaps it is Psalm 139 that provides the most extensive elucidation of negative theology and some of the characteristics inherent in apophatic discourse. Immediately

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[153] Ex. 34: 30 AV (Authorized Version)

[154] Ps. 17(18): 11 LXX (Septuagint)

[155] Ps. 97:2 AV (Authorized Version)

apparent is the Psalmist's attempt to draw the radical distinction in knowledge between humanity and Yahweh. In verses 1-5, the all encompassing knowledge of the Lord is expounded upon and contrasted with the limitations of the Psalmist in verses 6-10. Here, one notes the presence of the dialectical language of transcendence and immanence:

> "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."[156]

Although Yahweh remains incomprehensible in his essence and radical removed in nature from the Psalmist, he is nevertheless in close proximity with even his "right hand" providing support and comfort. In verse 10, the poetic metaphor of darkness is used once again. Yet, in this instance the Psalmist is the one who has clothed himself with inscrutability: "Surely the darkness shall cover me; [yet] even the night shall be light about me."[157] However, humanity, unable to penetrate the obscurity of Yahweh, is not immune from the reciprocation of such inquiries from on High, "The darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."[158] In this last phrase, a seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of Yahweh's attributes is offered. But as we have seen with previous cases of apophatic discourse, the *aporia*

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[156] Ps. 139:7-10 AV (Authorized Version)

[157] Ps. 139:11 AV (Authorized Version)

[158] Ps. 139:12 AV (Authorized Version

generated by such language allows the sublime mystery of God to be revealed in imperfect clarity.

New Testament

In examining the New Testament for the scriptural foundations of apophatic theology, the radical suggestion that the "Word" of God took on human form tempers all such inquiries within the text. As I stated in the introduction of the present work, an understanding of the idea that the "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us"[159] represents the highest epistemological goal throughout the history of Christianity, whether such understanding comes from apophatic methods or otherwise. All subsequent dogmatic proclamations of the Ecumenical Councils, written creeds, and any number of mystical or esoteric writings have concerned themselves, in one way or another, with the "unpacking" of the idea contained in the Gospel of John 1:14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

Moreover, the two of the three main features of apophatic discourse hitherto mentioned are present in this verse or will be extracted from it by subsequent Christian writers, orthodox or heretical. First, among heretical Christian groups of the fourth century A.D., such as the followers of Arius of Alexandria, the metaphor of emanation was observed in the phrase "as of the

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[159] St. John 1:14 AV (Authorized Version)

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only begotten of the Father." From their interpretation of this biblical text, the Arians deduced that the Word was simply a Platonic emanation from the Father. Arianism proved to be attractive to the natural human tendency to understand an idea or concept with all logical clarity. For the educated inhabitants of the Eastern Roman Empire, primed by their readings in Platonism, the theology of Arius provided a comforting answer about the divinity of Christ that was more tenable by the mind than what would eventually be accepted as orthodox. Eventually, the Eastern Roman Empire along with the Germanic tribes on its borders would succumb to this heresy only to return to orthodoxy late in the fourth-century. And even in the present day, Arianism has again emerged in the teachings of such groups as the Jehovah's Witness. However, in the fourth century, the implication of Arianism was unacceptable to the orthodox Christian faction who saw this characterization of Christ as a way of diminishing his divinity. St. Athanasius writing sometime in the mid fourth-century provides as summary of what came to be the correct position on this matter as accepted by all subsequent orthodox Christian groups to include the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and certain mainline Protestant Churches. He writes in his *Expositio Fidei* (*Statement of Faith*):

> "We believe in…one Only-begotten Word, Wisdom, Son, begotten of the Father without beginning and eternally; word not pronounced, nor mental, nor effluence…But He (Christ) was begotten ineffably and incomprehensibly"[160]

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[160] St. Athanasius, *Expositio Fidei*, ed. Phillip Shaff, *Athanasius: Selected Works and Letters* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 256.

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The language of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea of 325 A.D. is discernable in this statement and it also contains themes that will be accepted at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople of 381 A.D. Eventually, the Athanasian position concerning the relationship between Christ the Word and the Father became the standard of orthodoxy in the following decades. Thus, the notion of Christ as an emanation of the Father became anathema and was denied in Orthodox Christology. However, as was mentioned in the first chapter, the characteristic of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence is at the very heart of John 1:14. We find references to apophatic language throughout the remainder of the New Testament. Just a few verses later in his gospel, St. John states that "no man has seen God."[161] Chapter 4, verse 14 of St. John's first epistle again says exactly the same thing.

On the road to Damascus, St. Paul encountered Jesus in an episode reminiscent of Moses. The appearance of Christ was accompanied by a blinding, uncreated light- a recurring image that has its beginning with the Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor. In 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, written some 14 years after he had begun his missionary activities, St. Paul is still unable to fully understand what had occurred "whether in the body…or out of the body" and that what he witnessed is "inexpressible." The imagery of light, rather than darkness will characterize the mystery of the divine throughout the

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[161] St. John 1:18 AV (Authorized Version)

remainder of St. Paul's writings. In St. Paul's first epistle to Timothy, one

witnesses a New Testament affirmation of the imagery used in Psalm 139:

> "and this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen."[162]

Thus, when 1 Timothy 6:15-16 is compared with Psalm 139:11-12, it becomes

apparent that even the previously common metaphor of darkness is negated and

undone with a metaphor of "unapproachable light." Thus, God's essence

becomes unknowable to a greater degree in the *aporia* generated by the

conflicting language of darkness and light.

St. Paul, taking inspiration from Jeremiah 23:18, declares that God's

judgments are "unsearchable" and "his ways are past finding out."[163] Finally, in

Ephesians 3:16-19, St. Paul utters the pinnacle apophatic statement in the New

Testament, if not the entire Holy Scriptures: "That he would grant you…to know

the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the

fullness of God."[164] Thus, St. Paul affirms that even the very love of Christ, the

teleological goal of all Christian life, is beyond the capacity of reason and intellect

to understand it. Yet, this love is still "knowable" through experience. In verses 15

and 18, the apprehension of this love is made manifest in the corporate

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[162] 1 Timothy 6:15-16 RSV (Revised Standard Version)

[163] Romans 11:33-34 AV (Authorized Version)

[164] Ephesians 3:16-19 AV (Authorized Version)

experience of the whole Christian family in "heaven and earth" and it must be experienced in the ongoing communal life of the Church that knows no limits of time or place.

<div align="center">Apophatic Theology in Patristic Writings</div>

It is very easy to incorrectly assert that references to apophatic terminology within the writings of the Church following the apostolic era may be attributed wholly to its appearance in the New Testament. While such documents as the *Didache* make it abundantly clear that the order of early church services in the first-century included readings from the scriptures, these are most likely Old Testament readings[165] Nevertheless, by the early second-century, writings from the early church do contain references to what would become the New Testament. Much of what transpired in the early church was also sustained by oral and other extra-biblical sources.

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Writing around 107 A.D., St. Ignatius of Antioch may rightly be counted as an extra-biblical source using what is perhaps the first apophatic language in the post-apostolic church. Yet, it should be noted that his writings are constructed using allusions to the Four Gospels and the Pauline epistles. In his *Epistle to the*

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[165] St. Athanasius of Alexander is the first to promulgate a canon of scripture containing the 27 NT books currently accepted by the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant churches. This list is contained in his *39th Festal (Easter) Letter* written in 367 A.D. This list was finally ratified by the local Synod of Carthage in 397 A.D.

Ephesians[166], written as St. Ignatius was on his was to his martyrdom in Rome, he equates silence with perfection. Furthermore, St. Ignatius seems to suggest that silence is equivalent with mystery and transcendence of God himself: " It is better for a man to be silent and be [a Christian], than to talk and not be one." In the next sentence, St. Ignatius quoting St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:20, states that "the Kingdom of God" is not in word, but in power."[167] Here, one is reminded of the language of Proclus, appearing a number of centuries later, and his assertion that all language conversant with the ineffable must end ultimately in silence.

<u>St. Irenaeus of Lyon</u>

Moving ahead some seventy years, St. Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon) in Gaul, wrote a comprehensive polemic treatise against the Gnostic heretics of his time. This work, originally written in Greek and whose title *Adversus Haereses* (*Against Heresies*) comes to us from a later Latin translation, was the best source of heterodox Christianity prior to the discovery of the cache of Gnostic primary documents at Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. Within *Adversus Haereses*, St. Irenaeus asserts that against the pseudo Christian groups such as the Valentinians and Ebionites, there exists an Apostolic Christianity that had been passed down through apostolic succession from the era of the Holy

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[166] St, Ignatius's letter to the church in Ephesus was probably written some 47-50 years after St. Paul's letter.

[167] St.Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*. ed. Phillip Shaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 2001), 82.

Apostles down until his own time prior to his martyrdom in 177 A.D. during the persecutions under the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

Within *Adversus Haereses*, one may detect language that is distinctly apophatic in nature. For example, in writing against "Gnostic impiety", St. Irenaeus affirms that the nature of God is beyond the limits of human understanding and reason "Through His love and infinite benignity, He has come within reach of human knowledge (knowledge, however, not with regard to His greatness, or with regard to His Essence, for that has no man measured or handled."[168] Thus, St. Irenaeus employs the dialectical language of transcendence and immanence by making a distinction between the nature or essence of God, wholly unknowable and incomprehensible, and his "energies", which are revealed by the creation and sustenance of the material universe and by extension, humanity itself. Next, in a statement that places the Classical conceptions of the deity, whether it be the Platonic "One" or Epicurian "god," in direct conflict with the Christian Triune God, St. Irenaeus derides those who "dream of a non-existent being above Him (God), that they may be regarded as having found out the great divinity, whom nobody can recognize holding communication with the human race, or as directing mundane matters."[169] Parodoxically, St. Irenaeus, in deference to scripture, views the person of Jesus

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[168] St.Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adeversus Haereses, Book III*. ed. Phillip Shaff, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 2001), 661

[169] Ibid., 661.

Christ in contrast to the Father, whose operations in the world confirm his existence while he remains mysteriously removed and hidden from it. For St. Irenaeus, the Christ:

> "Gathered together all things into himself…he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming the visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself."[170]

<u>Cappadocian Fathers</u>

The influence of the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus upon the development of Trinitarian, Nicene Christianity cannot be understated. As Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, "alongside the objective knowledge available through councils, fathers, and scripture, there arose a theology of subjective knowledge and of religious experience, which came to occupy a large place in Byzantine Christian dogma."[171] Therefore, the Cappidocian contributions to the refinement of Christian apophatic thought are equally significant. That the Cappadocian Fathers would concerns themselves with this subject highlights their belief that the Truth of God, itself changeless and static, was nevertheless subject to much variance and dynamism in its experience.

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[170] Ibid., 636.

[171] Jaroslav Pelican. *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700),* vol. II of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 31.

It is by examining this important period of Christian History that much of the confusion surrounding the relationship between Platonism and Christianity may be clarified. Many recent scholars have often accused the Christian thinkers of this period of uncritically integrating the tenuous Trinitarian terminology contained within scripture with the framework of Platonic thought. However, the Trinitarian synthesis of the Cappadocians is quite distinct from the Platonic "great chain of being." Rather than the Son occupying a lower and distinct level of being as a kind of second God or as Arius believed, a creation of God, the Cappadocians affirmed the definition contained within the Nicene Creed stating that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three realizations of the Godhead existing on the same "horizontal level."[172] However, one must be reminded that the great Christian thinkers of the Fourth Century were fully individuals situated in their respective time and place. Thus, just as any intellectual occupying the Greco-Roman culture of Asia Minor, the Cappadocians were undoubtedly very familiar with Greek Philosophy and were equipped with an "astonishing lack of prejudice with respect to Neoplatonic thought."[173] However, as has been pointed out earlier, the Cappadocian Fathers simply used a common Hellenic philosophical vocabulary to illuminate concepts already readily apparent in Christian Scripture and the Apostolic fathers of the second-century.

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[172] Golitzin, *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei, 288.*

[173] Ibid., 289.

Nevertheless, in attempting to bridge the "space" existing between the Godhead and the created world that was formerly readily explainable within the framework of the Neo-Platonic hierarchies, the Cappadocian Fathers used apophatic terminology that affirmed the incarnation of the Logos (i.e. Word) in the world and also preserved the radical transcendence and mystery of the Godhead. In his letter to his Amphilochius of Iconium, written sometime in 360's A.D., St. Basil uses apophatic language in response to his friend. St. Basil poses the question- do Christians worship the known or the unknown? In answer to Amphilochius, St. Basil makes the distinction between the essence and operations of God: "the operations [of God] are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but we do not undertake to approach near to his essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach."[174] Thus, in this description, St. Basil preserves the mysterious essence of the Godhead itself but at the same time affirms that we may still experience His operations in the world. He goes on further to state "We know God from His power (i.e. operations.) We, therefore, believe in Him who is known, and we worship Him who is believed in."[175] In St. Basil's epistle, we can clearly recognize the conscious use of the dialectical language of transcendence and immanence. This distinction between the

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[174] St. Basil, *Epistle CCXXXIV,* ed. Phillip Shaff, *Basil: Letters and Select Works* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), 525.

[175] Ibid.

energies and essence of God would continually manifest itself in the hesychastic controversies of the Eastern Christian Church in the following centuries. In response to claims of heresy, thinkers such as St. Symeon (929-1022 A.D.) and St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 A.D.) defended the hesychast monks and their claims to directly experience God by using the "Jesus Prayer". By making reference back to this Cappadocian distinction, St. Gregory Palamas argued that rather than the transcendent essence of the Divine, the hesychast monks experienced the energies or operations of God in the course of their meditations. In his next letter to Amphilochios, St. Basil again expresses this distinction when he states that "God is the creator, and we a part of that creation wherein, thanks to revelation, we may discern signs of his goodness and wisdom. However, this knowledge constitute the limits of our natural capacity and its appropriate responses are, first, faith and then worship."[176]

Thus, in the context of Christian life, St. Basil acknowledges that the true subject of worship is completely beyond the capacity of human understanding. In fact, the whole of the revelatory actions of God in his creation are merely iconographic representations or symbols that never fully circumscribe or exhaust his ultimate nature. Here, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term "symbol." In contrast to the modern, Western understanding of the word, which implies substitution for something else, the usage of "symbol" in its ancient

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[176] St. Basil, *Epistle CCXXXV,* ed. Phillip Shaff, *Basil: Letters and Select Works* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1895), 526.

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context implies something that participates in both the mundane and transcendent reality. According to this understanding, the symbol does not simply "stand in" for something else. Rather, the symbol bridges the gulf that separates the two realities. Paradoxically, the very notion of 'symbol' contains at its heart the *aporia* inherent to all apophatic systems. Simultaneously, the symbol is not fully identified with the reality or truth, and the symbol is not entirely foreign and unrelated to the reality or truth.[177] It is this understanding of the nature of the symbol that will be the key to discerning the value of scriptural, theological, sacramental, and artistic components of the Christian Church. Equipped with this understanding of 'symbol', the Early Christian Church was able to wholeheartedly affirm seemingly paradoxical notions such as the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the acceptance of icons as 'windows' or conduits separating the transcendent and mundane.

From his writings, as Alexander Golitzin points out, St. Basil establishes five *a priori* assumptions that will become the underlying guidelines of all subsequent apophatic theological speculations in the Christian East. Moreover, these assumptions will also find their way into Western Christian Theology following the transmission of the Dionysian Corpus from the Byzantine Empire to the Carolingian Franks in the ninth-century. They are:

"1) God in his essence, is wholly unknowable; but 2) he has revealed himself to us as Creator, and 3) in his creation we may discern

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[177] John Zizioulas, "Symbolism and Realism in Orthodox Worship," *Sourozh* , no. 79 (February 2000): 3.

certain signs of his activity (energies) as Creator, together with 4) the revelation he has given us in scripture and especially Christ. Nevertheless, 5) these signs and images are , precisely, signs (icons), indicators…They are indeed divinely granted…but still they remain constructs, reflections of creaturely being, and therefore require the recognition that they can never be wholly adequate to the uncreated."[178]

Moreover, every attribute that is applied to the Holy Trinity must be negated with a corresponding antithesis. As with all apophatic systems, any positive attributes made about the transcendent must be necessarily undone with a corresponding negative statement. As has been the case with the previous examples of this mechanism, this becomes a safeguard from forming ideas that become in a sense mental "idols" which neither encapsulate or explain the divine.

In 378 A.D., following nearly 40 years of Arianism, the next Cappadocian theologian we will examine, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, was invited to become the Patriarch of Constantinople. It was during this time that he delivered a series of sermons, subsequently entitled the "Five Theological Orations" that provided the foundation of the discussions of the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. and signaled the sanctioning of Christian orthodoxy in the Eastern Roman Empire. However, Arianism would persist in the West, most notably in the Ostrogothic and Lombardic kingdoms of the Italy and the Visigothic Kingdom of Spain until finally being extinguished there in the eight-century A.D.

St. Gregory's works provide a significant example of the Cappadocian tendency to use Platonic and Neo-Platonic apophatic notions to "unpack" or

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[178] Golitzin, *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei, 291.*

elaborate upon Christian themes based wholly in scripture. In his second oration,

entitled "On the Doctrine of God", he echoes the *Timaeus* and Plato's declaration

that "the maker and father of this universe it is a hard task to find, and having

found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind"[179] He states: "So

we must begin again with this in mind. To know God is hard, to describe him

impossible, as a pagan philosopher taught."[180] St. Gregory continues:

> "to tell of God is not possible , so my argument runs, but to know him is even less possible. For language may show the known if not adequately, at least faintly…But to utterly grasp so great a matter is utterly beyond real possibility even so far as the elevated and devout are concerned…This truth applies to every creature born, to all beings whose reality is blocked by this gloom, this manifest portion of flesh. Whether higher incorporeal natures can grasp it, I do not know. They may, perhaps, through their close proximity to God and their illumination by light in its fullness know God if not with total clarity, at least more completely, more distinctly than we do, their degree of clarity varying proportionately with their rank"[181]

This passage is quoted at length because it provides a excellent example of the

synthesis of Neo-Platonic and Christian thought within the mind of St. Gregory.

By stating the precept that humanity participates in a reality "blocked by this

gloom, this manifest portion of flesh", he seems to elaborate upon an idea

expressed by St. Paul in I Corinthians 13:12- "For now we see through a glass,

darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I

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[179] Plato, *Timaeus*, 17.

[180] St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27* (trans. Frederich Willimas, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* [Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002]), 39.

[181] Ibid., 40.

am known [182] In our present form, encumbered by the confines of the material cosmos, and our bodies being a microcosm and extension of it, St. Gregory argues that we are unable to grasp the essence of God and we perceive his reality through a glass, darkly, if you will. Moreover, St Gregory also seems to again echo St. Paul, when in the same epistle, he states that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption."[183] Thus, to obtain salvation ("in the twinkling of an eye…we shall be changed."[184]), we must "put on incorruption, and this mortal[ity] *must* put on immortality."[185] Thus, we can discern from St. Paul that the confines of the flesh, in its present, corrupt form, must be transformed or transfigured. Yet, from this passage of St. Gregory, we can discern the explication of this idea using a hierarchical construct clearly taken from Plotinine Neo-Platonism. With regard to incorporeal beings (i.e. the angels), St. Gregory speculates that they may possess a clearer understanding of God based on their "closer" proximity to the light that originates with him. Here, the Neo-Platonic hierarchy of being is evident. According to this description, St. Gregory visualizes the relationship of man to God as consisting of a hierarchy with humanity occupying the lowest level. However, humanity is encumbered by virtue of its corporeality. Progressing

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[182] I Corinthians 13:2 AV (Authorized Version)

[183] I Corinthians 15:50 AV (Authorized Version)

[184] I Corinthians 15:52 AV (Authorized Version)

upward, we next reach the level of those "incorporeal natures"- the angelic beings.

It could be argued that such a clear example of the incorporation of Neo-Platonism by a patristic father of the importance and stature of St. Gregory would signal the tainting of Biblical Christianity by pagan thought. In fact, many modern Protestant groups such as the Stone-Campbell Restoration movement, originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have pointed to such examples as proof of a "Great Apostasy" occurring at the close of the first-century. However, it should be noted that St. Gregory appears reluctant to present this speculation as an article of faith equal to the Nicene Creed of other doctrinal statements. It could be argued that St. Gregory is simply attempting to understand the transcendent and super-mundane by using the prevailing worldview of his place and time. As with any description of the transcendent, St. Gregory has drawn from the cultural *milieu* in an attempt to visualize that which is beyond vision itself.

Further, still within his *Second Theological Oration*, St. Gregory "locates" God within what he terms a "supra-angelic realm"[186] transcending even the hierarchal order of being itself. In a conscious dis-ontological effort, St. Gregory describes this place as existed beyond being itself- "an abyss of non-sense with

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[185] I Corinthians 15:52 AV (Authorized Version)

[186] St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27*, 43.

no halting place."[187] Furthermore, he enumerates the attributes of God by declaring that God is "Incorporeal"[188] However, he states that such descriptions do not provide an all-embracing revelation of God's essential being. As with St. Basil, he draws a distinction between the essence and energies of God. He goes on to affirm that it is not adequate enough to continually apply positive attributes to essence of God. In fact, to preserve its transcendence and avoid creating a mental "idol", if you will, St. Gregory states that the only way to understand God is to use a dual language of apophatic and kataphatic terms:

> "The point of this is that comprehension of the object of knowledge should be effected both by negation of what the thing is not and also assertion of what it is…it is much simpler, much briefer, to indicate all that something is *not* by indicating what it *is*, than to reveal what it *is* by denying what it is *not*."[189]

From this admittedly difficult statement, one can recognize the apophatic mechanism that was described in the first chapter. If one applies any attribute to God, whether "ingenerate, un-originate, immutable" and "immortal" [190] it must occur with its antithesis. Thus, the radically transcendent nature of the deity is preserved. As St. Gregory discusses the "location" of God, one is reminded of Aristotle's removal of the transcendent from the spatial and temporal confines of the created universe in book VII of his *Metaphysics.* Yet, taking this Aristotelian

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[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid., 44.

[190] Ibid., 43.

thought one step further, St. Gregory realizes that to remove God from any cosmological scheme is in itself a form of delimitation. Moreover, by the very act of the comprehension of this attribute of God, this also becomes itself a form of delimitation.[191]

<center>Conclusion</center>

From the aforementioned passages of the Cappadocian Fathers, one might observe that the apophatic methods of divine contemplation originating with Heraclitus and elaborated upon by Plato and Aristotle and culminating with the Neo-Platonists seems to converge within their respective writings. What is one to make of this unlikely admixture that will allow Protestant reformer Martin Luther to see the Cappadocian and Dionysian writings as being mostly Neo-Platonic or sufficiently Christian to allow there incorporation into Orthodox Christian theology by St. Maximus the Confessor and all subsequent patristic writers in the East? A close examination of these works will demonstrate that they are explicitly Christian and as I have sought to express throughout this work, only use the language of Neo-Platonism in an attempt to further refine Christianity in the context of the prevailing Hellenistic worldview. It is a certainty that the Cappadocian and Dionysian Corpus contains numerous allusions to Plotinus and Proclus and in fact the *Mystical Theology* can be shown to contain quotes verbatim from the latter. As Andrew Louth has stated, the direct connections between the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and these pagan

philosophers has been demonstrated by scholars time and again.[192] Yet, it is the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, existing some 150 years earlier, that already demonstrate that contact between Platonic Philosophy and Christianity is well underway.

This fact begs the question as to why the writings are so heavily indebted to Neo-Platonism? However, upon examination of the writings of most secular and church scholars of the early middle-ages, from Boethius in fifth-century Ostrogothic Italy to Michael Psellus in eleventh-century Constantinople, one finds a recurring prevalence of vocabulary and concepts that are derived from non-Christian sources. In the Eastern Roman Empire and areas adjacent to but outside of its boundaries, such as the Syriac-speaking areas to the East (the likely origin of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus), and the heartland of Asia Minor, (home to the Cappadocian Fathers), the writings of the pagan philosophers were readily available. We should also note that since the third-century A.D., these lands had passed back and forth between the Persian Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire. Thus, they were at times clearly in the orbit of the Hellenistic world and subject to its cultural influences. Eventually, the areas of Asia Minor would become the pivot of the later Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages. In fact, throughout the Eastern Roman Empire, the pagan philosophers and Christian theologians shared a common Greek language and were subject to the

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[191] Ibid., 44.

same systems of education. For example, the theologian St. Gregory Nazianzus who was instrumental in the rejection of Arianism and recovery of Nicene Christianity, had studied at the pagan Academy of Athens in 350 A.D. While at the Academy, St. Gregory would have most certainly read the *Timaeus*, and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle much as any modern university student in the West might read the plays of Shakespeare or the philosophical writings of Kant or Voltaire. Within his extensive body of writings, St. Gregory Nazianzus makes reference to no less than Anaxagoros, Galen, Epicurius, Pythagorus, Euripides, and many other pagan philosophers and playwrites.[193] Therefore, it should not come as a great surprise that the educated Christian apophatic writings of Cappadocian Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysius would contain much language that would resonate with pagan as well as Christian ears. However, as has already been mentioned, the writings of the Cappadocians and Pseudo-Dionysius are very clearly meant to illuminate ideas and concepts that are inextricable bound up with the historic and apostolic understanding of the Christian faith as revealed by scripture.

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[192] Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (New York,: Continuum Books, 1989), 21.

[193] Constantine Cavarnos, *Orthodoxy and Philopsophy* (Boston: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2003), 43.

Hail, the Spirit able to unite! For we truly live our lives in Symbol, and with tiny paces move our clocks beside our real day and night. Still we somehow act in true relation, we that find ourselves we know not where. Distant station feels for distant station- what seemed empty space could bear…

Rainer Marie Rilke,
From *Sonnets to Orpheus*

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This work has sought to examine the development of apophatic thought from Heraclitus in the fifth-century B.C. to Pseudo-Dionysius in fifth-century A.D. During this 1000 year period, the Hellenistic world, the setting for this development, underwent perhaps the greatest cultural and religious transformations ever witnessed. With the conquests of the Levant and Near East by Alexander the Great, the opportunities for religious and cultural cross-fertilization were greatly increased. Moreover, the conquests of these same regions by the Roman Empire a few centuries later and the establishment of relatively secure lines of communication ensured that the expansion of nascent Christianity would occur in a diverse and pluralistic religious environment. Within this environment, contact was bound to occur between the apostolic faith as recorded in the texts of scripture, as well as the apostolic fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Irenaeus of Lyon, with what would for a time challenge Christianity as the dominant religious expression of the Roman Empire- the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and Proclus. In the case of the Cappadocian Fathers and

later apophatic Christian theologians, it was not uncommon for conversions to occur until latter in life. Here, one is reminded of the adult conversions of St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Augustine of Hippo, as well as the death-bed baptism of the Emperor Constantine. Therefore, many individuals living within Greco-Roman world were educated and acculturated within a dominant paradigm that was little changed for centuries. Naturally, those Christian theologians who articulated the mystery of God would draw from the bank of terminology that was prevalent in the intellectual dialogues of their time. However, it can be argued that what may be termed apophatic thought was already present in Christianity in a form only using scripture as its basis. To make these pre-existing ideas more palatable to a world primed with Plato, Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, the theologians of this period "Christianized" pre-existing, non-Christian concepts and ideas. This practice continued and may be witnessed in the missionary activities of St. Augustine of Canterbury among the pagan Anglo-Saxon tribes of Britain during the late sixth century and the conversion of the Aleut tribes of Alaska by the Russian Orthodox Christians during the eighteenth century.

There appears to be a consensus across religious boundaries for the value of apophatic thought for the exploration of the transcendent. As the opening chapter of this work demonstrates, in religious traditions as diverse as Taoism or Islam, the defining characteristics of the apophatic thought make their appearance time and again. However, the use of apophatic thought often occurs in theological systems only after other means of contemplation or

conceptualization are exhausted. In the cases of Christianity and Taoism, the transcendent and unknowable essence of the Divine becomes the backdrop of all subsequent interactions between humanity, encumbered by its corporeality and lower position in the hierarchy of being. One is reminded of the opening sentence of the Tao Teh Ching and its affirmation that what can be named and defined is not the radically transcendent. Rather, it is only a pale reflection of that which remains far-removed and unknowable in its essence.

Christianity is not exempt from this same affirmation, especially regarding the ineffability of the Trinity. According to Christianity, the Godhead is not 'being' but contains and encompasses being within himself, and by his energies enables the creation to share and participate with him. An examination of the apophatic texts of scripture or the early Christian Fathers will reveal an equally intense negation in an attempt to reveal the ontological mystery of God. Within the texts of St. Gregory Nazianzus or Pseudo-Dionysius, the positive and negative statements regarding God are continually undone by further apophatic affirmations. Therefore, God's transcendence eludes the very idea itself. Christianity affirms that God transcends even his own transcendence. Yet, the Trinity is not lost in abstract nothingness. Christianity records the coming of the one who by his very nature is able to overcome the boundary of separation between ourselves and the Godhead, who resides in the impenetrable darkness of ignorance. With the coming of the "God-Man" in the person of Jesus Christ, the chasm between the mundane and transcendent is abolished. However, even

as Christianity sought to define the exact nature of the "God-Man" at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, it was forced to resort to distinctly apophatic language in an attempt to preserve the mystery of the incarnation of the Logos.

Christianity, as it is lived out in the ongoing life of the Church, surrounds itself with constructs, whether scriptural, sacramental, or iconic, which become symbols participating concurrently in the present world and the world of the age to come. It must be remembered that these symbolic depictions are not solely revelations from God. Rather, they are synergistic human responses to God's revelatory actions and energies. Even apophatic thought becomes one of many constructs or symbols representing humanity's quest to understand the unknowable essence of God- an essence that is far removed from the mundane realities of our present state.

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VITA

KEVIN TEED MILLSAPS

Personal Data: Date of Birth: August 2, 1974

Place of Birth: Maryville, Tennessee

Marital Status: Married

Education: Public Schools, Maryville, Tennessee

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee;

Political Science (Public Administration

Concentration), minor Economics, B.A., 1999

Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology,

Brookline, Massachusetts; 2003-

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;

History, M.A., 2006

Professional

Experience: Armor Officer, 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment (2LT, 1LT)

Knoxville, Tennessee, 1998-2003 Graduate Teaching

Assistant, East Tennessee State

University, Department of History, 2002-2003

Chaplain Candidate, U.S. Army Reserves (CPT)

Joint Forces Headquarters, Milford, Massachusetts,

2004-

Honors and

Awards: Military History Award for Excellence in Research, Armor

Officer Basic Course, Ft. Knox, Kentucky, 1999