



Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction

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THE AUTHOR, AND HIS INFLUENCE IN THE LATER CHURCH

[The so-called Dionysius the Areopagite is a] theologian who professes to be St. Paul's Athenian convert Dionysius, and points his claim with a background of historical setting. But the claim collapses beneath a considerable weight of anachronisms, by far the chief of which is the later neo-Platonism in almost every paragraph. In fact, these writings appear to reflect, and even to quote, the doctrines of the Pagan philosopher Proclus, who began lecturing at Athens in A.D. 430. Moreover, it is probable that the Hierotheus, who figures so largely in them, is the Syrian mystic Stephen bar Sudaili: a later contemporary of the same thinker. The Dionysian writings may therefore be placed near the very end of the fifth century.

The true name of their author is entirely unknown. He was probably a monk, possibly a bishop, certainly an ecclesiastic of some sort. His home is believed to have been Syria, where speculative theology was daring and untrammelled, and his works are the chief among the very few surviving specimens of an important school. The pious fraud by which he fathered them upon the Areopagite need not be branded with the harsh name of "forgery," for such a practice was in his day permitted and even considered laudable. Nor does it rob them of their value, any more than certain parts of the prophecies ascribed to Isaiah are worthless because they are by another hand. If the Dionysian writings were historical documents the matter would be otherwise, just as the Gospel Narrative would lose nearly all its value if it were a later fabrication. But they are not historical documents. Their scope is with the workings of man's mind and spirit in a region that does not change, and their findings are equally valid or invalid whatever be their date. And yet even historically they have an interest which does not depend on their authorship. For, in any case, they spring from a certain reputable school within the Christian Church, and they were accepted by the Church at large. And thus their bold path of contemplation and philosophy is at least permissible to Christians. This path is not for all men, but some are impelled to seek it; and if it is denied them within the Christian pale, they will go and look for it elsewhere. Nietzsche is but one of those who have thus disastrously wandered afar in search of that which is actually to be found within the fold. Had he but studied the Dionysian writings he might have remained a Christian. At the present time these works have an added interest in the fact that, since neo-Platonism has strong affinities with the ancient philosophies of India, and may even owe something directly to that source through the sojourn of Plotinus in the Punjab, such writings as these may help the Church to meet with discriminating sympathy certain Indian teachings which are now becoming too familiar in the West to be altogether ignored. The bearings of this matter on the missionary problem are obvious.

The first mention of "Dionysius" (to give him by courtesy the name he takes upon himself) is in the year 533, when, at a council held in Constantinople, Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, appealed to these writings in support of Monophysite teaching. In spite of this

unpromising beginning they soon acquired a great reputation; indeed, they presumably possessed some authority already when this first recorded appeal to them was made. They were widely read in the Eastern Church, being elucidated by the Commentary of St. Maximus in the seventh century and the Paraphrase of the learned Greek scholar, Pachymeres, in the thirteenth or fourteenth. Through Erigena's Latin translation in the ninth century they penetrated to the Western Church, and were so eagerly welcomed in this country that (in the words of the old chronicler), "The Mystical Divinity ran across England like deer." They are often quoted with reverence by St. Thomas Aquinas, and were, indeed, the chief of the literary forces moulding the mystical theology of Christendom. Ruysbroeck slaked his thirst at their deep well, and so they provided a far greater than their author with stimulus and an articulate philosophy. Were this their only service they would have the highest claims on our gratitude.

But they have an intrinsic value of their own in spite of their obvious defects. And if their influence has too often led to certain spiritual excesses, yet this influence would not have been felt at all had they not met a deep spiritual want. It arose not merely on account of their reputed authorship but also because the hungering heart of man found here some hidden manna. This manna, garnished though it be in all these writings with strange and often untranslatable terms from the Pagan Mysteries and from later neo-Platonism, is yet in itself a plain and nourishing spiritual meat. Let us now try to discover its quality from the two treatises before us.

2. HIS LEADING IDEAS: THE NATURE OF THE GODHEAD IN ITSELF

The basis of their teaching is the doctrine of the Super-Essential Godhead (ὑπερούσιος θεαρχία). We must, therefore, at the very outset fix the meaning of this term. Now the word "Essence" or "Being" (οὐσία) means almost invariably an individual existence; more especially a person, since such is the highest type that individual existence can in this world assume. And, in fact, like the English word "Being," it may without qualification be used to mean an angel. Since, then, the highest connotation of the term "Essence" or "Being" is a person, it follows that by "Super-Essence" is intended "Supra-Personality." And hence the doctrine of the Super-Essential Godhead simply means that God is, in His ultimate Nature, Supra-Personal.

Now an individual person is one who distinguishes himself from the rest of the world. I am a person because I can say: "I am I and I am not you." Personality thus consists in the faculty of knowing oneself to be one individual among others. And thus, by its very nature, Personality is (on one side of its being, at least) a finite thing. The very essence of my personal state lies in the fact that I am not the whole universe but a member thereof.

God, on the other hand, is Supra-Personal because He is infinite. He is not one Being among others, but in His ultimate nature dwells on a plane where there is nothing whatever beside Himself. The only kind of consciousness we may attribute to Him is what can but be described as an Universal Consciousness. He does not distinguish Himself from us; for were we caught up on to that level we should be wholly transformed into Him. And yet we distinguish between ourselves and Him because from our lower plane of finite Being we look up and see that ultimate level beyond us.

The Super-Essential Godhead is, in fact, precisely that which modern philosophy describes as the Absolute. Behind the diversities of this world there must be an Ultimate Unity. And this Ultimate Unity must contain in an undifferentiated condition all the riches of consciousness, life, and existence which are dispersed in broken fragments throughout the world. Yet It is not a particular Consciousness or a particular Existence. It is certainly not Unconscious, Dead or, in the ordinary sense, non-Existent, for all these terms imply

something below instead of above the states to which they are opposed.

Nevertheless It is not, in Its Ultimate Nature, conscious (as we understand the term) for consciousness implies a state in which the thinking Subject is aware of himself and so becomes an Object of his own perception. And this is impossible in the ultimate Nature of the Undifferentiated Godhead where there is no distinction between thinking Subject and Object of thought, simply because there is at that level no distinction of any kind whatever. Similarly the Godhead does not, in the ordinary sense, live (for life is a process and hence implies distinctions) nor does It even (in our sense) exist, for Existence is contrasted with non-Existence and thus implies relationship and distinctions. Consciousness, Life, and Existence, as we know them, are finite states, and the Infinite Godhead is beyond them. We cannot even, strictly speaking, attribute to It Unity, for Unity is distinguished from Plurality. We must instead describe It as a Super-Unity which is neither One nor Many and yet contains in an undifferentiated state that Numerical Principle which we can only grasp in its partial forms as Unity and Plurality.

3. THE RELATION OF THE GODHEAD TO CREATION

This principle of Plurality which is thus transcendently contained in Its Undifferentiated Nature compels It to an eternal act of Creation. For all things pre-exist in It fused and yet distinct, as (shall we say?) in a single sensation of hunger there are indivisibly felt the several needs for the different elements of food which are wanted respectively to nourish the various kinds of bodily tissues, or as a single emotion contains beforehand the different separate words which issue forth to express it. Even so the Ultimate Godhead, brimful with Its Super-Unity, must overflow into multiplicity, must pass from Indifference into Differentiation and must issue out of its Super-Essential state to fashion a world of Being.

Now since the Godhead thus pours Itself out on to the plane of Being (which plane itself exists through nothing but this outpouring), it follows that the Godhead comes into relation with this plane: or rather (inasmuch as the act is timeless) stands in some relation to it. If the Godhead acts creatively, then It is related to the world and sphere of creation: eternally to the sphere of creation (which otherwise could not exist), and thus potentially to the world even before the world was made. Hence the Godhead, while in Its ultimate Nature It is beyond all differentiations and relationships, and dwells in a region where there is nothing outside of Itself, yet on another side of Its Nature (so to speak) touches and embraces a region of differentiations and relationships, is therefore Itself related to that region, and so in a sense belongs to it. Ultimately the Godhead is undifferentiated and unrelated, but in Its eternal created activity It is manifested under the form of Differentiation and Relationship. It belongs concurrently to two worlds: that of Ultimate Reality and that of Manifested Appearance. Hence, therefore, the possibility not only of Creation but also Revelation (ἔκφανσις). Just as the Godhead creates all things by virtue of that Aspect of Its Nature which is (as it were) turned towards them, so It is revealed to us by virtue of the same Aspect turned towards our minds which form part of the creation. Hence all the Scriptural Names of God, and this very Name "God" itself, though they apply to the whole Nature of the Godhead and not merely to some particular element or function thereof, yet cannot express that Nature in Its Ultimate Super-essence but only as manifested in Its relative activity. Dionysius, in fact, definitely teaches that doctrine which, when revived independently of recent years by Dr. Bradley was regarded as a startling blasphemy: that God is but an Appearance of the Absolute. And this is, after all, merely a bold way of stating the orthodox truism that the Ultimate Godhead is incomprehensible: a truism which Theology accepts as an axiom and then is prone to ignore. The various Names of God are thus mere inadequate symbols of That Which transcends all thought and existence. But they

are undifferentiated titles because they are symbols which seek (though unsuccessfully) to express the undifferentiated Super-Essence. Though the terms “God,” “King,” “Good,” “Existent,” etc., have all different connotations, yet they all denote the same undifferentiated Deity. There are, however, some Names which denote not the undifferentiated Godhead, but certain eternally differentiated Elements in Its Manifestation. These are the Names of the Three Persons in the Blessed Trinity. Whereas the terms “God,” “King,” “Good,” “Existent,” etc., denote (though they cannot express it) the same Reality: the term “Father” denotes something different from that of “Son,” and both of these from that of “Holy Ghost.” The whole Manifested Godhead is “God,” “King,” “Creator,” “Saviour,” “Lord,” “Eternal,” “Living,” etc., but only One Persona of the Godhead is Father, or Son, or Holy Ghost. The undifferentiated titles differ from each other merely through our feeble grasp of the Manifestation, and coalesce as our apprehension of it grows; the differentiated titles (διακεκριμένα or διακρίσεις) represent actual distinctions in the eternal Manifestation Itself. Thus the Absolute Godhead is the Super-Essence; the eternally Manifested God head is the Trinity. As to the reasons of this Dionysius deprecates all inquiry. He does not, for instance, suggest that Relationship in this its simplest form cannot but exist within that side of the God head which embraces and enters into this relative world. Here, as elsewhere, his purpose in spite of his philosophical language, is in the deepest sense purely practical, and mere speculations are left on one side. He accepts the Eternal Distinctions of the Trinity because They have been revealed; on the other hand, he sees that they must belong to the sphere of Manifestation or They could not be revealed.

It was said above that the Ultimate Godhead is Supra-Personal, and that it is Supra-Personal because personality consists in the faculty of knowing oneself to be one individual among others. Are the Personæ of the Trinity then, personal, since They are distinguished One from Another? No, They are not personal, because, being the infinite Manifestation of the Godhead, They are Super-Essential, and Dionysius describes Them by that title. And if it be urged that in one place he joins the same title to our Lord’s individual Human Name and speaks of “the Super-Essential Jesus,” this is because the Personality of our Lord (and our own personality also through our union with Him) passes up into a region transcending personality, and hence while the Humanity of Jesus is Personal His Godhead is Supra-Personal. This is implied in a passage from Hierotheus (quoted with approval by Dionysius himself) which teaches that the Deity of Jesus is of an universal character belonging through Him to all redeemed mankind.

The teaching of Dionysius on the Trinity is, so far as it goes, substantially the same as that of St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas; only it is expressed in more exact, if at first sight somewhat fantastic, terms. St. Augustine, for instance, teaches that the inner Differentiations of the Trinity belong solely to the realm of eternal Manifestation when he says that They exist secundum Relativum and not secundum Substantiam. Also he teaches the Supra-Personality of the Trinity when he says that neither the undivided Trinity nor any of Its Three Persons is a particular individuality; and St. Thomas teaches the same thing when he says that the Human Soul of Jesus does not comprehend or contain the Word since the Human Soul is finite (i.e. a particular individuality) while the Word is Infinite.

Thus while in the Undifferentiated Godhead the “Persons” of the Trinity ultimately transcend Themselves and point (as it were) to a region where They are merged, yet in that side of Its Nature which looks towards the universe They shine eternally forth and are the effulgence of those “Supernal Rays” through Which all light is given us, and whence all energy streams into the act of creation. For by Their interaction They circulate that Super-Essence Which Each of Them perfectly possesses, and so It passes forth from Them into a universe of Being.

Now the Godhead, while It is beyond all particular Being, yet contains and is the

ultimate Reality of all particular Being; for It contains beforehand all the particular creatures after a manner in which they are ultimately identical with It, as seems to be implied by the phrase that all things exist in It fused and yet distinct. Thus although It is not a particular being, It in a transcendent manner contains and is Particularity. Again It is beyond all universal Being, for universals are apprehended by the intellect, whereas the Godhead is incomprehensible and therefore is described as “formless.” Nevertheless It contains and is the Ultimate Reality of all universals, for, even before the world was made, It eternally embraced and embraces all things and all the universal laws of their existence. Thus after a transcendent manner It contains and is Universality. And hence in Its transcendent Nature Universality and Particularity are contained as one and the same undifferentiated Fact.

But in this world of Being the particular and the universal aspect of things must be mutually distinguished. Otherwise there could, on the one hand, be no things, and on the other, no bond of unity between them. Hence, when the Super-Essence overflows in the act of creation, It runs, as it were, into the two main streams of Universal and Particular Being. Neither of these two streams has any independent or concrete existence. Taken separately, they are mere potentialities: two separate aspects, as it were, of the creative impulse, implying an eternal possibility of creation and an eternal tendency towards it, and yet not in themselves creative because not in themselves, strictly speaking, existent. Nevertheless these two streams differ each from each, and one of them has a degree of reality which does not belong to the other. Mere universal Being, says Dionysius, does not possess full or concrete existence; at the same time, since it is Being or Existence, he does not call it non-existent. Mere Particularity, on the other hand, he practically identifies with Non-entity, for the obvious reason that non-existence itself is a universal category (as applying to all existent things), and, therefore, cannot belong to that which has no universal element at all. Thus the universal stream is an abstract ideal and possesses an abstract existence, the particular stream is an abortive impulse and possesses no actual existence whatever. The one is the formal law of the existence universe, the other its rough material.

Thus these two emanating streams of potentiality have, from before all time, eternally welled forth and passed away, the universal into emptiness and the particular into nothingness, or rather, through nothingness back at once into the Super-Essence in a ceaseless revolution which, until the appointed moment arrives for Time and the temporal world to begin, leaves no trace outside Its Super-Essential Source and Dwelling and Goal. It is possible (though one cannot say more), that Dionysius is thinking especially of the difference between these two streams when he describes the various motions of the Godhead. The Particular stream of Emanation may be in his mind when he speaks of the circular movement, since the particular existences remain within the Super-Essence, until the moment of their temporal creation: the Universal stream may be that of which he is thinking when he speaks of the direct and spiral movements, since both of these indicate an advance and would therefore be appropriate to express the out-raying tendency of that emanating Influence which, even before the particular creatures were made, had a kind of existence for thought as the other stream had not.

This Universal stream consists of currents or Emanations, Very Being, Very Life, etc. (αὐτοεῖναι, αὐτοζωή, κ.τ.λ.), and of these currents some are more universal than others; Very Being is, obviously, the most universal of all. And since the Super-Essence transcends and so absorbs all Universality, it follows that the more universal the Emanations are the higher is their nature. This stream, in fact, runs, as it were, in the channel which our thought naturally traces; for thought cannot but seek for universals, and the abstract and bloodless tendency of mere Philosophy comes from an undue exaltation of thought over life. From this defect, however, Dionysius is free. For, while he holds that the highest Emanation is the most universal, he also holds (as was seen) that the Emanations are in themselves

the mere background of existence and are not fully existent. And he expressly says that while the Emanations become more and more universal the higher we ascend towards their Source, the creatures become more and more individual and particular the higher they rise in the scale. The reason is, of course, that the Super-Essence transcends and absorbs all Particularity as well as all Universality; and hence it is that particular things become particularized by partaking of It, just as universals become universalized by a similar process. But of this more anon.

This Universal stream of Emanations thus eternally possesses a kind of existence, but it is an empty existence, like the emptiness of mere light if there were no objects to fill it and be made visible. The light in such a case would still be streaming forth from the sun and could not do otherwise, and therefore it would not be an utter void; but it would be untenanted by any particular colour or shape. Suppose, however, that the light could be blotted out. There would now remain the utter void of absolute darkness. Such darkness cannot exist while the sun is shining in the cloudless heavens; nevertheless the very notion of light cannot but be contrasted in our minds with that of darkness which is its absence; and so we conceive the light to be a positive thing which fills the darkness even as water fills a void. When the bowl is full of water, the void does not exist; and yet, since it would exist if the bowl could be wholly emptied; we can regard this non-existent void as the receptacle of the water.

Even so the Emanations of Very Being, etc., fill, as it were, a void which does not and cannot exist, since it is, and must be, saturated with them, and yet it is, by the very laws of our thinking, contrasted with them and would, in a manner, exist if the Emanations could cease to flow from the Super-Essence. They, streaming eternally (as they must) from that overflowing Source, permeate the whole boundless region of the world that is to be; a region beyond Time and Space. That region is thus their receptacle. The receptacle, if emptied of them (though this is impossible), would contain nothing, and be nothing whatsoever. Hence, it is called Not-Being, or the Non-Existent (τὸ μὴ ὄν).

So the two Streams flow timelessly without beginning and without end, and cross, but do not mingle: the Universal Stream perpetually advancing and the Particular Stream circling round and slipping through it, as it were, into the void of Nothingness (as a thing by its very nature invisible, would be in darkness even while surrounded by the light) and so returning into the Super-Essence without leaving a trace behind it. This activity, though it must be expressed thus in terms of Time, is really timeless and therefore simultaneous. For the Streams are not something other than the Super-Essence. They are simply distant aspects of It. They are the Super-Essence in Its creative activity. As the river flowing out of a lake consists of the water which belongs to the lake, or as the light and heat flowing from the sun are the same light and heat that are in the sun, so the emanating Streams are the same Power that exists in the Super-Essence, though now acting (or striving to act) at a distance. Or perhaps we may compare the Super-Essence to a mountain of rich ore, the inward depths of which are hidden beyond sight and touch. The outer surface, however, is touched and seen, and this corresponds to the Persons of the Trinity; while the same mountain viewed at a distance is the Stream of Universal Emanation. And though the view becomes dimmer and dimmer the farther away you go, yet it is always the same mountain itself that is being viewed. The Particular Stream, on the other hand, is like the same mountain when invisible at night, for the mountain still sends forth its vibrations, but these are lost in the darkness.

Or we may compare the Super-Essence to a magnet and the Persons of the Trinity to its tangible surface, and the two emanating Streams to the positive and negative magnetism which are simply the essence of the magnet present (so to speak) at a distance. Even so (but in a manner which is truer because non-spatial) the Super-Essence is in the emanating

streams outside the Super-Essential plane and thus interpenetrates regions which are remote from Itself. It is both immanent in the world as its Principle of Being and outside it as transcending all categories of Being. This contradiction is implied in the very word “Emanation” (πρόοδος) which means an act by which the Super-Essence goes forth from Itself. And, in fact, Dionysius more than once definitely says that the Super-Essence actually passes outside of Itself even while It remains all the time wholly within itself. This he expresses in one place by saying that the act of Creation is an ecstasy of Divine Love. This thought is vital to his doctrine, and must be remembered whenever in the present attempt to expound him, the Super-Essence is spoken of as “outside” the creatures. The Super-Essence is not, strictly speaking, external to anything. But It is “outside” the creatures because (as existing simultaneously on two planes) It is “outside” itself. And therefore, although the entire plane of creation is interpenetrated by It, yet in Its ultimate Nature It is beyond that plane and so “outside” it. Finite creatures though filled (according to their measure) with Its Presence, yet must, in so far as they are finite, look up to It as That which is Other than themselves. And, in this sense of being Other than they are, It must be described as “outside” them, even though (as their Principle of Being) It is within them.

Thus the two emanating streams, though they pass outside of the Super-Essence, yet actually are the Super-Essence Itself. And, in fact, the very term Emanation (πρόοδος) like the collateral term Differentiation (διάκρισις) may even be applied not only to the two Streams but also to the Persons of the Trinity; not only to the Magnets radiating Energy, so to speak, but also to its actual Surface.

This matter needs a few words of explanation.

There is in the undifferentiated (ὑπερνωμένη) Super-Essence a Differentiation between the Three Divine “Persons,” which Dionysius compares to the distinction between different flames in the same indivisible brightness. And Each “Person” is an Emanation because Each is a Principle of outgoing creative Energy. There is also a Differentiation between the various qualities and forces of the creative Energy, rather as (if we may further work out the simile of Dionysius) the light seen afar through certain atmospheric conditions is differentiated into various colours. And each quality or force is an Emanation, for it is an outgoing current of creative Energy. Or, by a slightly different use of language, the entire creative process in which they flow forth may be called not merely a collection of emanations but simply “the Emanation.” Thus an Emanation may mean, (1) a Person of the Trinity; (2) a current of the Universal Stream (e.g., Very Being, or Very Life, etc.); (3) a current of the Particular Stream (i. e. a particular force); (4) the entire process whereby the two Streams flow forth. This sounds confusing, but the difficulty vanishes if we classify these various meanings under two heads, viz.: (1) an Emanating Principle (i. e. a “Person” of the Trinity), and (2) an Emanating Act (whether regarded as a whole or in detail). This classification covers all its uses.

These two heads, in fact, correspond exactly to the two main uses of the word “Differentiation” as applying respectively to the Super-Essential sphere and to the sphere of Being. And here Dionysius certainly does cause needless difficulty by employing the same word “Differentiation” with these two distinct meanings in the same passage. The Persons of the Trinity are differentiated, but the Energy streaming from them is undifferentiated in the sense that it comes indivisibly from them all. In another sense, however, it is differentiated because it splits up into separate currents and forces. Each of these currents comes from the Undivided Trinity, and yet each current is distinct from the others. Dionysius expresses this truth by saying that the Godhead enters Undivided ly into Differentiation, or becomes differentiated without loss of Undifference (ἠνωμένως διακρίνεται).

Let us follow this creative process and see whither it leads. The Super-Essence, as It transcends both Non-Existence and Existence, also transcends both Time and Eternity. But

from afar It is seen or felt as Existence and as Eternity. That is to say Existence and Eternity are two emanating modes or qualities of the Universal Stream. The Particular Stream, on the other hand, is Time-non-existent as yet and struggling to come to the birth but unable to do so until it gain permanence through mingling with Eternity. At a certain point, however (preordained in the Super-Essence wherein Time slumbered), the two streams not only cross but actually mingle, and thus Time and the temporal world begin. The Particular stream no longer sinks wholly through the Universal, but is in part supported by it. Hence the world of things arises like a substance hitherto invisible but now becoming visible, and so, by this change, springing out of darkness into light.

Now, when the Particular stream begins to mingle with the Universal, it naturally mingles first with that current of it which, being most universal, ranks the highest and so is nearest the Source. It is only along that current that it can advance to the others which are further away. And that current is Being (αὐτοεῖναι). Thus the world-process begins (as Dionysius had learnt from Genesis and from the teaching of Plato) as the level of dead solid matter, to which he gives the name of “merely existent” (οὐσιωδής). Thence, by participating more and more in the Universal stream, it advances to the production of plant and animal and man, being by the process enriched with more and more qualities as Life (αὐτοζωή), Wisdom (αὐτοσοφία), and the other currents of the Universal stream begin to permeate it one by one.

Thus the separate individuals, according to the various laws (λόγοι) of their genera and species, are created in this world of Time. And each thing, while it exists in the world, has two sides to its existence: one, outside its created being (according to the sense of the word “outside” explained above), in the Super-Essence wherein all things are One Thing (as all points meet at infinity or as according to the neo-Platonic simile used by Dionysius, the radii of a circle meet at the centre), and the other within its own created being on this lower plane where all things are separate from each other (as all points in space are separate or as the radii of the circle are separate at the circumference). This paradox is of the very utmost importance.

The various kinds of existences being now created in this world of time, we can regard them as ranged in an ascending scale between Nothingness and the Super-Essence, each rank of being subsuming the qualities of those that lie below it. Thus we get the following system in ascending order: Existence, Life, Sensation, Reason, Spirit. And it is to this scale that Dionysius alludes when he speaks of the extremities and the intermediate parts of the creation, meaning by the extremities the highest and the lowest orders, and by the intermediate parts the remainder.

The diminution of Being which we find in glancing down the ladder is, Dionysius tells us, no defect in the system of creation. It is right that a stone should be but a stone and a tree no more than a tree. Each thing, being itself however lowly, is fulfilling the laws of its kind which pre-exist (after a transcendent manner) in the undifferentiated Super-Essence. If, however, there is a diminution of Being where such diminution has no place, then trouble begins to arise. This is, in fact, the origin and nature of evil. For as we ascend the scale of Being, fresh laws at each stage counteract the laws of the stage below, the law of life by which the blood circulates and living things grow upwards counteracting the mere law of inert gravitation, and again, the laws of morality counteracting the animal passions. And where this counter-action fails, disaster follows. A hindered circulation means ill-health, and a hindered self-control means sin. Whereas a stone is merely lifeless, a corpse is not only lifeless but dead; and whereas a brute is un-moral, a brutal man is wicked, or immoral. What in the one case is the absence from a thing of that which has no proper place in it, is in the other case the failure of the thing’s proper virtues.

4. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

At wearisome length Dionysius discusses the problem of evil and shows that nothing is inherently bad. For existence is in itself good (as coming ultimately from the Super-Essence), and all things are therefore good in so far as they exist. Since evil is ultimately non-existent; a totally evil thing would be simply non-existent, and thus the evil in the world, wherever it becomes complete, annihilates itself and that wherein it lodges. We may illustrate this thought by the nature of zero in mathematics, which is non-entity (since, added to numbers, it makes no difference) and yet has an annihilating force (since it reduces to zero all numbers that are multiplied by it). Even so evil is nothing and yet manifests itself in the annihilation of the things it qualifies. That which we call evil in the world is merely a tendency of things towards nothingness. Thus sickness is a tendency towards death, and death is simply the cessation of physical vitality. And sin is a tendency towards spiritual death, which is the cessation of spiritual vitality. But, since the ground of the soul is indestructible, a complete cessation of its being is impossible; and hence even the devils are not inherently bad. Were they such they would cease ipso facto to exist.

Dionysius here touches incidentally on a mystical doctrine which, as developed by later writers, afterwards attained the greatest importance. This doctrine of a timeless self is the postulate, perhaps, of all Christian mysticism. The boldest expression of it is to be found in Eckhart and his disciple Tauler, who both say that even the lost souls in hell retain unaltered the ultimate nobility of their being. And lest this doctrine should be thought to trifle with grave matters, be it remembered that the sinfulness and gravity of sin are simply due to this indestructible nobility of our being. Man cannot become non-moral, and hence his capacity for wickedness. The soul is potentially divine, and therefore may be actually satanic. The very devils in hell cannot destroy the image of the Godhead within them, and it is this image that sin defiles.

It follows from the ultimate non-entity of evil that, in so far as it exists, it can only do so through being mingled with some element of good. To take an illustration given by Dionysius himself, where there is disease there is vitality, for when life ceases the sickness disappears in death. The ugliness of evil lies precisely in the fact that it always, somehow or other, consists in the corruption of something inherently good.

It is, however, this ugliness of things that Dionysius fails to emphasize, and herein lies the great weakness of his teaching. Not only does he, with the misguided zeal of an apologist, glaze deliberately over certain particular cruelties of the Creation and accept them as finite forms of good, but also he tends to explain away the very nature of evil in itself. He tends to be misled by his own true theories. For it is true that evil is ultimately non-existent. St. Augustine taught this when he said: "Sin is nought";⁶ so did Julian of Norwich, who "saw not sin," because she believes "it hath no manner of substance nor any part of being." The fault of Dionysius is the natural failure of his mental type to grasp the mere facts of the actual world as mere facts. He is so dazzled with his vision of ultimate Reality that he does not feel with any intensity the partial realities of this finite universe. Hence, though his theory of evil is, in the main, true, he does not quite grasp the true application of his theory to this world of actual facts.

For this world is by its very nature finite. And hence, if the evil in it is (as Dionysius rightly says) but partial, it must also be remembered (as he for a moment forgets) that its very existence is but partial. And, therefore, though evil is ultimately non-existent, yet the bad qualities of things may, so far as this present world is concerned, have as much reality, or at least as much actuality, as their good qualities. And when we say that evil is ultimately non-existent we merely mean that evil ought to have no actuality here, not that it has none. Dionysius calls evil a lapse and failure of the creature's proper virtues. But a lapse

or failure has in it something positive, as he in the same breath both admits by using the word and also tries to explain away. It is as positive as the virtues from which it lapses. The absence of a wooden block is nothing, light has no proper place there, but the air, where light should be is darkness and is a visible shadow. St. Augustine has crystallized this truth in his famous epigram, quoted above in part, which runs in full as follows: "Sin is naught, and men are naughtes when they sin." The void left by the want of a good thing has a content consisting in the want. Probably had Dionysius seen more of the world's misery and sin he would have had a stronger sense of this fact. And in that case he would have given more prominence than he gives, in his extant writings at least, to the Cross of Christ.

Two things should, however, be borne in mind. In the first place he is writing for intellectual Christians in whom he can take for granted both an understanding of metaphysics and a horror of sin. To such readers the non-existence of evil could not have the same meaning as it would to the world outside. For the same reason he (like other Christian teachers after him) speaks of God's transcendent Non-Existence without fearing lest his words should be interpreted as atheism. In fact, to guard against misinterpretation he utters the express warning that mysteries can only be taught to the Initiated.⁸

In the second place throughout his whole treatment of evil, he is no doubt writing with an eye on the dualistic heresy of the Manichees, which was prevalent in his day. Hence the occasional indiscretion of the zeal with which he seeks to block every loop-hole looking towards dualism. The result is a one-sided emphasis in his teaching rather than positive error. He rightly denies a dualism of ultimate realities; but he tends to ignore, rather than to deny, the obvious dualism of actual facts.

Before proceeding to the Method of Contemplation which crowns and vitalizes the entire speculative system of Dionysius, it will be well to bring together in one paragraph the various meanings he gives to Non-Existence.

(1) The Super-Essence transcends the distinction between the Aristotelian "Matter" and "Form"; but in this world the two are distinct from each other. And whereas, in this world, Form without "Matter" has an abstract existence for thought, "Matter" without Form has none. Thus mere "Matter" is non-existent. And hence things both before their creation and after their destruction are non-existent, for their "Matter" has then no "form." (2) Similarly Good without evil exists as the highest Manifestation or "Form" of the Godhead, but evil without Good is formless and therefore non-existent. (This does not mean that "Matter" or the world-stuff is evil, but that neither it nor evil is anything at all.) And since evil is ultimately altogether non-existent, all things are non-existent in so far as they are evil. (3) Finally, the Super-Essence is, in a transcendent manner, non-Existent as being beyond Existence. And hence the paradox that the destructive force of evil and the higher impulse towards the Godhead both have the same negative principle of a discontent with the existent world—the dangerous, yet true, doctrine (taught, among others, by St. Augustine⁹ and Dante¹⁰) that evil is a mistaken quest for Good.

The principle of this classification is quite simple. It lies in the fact that Being is the most universal of the Emanations or Forms, and that all things therefore exist only in so far as they possess Form. Hence the want of all "form" is non-entity and makes things which are without any form to be non-existent; that want of proper "form" which we call evil is a tendency to non-entity and makes evil things to be so far non-existent; the want of complete substantial or spiritual "form" makes merely existent things (i.e. lifeless things) to be "un-existent"; and the transcendence of all "Form" makes the Super-Essence to be in a special sense "Non-Existent."

The theory of evil, as given above, is worked out in a manner sufficiently startling.

We naturally divide existent things into good and bad and do not think of non-existent things as being things at all. Dionysius, with apparent perversity, says all things are good,

and then proceeds to divide them into “Existent” and “Non-Existent”! The reason is this: All things have two sides to their being: the one in the Super-Essence and the other in themselves. In the Super-Essence they are eternally good, even before their creation. But in themselves (i.e. in their created essence) they were wholly non-existent before their temporal creation, and after it are partially non-existent in so far as they are tainted with evil.

5. CONTEMPLATION

So far this doctrine of a dual state belonging to all things may seem an unprofitable speculation. We now come to the point where its true value will be seen. For it underlies a profound theory of Personality and a rich method of Contemplation. This part of the subject is difficult, and will need close attention.

The process of Creation advances from the simple to the complex as Life is added to mere Being, and Consciousness to Life, and Rationality to Consciousness. But from this point there begins a new phase in the process. Man, having as it were floated into the world down the Universal stream of Emanation, now enters into his spirit, and so plunges beneath the stream, and there below its surface finds an undercurrent which begins to sweep him in a contrary direction towards the Source. By the downward movement his personality has been produced, by this upward movement it will be transformed.

So man presses on towards God, and the method of his journey is a concentration of all his spiritual powers. By this method he gathers himself together away from outward things into the centre of his being. And thus he gradually becomes unified and simplified, like the Angels whose creation Dionysius was able to place at the very commencement of the developing temporal order precisely because their nature is of this utterly simple and concentrated kind. And, because the process of advance is one of spiritual concentration, and moves more and more from external things into the hidden depths of the soul, therefore man must cast away the separate forms of those elements which he thus draws from the circumference into the centre of his personal spirit. Having sucked the nourishment from the various fruits growing severally in their different proper zones by the margin of the stream up which he presses, he assimilates those vitalizing elements into his own tissues (finding each food suited in turn to his advancing strength) and casts the rind away as a thing no longer needed. And this rejection of the husk in which the nourishing fruit had grown is the process described by Dionysius as the *Via Negativa*.

Let us consider this matter more in detail.

The first stage of Religion is anthropomorphic. God is conceived of as a magnified Man with an outward form. This notion contains some low degree of truth, but it must be spiritualized. And in casting away the materialistic details of the conception we begin to enter on a *Via Negativa*. All educated Christians enter on this path, though very few are given the task of pursuing it to the end. So first the notion of an outward material form is cast away and then the notion of change. God is now regarded as a changeless and immaterial Being, possessing all the qualities of Personality and all the capacities of Sensation and Perception in an eternal and spiritual manner. This is a conception of God built up, largely, by the Discursive Reason and appealing to that side of our nature. But the Intuitive Reason seeks to pierce beyond this shimmering cloud into the hidden Light which shines through it. For the mind demands an Absolute Unity beyond this variety of Attributes. And such a Unity, being an axiom or postulate, lies in a region behind the deductions of the Discursive Reason. For all deduction depends upon axioms, and axioms themselves cannot be deduced.

Thus the human spirit has travelled far, but still it is unsatisfied. From the simple unity

of its own being it gazes up at the Simple Unity of the Uncreated Light which still shines above it and beyond it. The Light is One Thing and the human spirit is another. All elements of difference in the human spirit and in the Uncreated Light have disappeared, but there still remains the primary distinction between Contemplating Subject and Contemplated Object. The human self and the Uncreated Light stand in the mutual relationships of "Me" and "Thee." That which says "Me" is not the Being Which is addressed as "Thee"; and the Being addressed as "Thee" is not that which says "Me." The two stand over against one another.

This relationship must now be transcended by a process leading to ecstasy. The human spirit must seek to go forth out of itself (i. e. out of its created being) into the Uncreated Object of its contemplation and so to be utterly merged. So it ceases to desire even its own being in itself. Casting selfhood away, it strives to gain its true being and selfhood by losing them in the Super-Essence. Laying its intellectual activity to rest it obtains, by a higher spiritual activity, a momentary glimpse into the depths of the Super-Essence, and perceives that There the distinction between "Me" and "Thee" is not. It sees into the hidden recesses of an unplumbed Mystery in which its own individual being and all things are ultimately transcended, engulfed and transformed into one indivisible Light. It stands just within the borders of this Mystery and feels the process of transformation already beginning within itself. And, though the movements of the process are only just commenced, yet it feels by a hidden instinct the ultimate Goal whither they must lead. For, as Ruysbroeck says: "To such men it is revealed that they are That which they contemplate."

This transcendent spiritual activity is called Unknowing, For when we know a thing we can trace out the lines of difference which separate it from other things, or which separate one part of it from another. All knowledge, in fact, consists in, or at least includes, the power of separating "This" from "That." But in the Super-Essence there are no lines of difference to trace, and there is no "This" or "That." Or rather, to put it differently, "This" and "That," being now transcended, are simply one and the same thing. While the human spirit is yet imperfect, it looks up and sees the Super-Essence far beyond it. At this stage it still feels itself as "this" and still perceives the Super-Essence as "That." But when it begins to enter on the stage of spiritual Reflection (to use the technical term borrowed by Dionysius from the Mysteries) it penetrates the Super-Essence and darkly perceives that There the distinction ultimately vanishes. It sees a point where "this" is transfigured into "That," and "That" is wholly "this." And, indeed, already "That" begins to pour Itself totally into "this" through the act whereby "this" has plunged itself into "That."

Thus the ultimate goal of the "ego" now seen afar by Unknowing and attainable, perhaps, hereafter, is to be merged. And yet it will never be lost. Even the last dizzy leap into Absorption will be performed in a true sense by the soul itself and within the soul itself. The statement of Dionysius that in the Super-Essence all things are "fused and yet distinct," when combined with the doctrine of human immortality, means nothing else. For it means that the immortality of the human soul is of an individual kind; and so the self, in one sense, persists even while, in another sense, it is merged. This is the most astounding paradox of all! And Dionysius states the apparent contradiction without seeking to explain it simply because, here as elsewhere, he is not much concerned with theory but is merely struggling to express in words an overwhelming spiritual experience. The explanation, however (if such it may be called) can easily be deduced from his theory of existence and of personality.

All things have two sides to their existence: one in the Super-Essence, the other in themselves. Thus a human personality is (in William Law's words) an "outbirth" from the Godhead. And having at last made its journey Home, it must still possess these two sides to its existence. And hence, whereas on the one side it is merged, on the other it is not. Its

very being consists of this almost incredible paradox. And personality is a paradox because the whole world is a paradox, and the whole world is fulfilled in personality.

For this principle of a twofold existence underlies all things, and is a reflection of the Super-Essential Nature. As the Super-Essence has an eternal tendency to pass out of Itself by emanation, so the creatures have a tendency to pass out of themselves by spiritual activity. As the Super-Essence creates the world and our human souls by a species of Divine “ecstasy,” so the human soul must return by an answering “ecstasy” to the Super-Essence. On both sides there is the same principle of Self-Transcendence. The very nature of Reality is such that it must have its being outside itself.

And this principle of self-transcendence or ecstasy underlies not only the solitary quest of the individual soul for God, but also the mutual relations of the various individuals with each other. In all their social activities of loving fellowship the creatures seek and find themselves in one another and so outside of themselves. It is the very essence of Reality that it is not self-sufficing or self-contained.

Not only do the creatures in which the Super-Essence overflows possess, by an answering mystery, their true being in the Super-Essence, but, as a result of this, they possess their true being in each other; for in the Super-Essence each has its place as an element in One single and indivisible Reality. We have here, in fact, the great antinomy of the One and the Many, or the Universal and the Particulars, not solved indeed, but pronounced to be insoluble and therefore ultimate. It penetrates into a region beyond the intellect, and that is why the intellect is finally baffled by it.

The Dionysian theory that one side of our being is outside ourselves in the Super-Essence will be found incidentally to reconcile Pragmatism and Idealism together. For Dionysius teaches that on one side of our being we actually develop in Time. And, if this is so, we do as the Pragmatists assert literally make Reality. But the other side of our being is timeless and eternally perfect outside ourselves. And if this is so, then Reality, as Idealists tell us, is something utterly beyond all change. Perhaps this paradox is intended in Wordsworth’s noble line:—“So build we up the being that we are.”

6. DIONYSIUS AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

Let us now consider the bearings of the Dionysian theory on certain other currents of modern philosophy.

According to Dr. McTaggart each human soul possesses, behind its temporal nature, a timeless self and each one of these timeless selves is an eternal differentiation of the Absolute. Now if these timeless selves are finite, then none embraces the whole system. And, if that is so, in what does the Spiritual Unity of the whole consist? If, on the other hand, they are infinite, then each one must embrace the whole System; and, if so, how can they remain distinct? Having the same context, they must coalesce even as (according to Orthodox Theology) the “Persons” of the Trinity coalesce in the Unity behind the plane of Manifestation. Dr. McTaggart’s philosophical scheme is noble, but it seems open to this metaphysical attack, and psychologically it appears to be defective as it leaves no room for worship, which is a prime need of the human soul. The Dionysian theory seems to meet the difficulty; for since our ultimate being is outside ourselves in the Super-Essence, one side of our Being is supra-personal. Our finite selves are, on that side, merged together in One Infinite “Self” (if It may be thus inadequately described); and this Infinite Self (so to call It) embraces, and is the Spiritual Unity of the whole System. And this Infinite Self, seen from afar, is and must be the Object of all worship until at last worship shall be swallowed up in the completeness of Unknowing.

The paradox that our true existence is (in a sense) outside ourselves is the paradox of

all life. We live by breath and food, and so our life is in these things outside our individual bodies. Our life is in the air and in our nourishment before we assimilate it as our own. More astonishing still, Bergson has shown that our perceptions are outside us in the things we perceive. When I perceive an object a living current passes from the object through my eyes by the afferent nerves to the brain, and thence by the efferent nerves once more to the object from which it started, causing a mere sensation in me (i. e. in my body) but causing me also by that sensation to have a perception outside me (i. e. outside my body) in the thing I look at. And all who gaze upon the same object have their perceptions outside themselves in that same object which yet is indivisibly one. Even so are we to find at last that we all have our true selfhoods in the One Super-Essence outside us, and yet each shall all the time have a feeling in himself of his own particular being without which the Super-Essence could not be his.

The doctrine of Unknowing must not be confounded with Herbert Spencer's doctrine of the Unknowable. The actual terms may be similar: the meanings are at opposite poles. For Herbert Spencer could conceive only of an intellectual apprehension, which being gone, nothing remained: Dionysius was familiar with a spiritual apprehension which soars beyond the intellect. Hence Herbert Spencer preaches ignorance concerning ultimate things; Dionysius (like Bergson in modern times) a transcendence of knowledge. The one means a state below the understanding and the other a state above it. The one teaches that Ultimate Reality is, and must always be, beyond our reach; the other that the Ultimate Reality at last becomes so near as utterly to sweep away (in a sense) the distinction which separates us from It. That this is the meaning of Unknowing is plain from the whole trend of the Dionysian teaching, and is definitely stated, for instance, in the passage about the statue or in others which say that the Divine Darkness is dark through excess of light. It is even possible that the word "Unknowing" was (with this positive meaning) a technical term of the Mysteries or of later Greek Philosophy, and that this is the real explanation and interpretation of the inscription on the Athenian altar: "To the Unknown God."

7. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONTEMPLATION

Be this as it may, Dionysius is unquestionably speaking of a psychological state to which he himself has been occasionally led. It must, however, be carefully distinguished from another psychological state, apparently the same and yet really quite different, of which there is also evidence in other writers.

Amiel speaks of a mental condition in which the self lies dormant, dissolved, as it were, and absorbed into an undifferentiated state of being; and it is well known that a man's individuality may become merged in the impersonal existence of a crowd. The contrast between such a state and Unknowing consists wholly in the difference of spiritual values and spiritual intensity. Amiel felt the psychic experience mentioned above to be enervating. And the danger is fairly obvious. For this psychic state comes not through spiritual effort but through spiritual indolence. And the repose of spiritual attainment must be a strenuous repose.

The same psychic material may take either of two opposite forms, for the highest experiences and the lowest are both made of the same spiritual stuff. That is why great sinners make great saints and why our Lord preferred disreputable people to the respectable righteous. A storm of passion may produce a Sonata of Beethoven or it may produce an act of murder. All depends on the quality and direction of the storm. So in the present instance. There is a higher merging of the self and a lower merging of it. The one is above the level of personality, the other beneath it; the one is religious the other hedonistic; the one results from spiritual concentration and the other from spiritual dissipation.

Apparently our souls are crystallizations, as it were, out of an undifferentiated psychic

ocean. So our personalities are formed, which we must keep inviolate. To melt back, though but for a time, into that ocean would be to surrender our heritage and to incur great loss. This is the objection to mere psychic trances. But some have been called on to advance by the intensification of their spiritual powers until they have for a moment reached a very different Ocean, which, with its fervent heat, has burst the hard outer case of their finite selfhood, and so they have been merged in that Vast Sea of Uncreated Light which has brought them no loss but only gain.

Just as in early days some had special gifts of prophecy through the power of the Holy Ghost, but some through the power of Satan, and the test lay in the manifested results,¹⁷ so in the present instance. We cannot doubt that the experience is true and valid when we see its glory shining forth in the humble Saints of God.

To illustrate this experience fully from the writings of the Saints would need a volume to itself. Let us take a very few examples from one or two writers of unquestioned orthodoxy.

And first, for the theory of personality implied in it we may turn to Pascal, whose teaching amounts to very much the same thing as that of Dionysius. "Le moi," he says, "est haïssable. . . . En un mot, le Moi a deux qualités: il est injuste en soi, en ce qu'il se fait centre du tout; il est encommonde aux autres, en ce qu'il les veut asservir: car chaque Moi est l'ennemi et voudrait être le tyran de tous les autres." Thus self-centred Moi, or Personality, is wrong inherently and not only in its results. And it is inherently wrong because a personality has no right to be the centre of things. From this we may conclude (1) that God, as being the rightful Centre of all things, is not a Moi, or Personality; and (2) that the transcendence of our Moi, or Personality, is our highest duty. What, then, is the goal to which this transcendence will lead us? Pascal has a clear-cut answer: "Il n'y a que l'Être universel qui soit tel. . . . Le Bien Universel est en nous, est nous mêmes et ne se pas nous." This is exactly the Dionysian doctrine. Each must enter into himself and so must find Something that is his true Self and yet is not his particular self. His true being is deep within his soul and yet in Something Other than his individuality which is within his soul and yet outside of him. We may compare St. Augustine's words: "I entered into the recesses of my being . . . and saw . . . above my mind an Unchanging Light. Where, then, did I find Thee except in Thyself above myself?"

Now for the actual experience of Unknowing and of the Negative Path that leads to it. The finest description of this, or at least of the aspiration after it, is to be found in the following passage from the Confessions of St. Augustine:

"Could one silence the clamorous appetites of the body; silence his perceptions of the earth, the water, and the air; could he silence the sky, and could his very soul be silent unto itself and, by ceasing to think of itself, transcend self-consciousness; could he silence all dreams and all revelations which the mind can image; yea, could he entirely silence all language and all symbols and every transitory thing—inasmuch as these all say to the hearer: 'We made not ourselves but were made by the Eternal'—if, after such words, they were forthwith to hold their peace, having drawn the mind's ear towards their Maker, and He were now to speak alone, not through them but by Himself, so that we might hear His word, not through human language, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through any utterance out of a cloud, nor through any misleading appearance, but might instead hear, without these things, the very Being Himself, Whose presence in them we love—might hear Him with our Spirit even as now we strain our intellect and reach, with the swift movement of thought, to an eternal Wisdom that remains unmoved beyond all things—if this movement were continued, and all other visions (being utterly unequal to the task) were to be done away, and this one vision were to seize the beholder, and were to swallow him up and plunge him in the abyss of its inward delights, so that his life for ever should be like that fleeting moment of consciousness for which we have been yearning, would not

such a condition as this be an 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord'?"

This passage describes the Via Negativa in terms of aspiration drawn (we cannot doubt) from experience. The soul must cast all things away: sense, perception, thought, and the very consciousness of self; and yet the process and its final result are of the most intense and positive kind. We are reminded of Wordsworth's—"Thought was not; in enjoyment it expired."

Perhaps more striking is the testimony of St Thomas à Kempis, since, having no taste for speculation, he is not likely to be misled by theories. In the *Imitation of Christ*²⁴ occurs the following passage: "When shall I at full gather myself in Thee, that for Thy love I feel not myself, but Thee only, above all feeling and all manner, in a manner not known to all?"

Thus he speaks longingly of a state in which the individual human spirit is altogether merged and has no self-consciousness whatever, except the mere consciousness of its merging. It is conscious of God alone because, as an object of thought, it has gone out of its particular being and is merged and lost in Him. And the way in which St. Thomas describes this state and speaks of it as not known to all suggests that it was known to himself by personal experience.

The clearest and profoundest analysis of the state, based also on the most vivid personal experience of it, is given by Ruysbroeck. The two following passages are examples.

"The spirit for ever continues to burn in itself, for its love is eternal; and it feels itself ever more and more to be burnt up in love, for it is drawn and transformed into the Unity of God, where the spirit burns in love. If it observes itself, it finds a distinction and an otherness between itself and God; but where it is burnt up it is undifferentiated and without distinction, and therefore it feels nothing but unity; for the flame of the Love of God consumes and devours all that it can enfold in its Self."

"And, after this, there follows the third way of feeling; namely, that we feel ourselves to be one with God; for, through the transformation in God, we feel ourselves to be swallowed up in the fathomless abyss of our eternal blessedness, wherein we can nevermore find any distinction between ourselves and God. And this is our highest feeling, which we cannot experience in any other way than in the immersion in love. And therefore, so soon as we are uplifted and drawn into our highest feeling, all our powers stand idle in an essential fruition; but our powers do not pass away into nothingness, for then we should lose our created being. And as long as we stand idle, with an inclined spirit and with open eyes, but without reflection, so long we can contemplate and have fruition. But, at the very moment in which we seek to prove and to comprehend what it is that we feel, we fall back into reason, and there we find a distinction and an otherness between ourselves and God, and find God outside ourselves in incomprehensibility."

Nothing could be more lucid. The moi is merged in the Godhead and yet the ego still retains its individuality un-merged, and the existence of the perfected spirit embraces these two opposite poles of fusion and distinction.

The same doctrine is taught, though with less masterly clearness, by St. Bernard in the *De Diligendo Deo*. There is, he says, a point of rapture where the human spirit "forgets itself . . . and passes wholly into God." Such a process is "to lose yourself, as it were, like one who has no existence, and to have no self-consciousness whatever, and to be emptied of yourself and almost annihilated." "As a little drop of water," he continues, "blended with a large quantity of wine, seems utterly to pass away from itself and assumes the flavour and colour of wine, and as iron when glowing with fire loses its original or proper form and becomes just like the fire; and as the air, drenched in the light of the sun, is so changed into the same shining brightness that it seems to be not so much the recipient of the brightness as the actual brightness itself: so all human sensibility in the saints must then, in some ineffable manner, melt and pass out of itself, and be lent into the will of God. . . ."

The substance (i. e. personality) will remain but in another form.”

Of this transcendent experience St. Bernard bluntly says: “To experience this state is to be deified,” and “Deification” is a technical term in the Mystical Theology of both the Eastern and the Western Church. Though the word *θέωσις* was perhaps a Mystery term, yet it occurs, for instance, in the writings of St. Macarius, and there is therefore nothing strange or novel in the fact that Dionysius uses it. But he carefully distinguishes between this and cognate words; and his fantastic and uncouth diction is (here as so often) due to a straining after rigid accuracy. The Super-Essence he calls the Originating Godhead, or rather, perhaps, the Origin of Godhead (*Θεαρχία*), just as he calls it also “the Origin of Existence” (*οὐσιαρχία*). From this Origin there issues eternally, in the Universal stream of Emanation, that which he calls Deity or Very Deity (*θεότης* or *αὐτοθεότης*). This Deity, like Being, Life, etc., is an effluence radiating from the Super-Essential Godhead, and is a distant View of It as the dim visibility of a landscape is the landscape seen from afar, or as the effluent heat belongs to a fire. Purified souls, being raised up to the heights of contemplation, participate in this Effluence and so are deified (*θεοῦνται*) and become in a derivative sense, divine (*θεωδεῖς*, *θεῖοι*), or may even be called Gods (*θεοί*), just as by participating in the Effluence or Emanation of Being all created things become in a derivative sense existent (*οὐσιωδῆ, ὄντα*). The Super-Essential Godhead (*θεαρχία*) is beyond Deity as It is beyond Existence; but the names “Deity” (*Θεότης*) or “Existent” (*ὄν*) may be symbolically or inadequately applied to It, as a fire may be termed “warm” from its results though its actual temperature is of an intenser kind than this would imply. And the name of “Godhead,” which belongs to It more properly, is given It (says Dionysius) merely because it is the Source of our deification. Thus instead of arguing from God’s Divinity to man’s potential divinity, Dionysius argues from the acquisition of actual divinity by certain men to God’s Supra-Divinity. This is only another way of saying that God is but the highest Appearance or Manifestation of the Absolute. And this (as was seen above) is only another way of stating the orthodox and obvious doctrine that all our notions of Ultimate Reality are inadequate.

8. THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS OF DIONYSIUS’S DOCTRINES

In the treatise “Concerning the Divine Names,” Dionysius seeks to reconcile his daring conceptions with Scripture. Nor can he be said to fail. His argument, briefly, is that in Scripture we have a Revealed Religion and that things which are Revealed belong necessarily to the plane of Manifestation. Thus Revealed Religion interprets to us in terms of human thought things which, being Incomprehensible, are ultimately beyond thought. This is merely what St. Augustine teaches when he says that, the Prologue of St. John’s Gospel reveals the mysteries of Eternity not as they actually are but as human thought can grasp them. The neo-Platonism of Dionysius does not invalidate Scripture any more than that of Plotinus invalidates the writings of Plato. Dionysius merely says that there is an unplumbed Mystery behind the words of Scripture and streaming through them, just as Plotinus and other neo-Platonists hold that there is an unplumbed Mystery streaming through from behind Plato’s categories of thought. And if it be urged that at least our Lord’s teaching on the Fatherhood of God cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of a Supra-Personal Godhead, the answer is near at hand. For the Pagan Plotinus, whose doctrine is similar to that of Dionysius, gives this very name of “Father” to his Supra-Personal Absolute—or rather to that Aspect of It which comes into touch with the human soul. Moreover in the most rigidly orthodox Christian theology God the Father is not a Personality. St. Augustine, for instance, teaches that the “Persons” of the Trinity are Elements whose true nature is unknown to us. They correspond however, he says, to certain elements in our individual personalities, and hence the human soul is created (he tells us) not in the image of one Person in the Godhead but in

the image of the whole Trinity. Thus he by implication denies that God the Father is, in the ordinary sense of the word, a Personality. And the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas is very similar. It may, perhaps, even be said that the germ of the most startling doctrines which Dionysius expounds may be actually found in Scripture. A state, for instance, which is not knowledge and yet is not ignorance, is described by St. Paul when he says that Christians “know God or rather are known of Him.” This is the mental attitude of Unknowing. For the mind is quiescent and emptied of its own powers and so receives a knowledge the scope and activity of which is outside itself in God. And in speaking of an ecstatic experience which he himself had once attained St. Paul seems to suggest that he was, on that occasion, outside of himself in such a manner as hardly, in the ordinary sense, to retain his own identity. Moreover he suggests that the redeemed and perfected creation is at last to be actually merged in God (ἵνα ἢ ὁ Θεός τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν). And the doctrine of Deification is certainly, in the germ, Scriptural. For as Christ is the Son of God so are we to be Sons of God, and Christ is reported actually to have based His own claims to Deity on the potential Divinity of the human soul. Moreover we are to reign with Him and are, in a manner passing our present apprehension, to be made like Him when we see Him as He is.

Now all the boldest statements of Dionysius about the ultimate glory for which the human soul is destined are obviously true of Christ, and as applied to Him, they would be a mere commentary on the words “I and the Father are One.” Therefore if Christ came to impart His Life to us so that the things which are His by Nature should be ours by Grace, it follows that the teaching of Dionysius is in harmony with Scripture so long as it is made to rest on the Person and Work of Christ. And, though Dionysius does not emphasize the Cross as much as could be wished, yet he certainly holds that Christ is the Channel through which the power of attainment is communicated to us. It must not be forgotten that he is writing as a Christian to Christians, and so assumes the Work of Christ as a revealed and experienced Fact. And since he holds that every individual person and thing has its pre-existent limits ordained in the Super-Essence, therefore he holds that the Human Soul of Christ has Its preexistent place there as the Head of the whole creation. That is what he means by the phrase “Super-Essential Jesus,” and that is what is taught in the quotation from Hierotheus already alluded to. No doubt the lost works of Dionysius dealt more fully with this subject, as indeed he hints himself. And if, through this scanty sense of the incredible evil which darkens and pollutes the world, he does not in the present treatise lay much emphasis upon the Saviour’s Cross, yet he gives us definite teaching on the kindred Mystery of the Incarnation.

9. CONCLUSION

A few words on this matter and the present sketch is almost done. The Trinity (as was said) is Super- Essential or Supra-Personal. It is that Side of the Godhead which is turned towards the plane of Creation. Each “Person” possesses the whole Super-Essence and yet Each in a different manner. For the Father is originative and the other Two “Persons” derivative. The entire Super-Essence timelessly wells up in the Father and so passes on (as it were), timeless and entire, to the Son and Spirit. Thus the Second “Person” of the Trinity possesses eternally (like the other Two “Persons” in the Godhead) nothing but this Formless Radiance. But when the Second “Person” becomes Incarnate this Formless and Simple Radiance focuses Itself (shall we say?) in the complex lens of a Human Individuality. Or perhaps Christ’s Humanity should rather be compared to a prism which breaks that single white radiance into the iridescent colours of manifold human virtues. Thence there streams forth a glory which seeks to kindle in our hearts an answering fire whereby being wholly consumed we may pass up out of our finite being to find within the Super-Essence our predetermined Home.

Such is, in outline, the teaching of this difficult writer who, though he tortured language to express the truth which struggled within him for utterance, yet has often been rashly condemned through being misunderstood. The charge of Pantheism that has been laid at his door is refuted by the very extravagance of the terms in which he asserts the Transcendence of the Godhead. For the title "Super-Essence" itself implies a Mystery which is indeed the ultimate Goal of the creatures but is not at present their actual plane of being. It implies a Height which, though it be their own, they yet can reach through nothing else than a complete self-renunciation. With greater show of reason Dionysius has been accused of hostility to civilization and external things. Yet here again unjustly. For, if in his solitary hermitage he lived far from the haunts of men, yet he wrote an entire treatise on the institutional side of Religion; and he describes with impassioned enthusiasm the visible beauties of Nature. And, in fact, in his treatment of evil, he goes out of his way to assert that the whole material world is good. Outward things are assumed as the starting-point from which the human spirit must rise to another region of experience. Dionysius does not mean that they are all worthless; he simply means that they are not ultimate. In the passage concerning the three movements of the soul he implies that the human faculties are valuable though they must finally be transcended. Even so Macarius tells us that "Revelation" is a mental state beyond "Perception" and beyond "Enlightened Vision." All our natural activities must first sift together the particles which form the block of marble before we can by the Via Negativa carve the image out of it. And if this process of rejection destroys the block's original shape, yet it needs the block to work upon, and it does not seek to grind the whole material into powder. All life, when rightly understood, is a kind of Via Negativa, and we must struggle after certain things and then deliberately cast them aside, as a musician must first master the laws of Counterpoint and then sometimes ignore them, or as the Religion of the Law is a preparation for the higher Religion of the Spirit. Dionysius, nurtured in philosophy, passed beyond Philosophy without obscurantism, as St. Paul, nurtured in the Law, passed beyond the Law without disobedience. Finite things are good, for they point us on to the Infinite; but if we chain ourselves to them they will become a hindrance to our journey, when they can no longer be a guide. And Dionysius would have us not destroy them but merely break our chains.

His doctrines are certainly dangerous. Perhaps that is a mark of their truth. For the Ultimate Truth of things is so self-contradictory that it is bound to be full of peril to minds like ours which can only apprehend one side of Reality at the time. Therefore it is not perhaps to be altogether desired that such doctrines should be very popular. They can only be spiritually discerned, through the intensest spiritual effort. Without this they will only too readily lead to blasphemous arrogance and selfish sloth. And yet the Via Negativa, for those who can scale its dizzy ascent, is after all but a higher altitude of that same royal road which, where it traverses more populous regions, we all recognize as the one true Pilgrim's Way. For it seeks to attain its goal through self-renunciation. And where else are the true principles of such a process to be found if it be not in the familiar virtues of Christian humility and Christian love?

C.E. Rolt. Introduction to *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*. London, The Macmillan Company, 1920.

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