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# Apophatic Theology: Denys the Areopagite

by Andrew Louth

Apophatic or negative theology – an approach to God that proceeds by way of negation, by *denying* attributes of God – is as old as Christianity, and indeed much older. It is found in both the traditions that converge in Christianity, the tradition of the Jewish Scriptures and that of Greek philosophy. One of the prophets whose oracles are preserved under the name of Isaiah represents God as saying: ‘To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One’ (Is 40.25); and God’s self-revelation to Moses (Ex 3.14) invites or requires an apophatic interpretation, however it is translated: whether, following the LXX (and probably most naturally), ‘I am the one who is’, or more literally, ‘I am that I am’. Similarly the Greek philosophical tradition, especially that inspired by Plato, produces the assertion from the *Timaeus* that ‘to discover the Father and Maker of the universe would be some task, and it would be impossible to declare what one had found to everyone’ (*Tim* 28C) – an assertion often adopted in a still more radical form by the Christian Fathers – and the equally famous affirmation in the *Republic*, that the Idea of the Good is ‘beyond being’, ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (*Rep* 509B).

In the history of the Christian tradition there have been several moments when the assertion of the radically apophatic nature of theology has been felt to be especially pressing: throughout the fourth century, in response to the Arian challenge, and perhaps especially in response to Eunomius and the Anomoeans, and again a thousand years later in the context of the hesychast controversy. But perhaps the most significant moment was that out of which the *Corpus Areopagiticum* emerged: at the beginning of the sixth century, when there suddenly came to light a collection of brief treatises and letters, ascribed to the disciple of the Apostle Paul, Denys (or Dionysius), who had been converted to Christianity as a result of Paul’s speech in defence of Christianity before the court of the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17. 22-34). But on this occasion the renewed emphasis on the apophatic nature of theology does not seem to have been the response to any kind of intellectual or doctrinal challenge. It is in fact extremely difficult to work out what kind of polemical context Denys the Areopagite was responding to, or indeed whether he was at all. The only polemical context that he

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might fit would be that between what was soon to be called the 'inner learning', that is the Christian dogmatic tradition, and the 'outer learning', that is the tradition of classical, especially Platonic, philosophy, for he betrays no interest in the theological controversies that were tearing apart the Christian Church in the sixth century. But though he must fit in some way into the tension between these two traditions – a tension which, I have maintained elsewhere, is not something that separates the Byzantine theological tradition from something else, despite the shrill claims by Byzantine churchmen that it does, but is rather a fissure that goes right through the 'Byzantine soul' itself<sup>1</sup> – though he must fit in some way into that tension, it is hardly in any directly polemical way. It is becoming more and more clear that Denys throughout his writings expressed Christian doctrines in terminology that drew very closely, almost to the point of plagiarism, on the explicitly pagan philosophers of Athenian Neoplatonism – Proclus and maybe even Damascius, and doing this on the very eve of the extinction of that Neoplatonic school by the Emperor Justinian (it is now increasingly argued that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* should be placed as late as possible – that is in the 520s – and it was in 529 that Justinian closed the Academy at Athens). It is not polemic opposition to pagan Neoplatonism that one finds in Denys, except on very rare occasions (and then it is not explicit): it is collaboration, or even collusion. Furthermore, Denys himself explicitly disowns any polemic against the Greeks, that is Greek paganism, or anyone else, in his seventh letter: 'As far as I am concerned I have never spoken out against Greeks or anyone else (*Ep* 7:1077B).'<sup>2</sup>

Denys, then, does not develop his concern for the apophatic nature of theology in response to any definite threat, as has often been the case in the development of Christian doctrine. What he contributes is something else, in many ways more significant: on the one hand, terminology, and on the other hand a vision of Christian theology in which every element relates to a fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> In my survey article, 'Byzantium', for the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Medieval and Renaissance Thought*, ed. Alistair McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Although I have used the new critical edition of the Dionysian Corpus (*Corpus Dionysiacum*, I. *De Divinis nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla, II. *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, *De Mystica Theologia*, *Epistulae*, ed. G. Heil, A.M. Ritter, *Patristische Texte und Studien*, 33 and 36, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990-1), I have identified passages in the traditional way by reference to columns in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 3, which are given in the margin of the critical edition.

apophaticism. It is not surprising that terminology and articulation go together, for it is, of course, terminology that enables one to articulate. There is another fact that adds enormous interest to what can already be seen to be important: and that is that the terminology, at least, that Denys uses to express his understanding of apophatic theology is a signal example of his use of Neoplatonic language to clothe the expression of Christian doctrine. For though apophatic theology is something we can find throughout the Christian tradition long before Denys, it is Denys who gives it the name, and this name he takes from pagan Neoplatonism, most likely from Proclus. Once Denys introduced the name 'apophatic theology' into Christian usage, it began to make itself at home: St Maximus the Confessor uses it frequently (and presses it into some novel contexts), it is found in St John Damascene's *expositio fidei* and thereafter becomes a commonplace in Byzantine theology.

But Denys uses the term 'apophatic theology' most commonly as one of a pair: apophatic theology is contrasted with 'cataphatic theology', a theology of affirmation. Apophatic theology complements cataphatic theology, seems to undermine it, but in reality undergirds it. Denys' longest and most explicit discussion of the nature of and difference between apophatic and cataphatic theologies occurs in his short treatise, *The Mystical Theology* (especially chapter 3), but it is considered elsewhere, notably in his *Divine Names*. There, Denys expresses himself thus:

Therefore God is known in all things and apart from all things; and God is known by knowledge and by unknowing. Of him there is understanding, reason, knowledge, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other things, but he is not understood, nothing can be said of him, he cannot be named. He is not one of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; he is all things in everything and nothing in anything; he is known to all from all things and to no one from anything. For we rightly say these things of God, and he is celebrated by all beings according to the analogy that all things bear to him as their cause. But the most divine knowledge of God, that in which he is known through unknowing, according to the union that transcends the mind, happens when the mind, turning away from all things, including itself, is united with the dazzling rays, and there and then illuminated in the unsearchable depth of wisdom. (*DN* 7. 3: 872A-B)

This expresses very clearly two aspects of Denys' theology: the complementarity of apophatic and cataphatic theology, and the

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more fundamental truth expressed by the way of denial. The key term here is that of 'cause' (αἰτία), applied to God. It is in virtue of his being the cause of all that everything has a relationship to God. And as all our concepts are derived from something among the things that are, every concept has some relationship to God: it can in some way be applied to God. This is the basis of cataphatic theology. Because there is an analogy, in virtue of the relationship everything has to its cause, every affirmation can be made in some way of God. (This language of 'analogy' is found in Proclus, indeed more commonly than its Dionysian synonym, cataphatic.) In Denys' own actual use of cataphatic theology, this universal justification is qualified, in that for Denys the 'names of God' are revealed, in Scripture: it is Scriptural affirmations of God that he is justifying in this way. But God as cause is really the cause of all (παντῶν αἰτία). And the cause of all does not itself belong to 'the all': 'he is not one of the things that are'. For this reason, God is often described as the 'transcendent cause': transcendent, that is, over the things that are. And it is in virtue of this that any attribute applied to God must be denied of him: he is not one of the things that are, there is no common ground between him and the beings of which he is the cause, he does not belong to that realm from which our concepts are derived, and within which they refer.

All this is very dry stuff, and could be developed in a variety of ways: a Heideggerian way, according to which God is not one of *die Seiende*, and a Thomist way, according to which God as *ipsum esse subsistens* is not precisely an *ens*, beckon. But I want to pursue this further along lines that Denys himself seems to suggest (though in thinking this through I freely admit that I have been influenced by thinkers nearer to our own time).<sup>3</sup> First of all, how exactly does Denys think of the relationship between God and the 'things that are' (τὰ ὄντα)? It is striking, and is often held against the Areopagite,<sup>4</sup> that he never describes τὰ ὄντα as 'created beings' (τὰ κτιστά), as most Christian thinkers, before and after him, have

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most immediately by Jean-Luc Marion, though not consciously. I had written this before I re-read his chapter on Denys in his *L'Idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977: the book is dedicated to Denys), 177-243, to discover that the themes I had developed were those Marion had also pursued, though in a rather different way. I have also found very interesting Jean-Yves Lacoste's reflections on liturgy in his *Expérience et Absolu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Most recently by Bernhard Brons, *Gott und die Seiende. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von neuplatonischer Metaphysik und christlicher Tradition bei Dionysius Areopagita* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976), 195-6.

done (he does use various forms of the verb, κτίζω, but only in biblical quotations). Denys does not usually, or primarily, think of the relationship of God to the 'things that are' as one of creation. I do not think this is an oversight on his part, nor do I think it is wholly explained by invoking his predilection for Neoplatonic terminology, to which, one can readily grant, the language for creation does not belong. The reason is, I think, because the relationship between God and beings can be thought of another way, a way that undergirds more intimately his notion of apophatic and cataphatic theology, and that is by thinking of beings as constituting a theophany. (I said 'thought of', because Denys does not, in fact, use the *terminology* all that much, though it is not absent like the terminology of creation.) The relationship between God and beings is fundamentally theophanic: beings reveal something of God and by revealing something of God point beyond themselves to God. This is central to Denys' understanding of what it is to be: it is to come from the source and cause of all, that is God, to derive something from that source and to refer one's being to that cause. This is of course very Neoplatonic, and Denys expresses himself in Neoplatonic language. But I am sure that his meaning is not ultimately Neoplatonic. In a significant passage in response to a question from 'Timothy', the dedicatee of the *Divine Names*, about why expressions like 'being itself' or 'life itself' are sometimes ascribed to God and sometimes said to be caused by God, Denys says:

We do not say that being itself which is the cause of every being is some divine or angelic being, for there is only one being itself which is the transcendent source and being and cause of the being of all that is; nor do we say that there is another life-bearing divinity alongside that life, beyond the divine, which is the cause of everything that lives and of life itself. Nor, in summary, are there beings and substances that are sources of the things that are and their creators, which certain people foolishly declare to be gods and creators of the things that are. Properly speaking, no one has ever had knowledge of beings of this kind, nor 'did their fathers' (cf. Dt 32. 17), for there are no such beings. But we apply the terms 'being itself', 'life itself', 'divinity itself' - in a way that refers to the source, God and cause - to the one source and cause of all beings, that is beyond source and being, and we apply by way of participation the terms 'being itself', 'living itself', 'deification itself' to those provident powers that come forth from the imparticipable God, by participation in which [powers] beings properly both are and are said to be beings and living beings and beings indwelt by divinity, and the rest similarly.

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(DN 11.6: 953C-956A).

The significance of this passage is that in it Denys denies the kind of hierarchy of divine reality, a hierarchy based on the circular movement of procession and return, that is fundamental to Neoplatonism: there is no grading of being, reaching upwards with increasing simplicity and intensity, until it passes to, or even beyond, the One. Rather there is a fundamental contrast between the God beyond being, and beings, although the realm of beings, as a theophany, is arranged in an ordered way to display the divine glory and to call all beings back towards the source and cause from which they flow. (It is in relation of this idea of theophanic display that the true Dionysian meaning of hierarchy emerges, a meaning very different from the crude notion of subordination implicit above.)

It is this fundamental distinction between God and beings that is the principal burden of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Denys affirms it, but expresses it in his own way: beings come from (ἐκ) God, but they do not, as in Neoplatonism, come from God *via* intermediate beings. Intermediate beings mediate between God and beings more remote from God *as theophany*: as theophany they call other beings, principally through their beauty (Denys knows of Plato's derivation of καλόν, beautiful, from καλέω, I call: cf. DN 4. 7: 701C and Plato, *Crat.* 416C), back to the source from which all beings immediately derive, but they do not mediate *being*, beings do not derive from (ἐκ) other beings, but directly from the source and cause of all. The theophanic beauty reminds those beings who are struck by this beauty of their own derivation from the source and cause of all. That means that the theophanic beauty recalls to all beings that which is beyond all beings, that transcendent reality from which all beings derive. The relationship of God to beings is one of distance, not the distance that we might traverse with our feet (to recall a Plotinian commonplace),<sup>5</sup> but a fundamental distance that at the same time reveals the possibility (from our side) of an (immediate) presence: something to which Augustine gave expression in his famous prayer: 'Behold you were within and I was outside, and there I sought you and in among those beautiful things that you had made I rushed in my deformity. You were with me, and I was not with you. Those things held me far from you, which, unless they had been in you, would not have been' (*Conf.* 10. 27. 38. Cf. DN 3. 1: '[God] is present to everything, but not everything

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<sup>5</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.8. 22-3.



is present to him.’). The distance is expressed by the denials of apophatic theology, the presence by the affirmations of cataphatic theology: but the distance undergirds the presence, for without the distance presence would spell identity – and here would be nothing to *be* present. Put another way: this distance speaks to us of otherness, of the Other. It is the presence of the Other, who remains other, although present, that we realize in our return to the source from which we flow.

The relationship of God to beings lays bare a primordial and original Otherness. What is this distance *for*? It is not there to be overcome: it is no part of the Dionysian vision to suggest that there is any experience in which this distance can be collapsed, as it were. What I have particularly in mind is the persistent temptation that the cultivation of inwardness can remove this distance between God and beings: the temptation of what we must call mysticism, using the word in its modern and all too prevalent sense. Our inwardness is part of our being, it belongs to the realm of this-worldly reality. It is not privileged, it is not closer to God than the reality of the world around us. This is not to say that there is no place for inwardness, interiority, simply that to conceive it as *directly* a way to God is to misunderstand. Denys makes this unmistakably clear when he interprets the account of Moses’ ascent of Sinai as the scaling of the mountains of the mind – ‘cliffs of fall/ Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed’: at the ‘peak of the divine ascents’, he sees ‘not God himself (for he cannot be beheld), but the place, where he is’ (MT 1. 3: 1000D).

This distance is not to be overcome: it is a distance that creates a space in which something can happen. Something: in one sense everything, but in another quite precise sense not just *anything*. This distance by which God transcends all that has come from him defines a space in which the fundamental reality of these beings, a reality rooted in their relationship to their source, is played out, or expressed. By ‘space’ I mean more than what we know as space, but not less: more, because there is, according to Denys, something corresponding to ‘space’ for purely spiritual beings (*viz.*, that which the hierarchies of the celestial beings ‘occupy’); but not less, because for us embodied beings space does mean something defined by dimensions – it is space that separates us one from another.

What occupies this space opened up by the distance to which apophatic theology points is explored by Denys in his two treatises on the hierarchies: the *Celestial Hierarchy* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. For our purposes, we can say that the former treatise explores the very notion of hierarchy, while the latter treatise is con-



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cerned with the function of the Christian community – that is, those whom Denys is addressing – within this hierarchical space. As I have already hinted, we must take the word hierarchy in the sense that Denys gave it, and not in the cruder and narrower sense that it has acquired with the course of time. After all, Denys invented the term, and so its original meaning is that which he gave it. For us, the word ‘hierarchy’ expresses a rigid structure of subordination; the OED Supplement gives this definition as one of its examples: ‘a social order in which human relations are determined by the degree of authority exercised by one group over another’.<sup>6</sup> Denys’ definition in his *Celestial Hierarchy* is really very different:

Hierarchy is, as I understand it, a sacred order, knowledge and activity, which is being assimilated to likeness with God as much as possible and, in response to the illuminations that are given it from God, is raised to the imitation of Him in its own measure. (CH 3. 1: 164D).

It is, certainly, a matter of order (τάξις), but for Denys it is much more. The hierarchy itself is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) and activity (ἐνέργεια), and has a purpose: that of drawing into union with and assimilation to God all that belongs to it. It is ordered, it seems to me, for two reasons: first, and I suppose fundamentally, because disorder could not express God’s πρόνοια which rules the cosmos through the rational structure – the λόγοι – in accordance with which everything is; secondly it is ordered, because the hierarchies reach through a cosmos that has turned away from God and been fractured by the sin of rational beings. In such a world, the only one we know, hierarchy has a healing purpose. Far from being a structure of ordered and repressive authority, hierarchy for Denys is an expression of the love of God for everything that derives from him – that is, everything – a love that seeks to draw everything back into union with the source of all being. Hierarchy is the theophany of God’s love that beings are.

We belong to this by participation in ‘our hierarchy’ (ἡ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱεραρχία), as Denys usually calls it, which is the subject of the treatise, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (the term ‘ecclesiastical’ hierarchy only occurs in the title, which may not go back to Denys himself). This treatise is concerned with various aspects of the Christian liturgy. One thing leaps from the pages of Denys’ discussion of Christian liturgy, and that is that for Denys liturgy is not primarily – hardly at all – a matter of texts, it is a matter of ceremonies that take place

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<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary, Supplement 2* [1976], 91, s.v. ‘hierarchy’ 4

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in space. He is, in fact, much more interested in the movements that take place in the liturgy, and the materials used, than he is in the texts that are used and the prayers recited. And he is not at all unusual in this: Theodore of Mopsuestia in his homilies on Baptism and the Eucharist,<sup>7</sup> perhaps about a century earlier, and St Maximus the Confessor in his *Mystagogia*,<sup>8</sup> about a century later, fully share this preoccupation. The same is true of what became the most popular and influential commentary on the Byzantine liturgy, that ascribed (probably correctly) to the patriarch of Constantinople who resigned over the introduction of iconoclasm in 730, Germanus. His commentary begins, as does Maximus' *Mystagogia*, with the space defined by the church building:

The church is the temple of God, a holy place, a house of prayer, the assembly of the people, the body of Christ. It is called the bride of Christ. It is cleansed by the water of his baptism, sprinkled by his blood, clothed in bridal garments, and sealed with the ointment of the Holy Spirit... The church is an earthly heaven in which the God beyond the heavens dwells and walks about. It represents the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ: it is glorified more than Moses' tabernacle of witness, in which are the mercy-seat and the Holy of Holies. It is prefigured in the patriarchs, foretold by the prophets, founded in the apostles, adorned by the hierarchs, and fulfilled in the martyrs.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on the space in which the liturgy takes place corresponds to the distance that stands between God and beings, to which apophatic theology points. The space which the performance of liturgy demands symbolizes the transcendent distance of God over beings. In the performance of liturgy within space there is symbolized the relationship of God to beings, moving out in life-giving love and back in assimilation to God and union with him. This is how Denys interprets the procession of the bishop, or hierarch as he calls him, from the sanctuary through the church and back again,

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<sup>7</sup> *Les Homélies catéchétiques de Théodore de Mopsueste*, traduction, introduction, index par R. Tonneau, O.P., en collaboration avec R. Devreesse (Studi e Testi 145; Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949), 320–605.

<sup>8</sup> Migne, PG 91. 657–717. English translation in Maximus Confessor, *Selected Writings*, translated by G.C. Berthold (Classics of Western Spirituality; London: SPCK, 1985), 181–225.

<sup>9</sup> Translation (modified) from: St Germanos of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, ed. and trans. by Paul Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 57.

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during which the people and the church are censured:

I think we must now go inside the sacred things and reveal the meaning of the first of the images. We must look attentively upon the beauty which gives it so divine a form and we must turn a reverent glance to the double movement of the hierarch when he goes first from the divine altar to the far edges of the sacred place spreading the fragrance and then returns to the altar. For the blessed divinity, which transcends all being, while proceeding gradually outward because of goodness to commune with those who partake of him, never actually departs from his essential stability and immobility. Enlightening anyone conforming as much as possible to God, the Deity nevertheless maintains utterly and unshakably its inherent identity. Similarly the divine sacrament of the synaxis [Denys' term for the Eucharist] remains what it is, unique, simple, and indivisible and yet, out of love for humanity, it is pluralized in a sacred variegation of symbols. It extends itself so as to include all the hierarchical imagery. Then it draws all these varied symbols together into a unity, returns to its own inherent oneness, and confers unity on all those sacredly uplifted to it. And it is the same with the divine hierarchic understanding which is especially his own. He resorts to a multitude of sacred enigmas. Then, freely and untrammelled by anything beneath him, he returns to his own starting point without having any loss. In his mind he journeys toward the One. With a clear eye he looks upon the basic unity of those realities underlying the sacred rites. He makes the divine return to the primary things the goal of his procession toward secondary things, which he had undertaken out of love for humanity. (EH 3. 3. 3: 428D-429B)<sup>10</sup>

Within liturgy there is then an image of the relationship of God to beings, and thus liturgy – its performance and our participation in it – impresses on those beings that belong to our hierarchy a realization of the transcendence of the source from which they derive and to which they long to return. Liturgy takes place in space, in the world in what I take to be Heidegger's sense,<sup>11</sup> and like the world in that sense, it is not something that stands over against us, but something that we begin to grasp by participating in it, that in terms of which we interpret the rhythms of our lives, and our hopes and fears. Unlike the world, in that sense, liturgy is concerned with an

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<sup>10</sup> Translation from: Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. by C. Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 212–13.

<sup>11</sup> See his 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes', in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1963), 7–68, esp. 33–4.

orientation towards the transcendent, not simply an openness to the conditions of our existence.

I have used the word 'image' in relation to liturgy: it is an important word, not least because to a Christian of the Orthodox tradition, as I am, it recalls one aspect of the indispensable place of *art* in liturgical worship – a term which, for us, embraces more than simply weekly or even daily services. Art in liturgical worship: or perhaps the liturgy as a form of art, or at least not less than a form of art. In the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church, one is still conscious of the continuity between the performance of the liturgy and the dramatic performances of classical antiquity which were thought of as public λειτουργία. But image has a further significance here, and draws us back to my theme of apophatic theology. The point can be made simply by recalling that images, icons, could be, and were, controversial in Byzantine society. Iconoclasm, which for more than a century became imperial policy, maintained that there could be no effective way of distinguishing between icons and idols: veneration of icons made gods of this-worldly realities. The Orthodox responded, and drew on Denys in support, by making a distinction between the image or icon and its archetype. St John of Damascus, who understood more clearly than the theologians in the capital, Constantinople, how powerfully Denys could be cited in support of the veneration of icons, began the dossier of patristic texts that he placed, in different forms, at the end of each of his tracts in defence of the holy icons with citations from the Areopagite. Something analogous to the Dionysian dialectic between apophatic and cataphatic theology was invoked in relation to the icon: the icon mirrored the archetype – cataphatic moment – but was not identical with the archetype – apophatic moment – so that veneration of the icon passed through affirmation, by way of negation, and achieved ἀναγωγή, an ascent to the heavenly reality of the one depicted. (In fact, the argument was conducted entirely in terms of veneration of the icon of Christ, with the icon fulfilling a role analogous to that of Christ's humanity, so that veneration passed by affirmation and negation to worship of the eternal Godhead of the Son.) What distinguishes icon from idol is that apophatic moment: the creation of a distance across which the icon points, across which the icon carries our veneration. So both liturgy and icon are this-worldly realities (it is worth noting, in passing, that originally icons were not blessed, and that the Seventh Ecumenical Council simply ignores the iconoclast objections that icons were therefore profane, locating the holiness of the icon in the

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fact that it is an image made by an artist: blessing would not make it an image, that was achieved, if at all, by the artist).<sup>12</sup> The icon and the liturgy are then *eschatological*, in the sense that they point beyond this world to the final consummation when, in Denys' terminology, hierarchies will display rather than merely seek to achieve their purpose (though I feel that Denys tends, as much Christian Platonism does, to elide the historical, without which the eschatological loses much of its force).

There is another point of distinction between the icon and the idol, and this bears very closely on an aspect of liturgy I have not paid much attention to. Icons can be venerated – indeed, are to be venerated – because they are images of someone who is worthy of veneration. They are not simply vehicles for our veneration, they are also vehicles for making known one in whom the holiness and glory of God is manifest. Orthodox defenders of icons went further than that, and insisted that the primary justification of icons is the Incarnation: it is because God has definitively united matter to himself in the substance of the human flesh that he assumed that matter can be made use of in the making of icons (and, we might say, the celebration of the liturgy) as a vehicle for our veneration of the glory of God. As St John Damascene put it:

I do not worship matter, but I worship the creator of matter, who for my sake became matter and condescended to make his home in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from venerating matter, through which my salvation was worked.<sup>13</sup>

But icons do not just point beyond: one might justly argue that anything can do that in virtue of its possessing its being from God. 'The icon is a door',<sup>14</sup> it is stated in the iconophile *Life of St Stephen the Younger*, one of those martyred during the iconoclast period (d. c. 764): not just the door through which our veneration passes, but a door through which the holiness of the glorified humanity of Christ and the Saints passes to us. Similarly with the symbols and ceremonies of the liturgy: they are not simply signs pointing beyond, they are embodiments of divine and heavenly truths and convey them to us. You will recall that I mentioned that, although the jus-

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<sup>12</sup> See the *acta* of the sixth session of Nicaea II: Mansi 13 (Florence 1867), 269C-272A.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Damascene, *On the Images* I 16 (ed. Kotter, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 17, Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1965, 89).

<sup>14</sup> PG 100. 1113A.

tification of cataphatic ascription to God seems to be universal in scope, in fact Denys only applies to God terms, or names, as he puts it, that are found in Scripture (though this sometimes seems a little artificial, as he exercises considerable imagination to find in the Scriptures attributes applied to God!). This limitation is because scriptural imagery, although made possible by the general justification of cataphatic attribution in respect of God, is more than this: it is actually a vehicle for God's revelation of himself to us. Similarly, again, the hierarchies are not general, but specific: they are not a matter of human imagination, but of divine institution. And again, the possibility of this is undergirded by the distance – this time perhaps rather the freedom or independence – of God *vis-à-vis* the beings that flow from him, a distance preserved by the fundamental truth of apophatic theology. It is because God is free in relation to what flows from him – everything necessarily flows from him, but necessity does not embrace God himself – that certain names reveal him more closely than others.

I want to close by discussing one further feature of Denys' theology, which again seems to me to be closely bound up with his understanding of apophatic theology. The word Denys uses to describe the way we apply the divine names or attributes to God is not the usual word for 'to predicate': the word he uses is ὑμνεῖν, to hymn, or to celebrate, or to praise. St Maximus the Confessor singles this usage out for comment in one of his scholia to the *Divine Names*: 'God is therefore hymned as the cause of all things. For he does not say, these things are predicated of him, but properly he is hymned' (*DN* Sch 325. 7).<sup>15</sup> This language is, as we might expect, Neoplatonic, but it is less clear here than it sometimes is, for such language is also frequent in Christian theologians such as St John Chrysostom and St Gregory Nazianzen: it would not have seemed strange to Denys' contemporaries in the way much of his other language would. The avoidance of the verb to predicate – or to be more precise Denys' unease in using the word without immediately qualifying it, as later on in the passage that Maximus is commenting on, where Denys says, 'Therefore everything is at once predicated of him, and yet he is none of them at all' (*DN* 5. 8: 824B) – this avoidance stems from his conviction that ascription of names to God is utterly different from ascription of names to any of the beings that exist, for names are ascribed to God, only to be denied of him, and that denial is more fundamental and more true,

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<sup>15</sup> The scholia can be found in PG 4: the reference gives the column number and the number of the scholion in that column.

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although to take that denial as simply cancelling the affirmative attribution would be still further from the truth. The truth of human attribution of names to God is preserved by seeing it as praise, as celebration: such praise celebrates God's gift of being – it is a form of thanksgiving – but the terms used in no way circumscribe him. Praise, then, is an appropriate way of making ascription of qualities to God – appropriate, that is, to the One whom we seek to praise. I suspect there is another side to Denys' fondness for saying that we celebrate the source and cause of all by praising him: and that is that praise is an appropriate attitude for beings who realize the reality of their existence, that is, that they owe their being to God, the source of all being. One recalls the phrase with which St John Chrysostom was said to greet everything that happened to him: Δόξα τῷ Θεῷ πάντων ἕνεκεν, 'Glory to God for everything.' Praise turns us away from self and possession and being at home with ourselves and our world. It sees elsewhere the source of being and blessing, and recognizes that the here and now is not home, but where we are travelling from. This recognition that the springs of life are not found here, but beyond, that the best we can do here is to strain forward to what lies ahead: the realization that here is the wilderness, and all that we have is borrowed. Living in such a spirit finds praise an appropriate attitude, rather than regret, or resentment, or fear, or nostalgia, or plain self-satisfaction. 'Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?' But perhaps it is for the poet to articulate that praise that would be stifled if the times seemed too comfortable: that is W.H. Auden's suggestion in the stanza that closes his poem, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats':

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

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