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# THE INTERTWINING OF MULTIPLICITY AND UNITY IN DIONYSIUS' METAPHYSICAL MYSTICISM\*

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## Abstract

In Dionysius, the procession of things from, and their reversion to, the One, far from being distinct and clear-cut events, can be understood as intertwined, simultaneous, and co-eternal 'moments' of the same cosmic reality, whereby a given thing oscillates, or spirals, between unity and multiplicity. Moreover, Dionysius' mystical itinerary is a special case of his procession-reversion metaphysics: mysticism is the soul's own reversion to the One. This explains why the mind also intertwines cataphatic and apophatic mystical discourses, as it spirals

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between unity and multiplicity. This analysis has the advantage of bringing added coherence and realism to Dionysius' metaphysical and mystical doctrines.

*Key Words:* Dionysius, Cataphatic, Apophatic, Affirmative and Negative Theology, *Henosis*.

### Resumen

En Dionisio, la procesión de las cosas del 'Uno' y su reversión al mismo, lejos de ser eventos distintos y separados, pueden entenderse como 'momentos' entrelazados, simultáneos, y coeternos de la misma realidad cósmica, a través de la cual una cosa oscila entre la unidad y la multiplicidad. Además, el itinerario místico de Dionisio es un caso especial de su metafísica de procesión-reversión: el misticismo es la reversión del alma al 'Uno'. Esto explica por qué la mente también entrelaza discursos místicos apofáticos y catafáticos según oscila entre la unidad y la multiplicidad. Este análisis añade coherencia y realismo a las doctrinas metafísicas y místicas de Dionisio.

*Palabras Clave:* Dionisio, Catafática, Apofática, Teología afirmativa y negativa, *Henosis*.

### Introduction

As is well known, the term *Corpus Dionysiacum* refers to a group of writings that claim to be authored by St. Dionysius the Areopagite, the disciple of the apostle St. Paul and first bishop of Athens.<sup>1</sup> The writings associated with Dionysius are *The Divine Names*, *Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and a set of ten *Letters*. The author of these writings

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Acts of the Apostles* 17:34. Although these works have been traditionally accepted as authentic (from the late AD 400's up to the 1900's), the belief that they actually come from the pen of the historical St. Dionysius the Aeropagite has lately been put into serious question by most experts. I shall call him "Dionysius" (rather than "Pseudo-Dionysius") simply for convenience, without intending to side with those authors who consider him to be the real Areopagite; cf. Alexander GOLITZIN: *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to Its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition*, Series: *Analecta Blatadon* 59, Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies 1994.

also ascribes to himself other, non-extant works, among which are those titled *Symbolic Theology* and *Outlines of Theology*.

Dionysius' works are, without a doubt, very difficult and obscure.<sup>2</sup> Despite its obscurity, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was popular in medieval Christian thought, partly for being the *locus classicus* on the question of what can and cannot be said of the divinity, and partly for being the source for the Neoplatonic doctrine of "the great circle" of causation,<sup>3</sup> that is, the notion that all things emanate from and revert or return to the divinity, to the "One" or the "Good," which is both their origin and their end. This idea was seen as a philosophical explanation of the biblical claim that God is the *alpha* and the *omega* (cf. Apocalypse 22:13). All of this we find fully developed in Dionysius' masterpiece, *The Divine Names*.

Among modern scholars, however, Dionysius is perhaps better known for his apophatic mysticism or negative theology, especially as it is expressed in his short treatise, *Mystical Theology*, according to which the soul reaches God, the one-in-no-way-many, by negating all divine attributes and uniting itself to Him in a non-rational (supra-rational) manner. Accordingly, the secondary literature has placed a heavy emphasis on his apophaticism to such a degree that it almost altogether ignores the cataphatic elements in his theology, that is, his affirmative

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<sup>2</sup> Even St. Thomas Aquinas himself, who, according to oral tradition, was thankful for having understood everything he had read, admits the obscurity of the *Corpus dionysiacum*; cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio* (Ed. C. PERA, P. CARAMELLO, C. MAZZANTINI. Turin; Rome: Marietti 1950), prooemium: "in omnibus libris suis obscuro utitur stilo.... Accidit etiam difficultas in praedictis libris.... quia plerumque stilo et modo loquendi quo utebantur platonici, qui apud modernos est inconsuetus." He theorizes (ibid.) that this difficulty is intentional on the part of Dionysius, in order to hide "the sacred and divine dogmas from the mockery of the infidels" (*ut sacra et divina dogmata ab irrisione infidelium occultaret*).

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps best known today as being the doctrine after which Thomas Aquinas modeled his *Summa theologiae*; cf. *ST Ia*, q. 2, prooem.; *Ia-IIae*, prooem. For a criticism of this imagery, cf. JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, pp. 66-71.

theology, the idea that God can be known and spoken of (at least in some way) through affirmative discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Yet this emphasis is not something that we see in Dionysius' medieval scholastic interpreters (perhaps with the notable exception of John Scotus Eriugena).<sup>5</sup> Rather, the scholastics tended

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<sup>4</sup> For a good example of this strong emphasis of Dionysius' negative theology, to the neglect of his affirmative theology, see Deirdre CARABINE: *The unknown God: negative theology in the Platonic tradition, Plato to Eriugena*, Series: Louvain Pastoral and Theological Monographs 19, Leuven, Belgium: Peeters Press 1995, pp. 279-300. See also V. LOSSKY: "La théologie négative dans la doctrine de Denys l'Aréopagite", *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* XXVIII (1939), pp. 204-221; John RIST: "Mysticism and Transcendence in Later Neoplatonism", *Hermes* XCII (1964), pp. 213-225; J. WILLIAMS: "The Apophatic Theology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite", *Downside Review* CXVII (1999), pp. 157-172.

<sup>5</sup> This is especially true of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. AQUINAS' *In librum Beati Dionysii...* is an excellent example of an exegesis that harmoniously weaves together apophatic and cataphatic elements. Yet Albert and Aquinas not only wrote commentaries or paraphrases on Dionysius' *Divine Names*, but adopted his thought throughout their other works, particularly in passages on the divine attributes (or 'divine names'), on the notion of the good, and on teleology, which tend to be replete with references to Dionysius, especially to chapter four of *The Divine Names*. For the reception of Dionysius' theology in Aquinas, see Fran O'ROURKE: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2005. See also JONES: "The Ontological Difference..."; Bogdan BUCUR: "The Theological Reception of Dionysian Apophatism in the Christian East and West: Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas", *Downside Review* CXXV (2007), pp. 131-146. For the reception of Dionysius' thought in other authors and in the middle ages in general, see Ysabel de ANDIA Y ELIO: *Denys l'aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident*, Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes 1997; T. BOIADJIEV; G. KAPRIEV; A. SPEER, eds.: *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter*, Turnhout: Brepols 2000; H. F. DONDAINE: *Le corpus dionysien de l'université de Paris au XIIIe siècle*, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 1953; L. M. HARRINGTON: *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris*, Leuven: Peeters 2004; P. ROREM; J. LAMOREAUX: *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998. Cf. Eric D. PERL: *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2007; Paul ROREM: *Pseudo-Dionysius, A commentary on the texts and an introduction to their influence*, New York: Oxford University Press 1993.

to read Dionysius' mysticism in its proper metaphysical context: that of the universal cycle of emanation from and reversion to the One. More concretely, they saw Dionysius' apophaticism as a special case of his reversion metaphysics. The soul's apophatic ascent is *its* way of reverting back to the One. Within this context, as we shall see, it is easier to reach a more balanced reading of Dionysius' mysticism, where apophatic and cataphatic elements are harmoniously weaved together into a mystical itinerary whereby the soul ascends from the multiplicity of creatures to the unity of the One. In fact, one could say that Dionysius' apophatic mysticism is dependent on his cataphatic mysticism.<sup>6</sup>

This paper, then, examines Dionysius' triadic structure of causation of abiding, procession, and reversion (*monê, prodos, epistrophê*), whereby the Good *abides* in itself, *proceeds* out of itself into creation, and *reverts* back into itself. Within the context of the reversion of all things to the One, I shall also discuss Dionysius' mysticism as consisting in the reversion of *human beings* to the One. The paper will be divided thus: First (I), I shall consider the notion of the One's abiding, and then (II) that of the One's procession or emanation, as the necessary context for this study. Subsequently (III), I shall examine Dionysius' conception of the reversion of all things to the Good, especially with reference to procession, its counterpart. As we shall see, in Dionysius, the procession of things from, and their reversion to, the One, far from being distinct and clear-cut events, can be understood as intermingled, simultaneous, and co-eternal 'moments' of the same cosmic reality, whereby a given thing oscillates between multiplicity and unity. Then (IV), I shall study Dionysius' mystical itinerary, which—I shall argue—is a special case of his procession-reversion metaphysics: mysticism is the soul's own reversion to the One. This explains why the mind also intertwines cataphatic and apophatic mystical discourses, as it spirals between multiplicity

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mark JOHNSON, "Apophatic Theology's Cataphatic Dependencies", *Thomist* LXII (1998), pp. 519-31.

and unity. Finally, I shall conclude by showing the relationship between Dionysius' intertwining of mystical discourses with his intertwining of cosmic causal processes. My analysis has the advantage of bringing added coherence and realism to Dionysius' metaphysical and mystical doctrines.

### 1. The Abiding of the One According to Dionysius

The point of departure for Dionysius' Neo-Platonism is very much like that of Plotinus and, ultimately, of Plato's deductions in the second half of the *Parmenides* dialogue: the idea of a 'One' that is in no way many.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Plato has Socrates and Parmenides discuss it merely as a hypothesis, Plotinus and Dionysius take it as an axiom. Unlike Plotinus, however, Dionysius identifies the One with the Christian God, Whom he also calls "the Good," "the Thearchy," "the Divinity," etc. In the case of both Neoplatonists, though, the One is radically unitary; there is no multiplicity in the One. And for this reason, the One is beyond being, beyond all, since it is the *source* of all being, the source of all that is and of all multiplicity. In their view, every being is multiple, insofar as it has many respects. For example, a tree has matter and form, height and weight, different integral parts, and is a subject that bears attributes, such as color, texture, etc. Even spiritual beings are subjects with attributes. In fact, all things about which we can form affirmative judgments are multiple in some way or another, for an affirmative judgment is a composition of a subject and a predicate, and thus refers to a union, in reality, of a subject (or substance) with an attribute. But the One is entirely one and simple and, therefore, falls entirely outside of human discourse and intelligibility. Because it is in all ways one, there is no way to form a judgment concerning it. We need a multiplicity of concepts to form a judgment; thus, we cannot form a true affirmative judgment about the One, because that judgment would impute multiplicity onto it. And since we, in order to form judgments,

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. PLATO, *Parmenides* 137c-166c.

must utilize the copula “is,” and hence the notion of being — which cannot be predicated of the One — it follows that the One is wholly “unspeakable,” beyond discourse or intelligibility. Even if we were to make an existential judgment, such as “The One is,” (in the sense that it exists), we would be using the verb “is,” and hence ascribing to the One *both* unity *and* existence, and hence, multiplicity. Thus, we cannot even say that the One “exists.” All we could attribute to it is unity, but only if we are careful not to use the copula, whereby we would be attributing ‘being’ to the One. Thus, for example, if we said that “The One is one” (which I could not resist doing at the beginning of this paragraph, when I said that the One is unitary), we would fall into the trap of attributing oneness *and* existence. This is why Dionysius sometimes purposely leaves out the copula “is” when speaking affirmatively of the one: “The one: one.” He rather prefers to avail himself of negative language concerning the divinity, notably by using the Greek suffix *hyper-* (“beyond-” or “super-”), such as when he says that the One is *beyond* being, or, in his very words, “the divinity: beyond being,” or “the one: beyond-beingly being.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Procession of the One in Dionysius

For Dionysius, the “divine names” (that is, any predicates that may be said of God) cannot be said of the divine essence itself. There

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<sup>8</sup> *Divine Names* 1.11, in Jacques-Paul Migne: *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, Paris: J.P. Migne 1857-66, henceforth abbreviated as “PG”, vol. 3, col. 649B. Cf. JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 1. The critical edition of the *Divine Names* can be found in B. R. SUCHLA ed.: *Corpus Dionysiacum I: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De divinis nominibus*, Berlin: Walter De Gruyter 1990; that of the *Mystical Theology* and his *Letters* is found in G. HEIL; A. M. RITTER eds.: *Corpus Dionysiacum II: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae*, Berlin: De Gruyter 1991. Yet, in order to follow the customary method of citation, I make reference to the volume and column numbers of the text in the *Patrologia graeca*. All of the English texts of Dionysius that I reproduce in this paper are taken from Jones’ translation; I consulted the original Greek when necessary.



is no divine essence, for the One is beyond essence (*hyperousiôs*).<sup>9</sup> Yet, Dionysius holds that one can, in a sense, legitimately say things affirmatively of the divinity — not, however, as the divinity is in itself, but rather, as it manifests itself in its effects. In other words, the “divine names” are merely causal designations: they describe the *effects* of the divinity. For instance, when we say that God is “good,” for Dionysius this can only mean that God causes good effects, not that God in Himself is good. Therefore, all of what we said above regarding the unspeakability of the One is true as far as Dionysius’ understanding of the One as *abiding* (*monê*) in itself. But the One’s abiding is only one of three ‘moments’ or aspects of the One. The One also *emanates* (*prodos*) and *reverts* (*epistrophê*) back into itself. In these latter two moments, it is possible to speak affirmatively of the One as it proceeds and reverts back to itself.

Now, what causes the One to emanate outside of itself? Dionysius maintains that it is the divine *eros*<sup>10</sup> that causes beings to self-diffuse: “the divine *eros* is ecstatic; it does not permit any to be lovers of themselves but of those which they love.”<sup>11</sup> Through this *eros*, the One comes out from “within” itself, ecstatically shooting forth outside of itself, differentiating itself into many, thus giving being to the world: “the cause [i.e., the divinity] proceeds out of itself and multiplies itself in what it causes.”<sup>12</sup> This is why the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. JONES: “The Ontological Difference...”, pp. 119-132.

<sup>10</sup> Commenting on Dionysius’ audacious attribution of *eros* to the divinity, Charles André Bernard, in his essay, “La Doctrine Mystique de Denys L’Areopagite,” (*Gregorianum* LXVIII (1987), pp. 549, 551), writes: “L’amour fait sortir Dieu de lui-même... Rien d’étonnant, par conséquent, si les notions de désir et de charité peuvent trouver une application universelle... [même] dans le mouvement descendant de la Théarchie vers les êtres. Ne craignons donc pas! Mettons en Dieu même la notion de désir, non par défaut, mais par surabondance.” See also John Rist: “A Note on *Eros* and *Agape* in the Pseudo-Dionysius”, *Vigiliae christianae* XX (1966), pp. 235-243.

<sup>11</sup> *Divine Names* 4.13 (PG 3, 712A).

<sup>12</sup> JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 43.

medievales, inspired by Dionysius, coined the dictum that “the good is self-diffusive” (*bonum est diffusivum sui*).<sup>13</sup>

In this way the divinity breaks out of its absolute oneness, nothingness, and hiddenness, and manifests itself: it flows outside of its unity, shooting forth multiplicity. Procession, then, is the bringing forth and letting be of beings through *eros*, from the unity and “beyond-beingness” of the abiding divinity into the being and multiplicity of the cosmos. Therefore, whereas the divinity does not possess being (as “beyond-beingly being”), what proceeds from it *does* possess being; whereas the divinity does not possess multiplicity (as “one-in-no-way-many”), what proceeds from it *does* possess multiplicity. The entire cosmos, then, is nothing other than a differentiation of the oneness of the divinity and the coming-*to-be* of the “beyond-beingness” of the divinity. By proceeding outside of itself, the divinity *attains* being and multiplicity.

In this view, then, the world is nothing but the One-made-multiple, that is, the One ‘differentiated’, the beyond-being-made-being, the beyond-all-made-all. God is not clearly a “wholly-other” from the world; rather, the world is a *moment* of the One itself. As differentiated divinity, then, the cosmos participates in and imitates the unity of the abiding divinity; also, each being in

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<sup>13</sup> Cf., AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 5, a. 4, ad 2, in *Opera Omnia: iussu impensaue, Leonis XIII. P.M. edita* (Rome, 1882-), vol. 4: “[B]onum dicitur diffusivum sui esse, eo modo quo finis dicitur movere.” But, as C.G. NIARCHOS writes (“Good, Beauty and Eros in Dionysius’ Doctrine of Divine Causality”, [*Diotima* 23 (1995), 106-108], p. 107), when we read Dionysius, “we should not understand the good or the beautiful in terms of one type of cause, i.e., either final or formal, because the good/beautiful is the ‘form out of which’, the ‘in which’, and the ‘for the sake of which’, or ‘into which’ of all beings (DN. 700B-704A).” Dionysius’ own understanding of the self-diffusiveness of the good is, therefore, much more elaborate than that of most mediaeval philosophers, for whom it only meant that the good is a final cause and, thus, perfective of others. See also HARRY MARSH, *Cosmic Structure and the Knowledge of God: Thomas Aquinas’ “In Librum Beati Dionisii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services 1994, p. 113; as well as Michele SCHIAVONE, *Neoplatonismo e Cristianesimo nello Pseudo Dionigi*, Milan: Marzorati Editore 1963, p. 83-84.

the cosmos participates in and imitates the unity of the abiding divinity in its own way. But this does not mean that God is the world. Dionysius is not a pantheist or monist, simply speaking. Rather, for him, the divinity is the sustaining cause of all beings. Things exist insofar as they participate in the goodness of “the Good.” The Thearchy, then, as cause, must possess all the perfections that its effects have, but in a pre-eminent, perfect, unified, undifferentiated, and super-essential fashion. Different things receive being proportionately to the kind of thing they are. Thus, Dionysius asserts that, “as the writings [Scriptures?] say, the good is that from which all subsist and are—insofar as they are brought forward from the all-complete cause, that in which all are connected—for they are protected and held fast in its almighty power.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout this procession, then, the divinity *remains* abiding. The abiding One is not strictly identical to the emanating One. This is evident from the fact that, since what is caused exists only insofar as it *participates* in the unity of its cause, its cause must not be dissipated; otherwise, what is caused could not participate in it. As John Jones puts it, since “whatever is, is one... what is caused remains as it is [only] so long as it participates in [the unity of the cause], because the specific character of unity belonging to what is caused is derived from its cause(s).”<sup>15</sup> A cause is, by definition, transcendent to the effect. Thus, the same author asserts that the divinity, “as cause of all: nothing beyond all (*hyper panta*).”

But although the abiding divinity transcends the proceeding divinity insofar as it is its cause, cause and effect here are nevertheless identical insofar as it is the same divinity that both abides and proceeds. This is so because it is only in a sense that what is caused is other than what causes. The cause, in order to cause, has to give itself to what it causes. What is caused is nothing apart from its cause; it does not possess any being of its own, but

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<sup>14</sup> *Divine Names* 4.4 (PG 3, 700A-B).

<sup>15</sup> JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 42.

merely derives it from its cause. What causes abides in itself, but what is caused abides in what causes. Dionysius summarizes this doctrine in a remarkable way:

[The divine differentiation is] the good-showing processions of the godhead. It is differentiated in a unified way: being given to all beings, overflowing the participations of the totality of those that are good, singly made many, abidingly multiplied out of the one. Since God is beyond-beingly being and, as being is given to beings and brings forth the totality of beings, that being is said to be multiplied by the bringing forth of all beings out of itself. By its beyond-beingly apartness from beings, its single bringing up of the whole, and the undiminished flowing of its undiminished gifts, it remains not less than itself, one in its manifoldness, unified in its procession, and full in its difference.<sup>16</sup>

Jones points out, however, that there exists an asymmetrical relation between beings and the divinity: although all beings participate in the divinity, the divinity does not participate in them.<sup>17</sup> Beings are not parts of the divinity, although the divinity is wholly in them. Thus, Dionysius himself says that, “it is not something among beings or something in beings... being is of it, it is not being; being is in it, it is not in being; being has it, it does not have being.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Divine Names* 1.11 (PG 3, 649B).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. JONES, *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Divine Names* 7.3 (PG 3, 872A); 5.8 (PG 3, 824A). Michele Schiavone (*Neoplatonismo...*, p. 69) writes: “[L’]accezione della diffusività dell’Uno-Bene richiama l’esigenza della partecipazione come dono, la cui essenza è tutta *a parte Dei* e in nessun modo, se non impropriamente, *a parte hominis*: non solo viene così ribadita la assoluta trascendenza dell’Uno, ma anche il carattere gratuito (come dono) dell’originario svelarsi e manifestarsi dell’Assoluto, che sfugge sempre al rango del possesso e dell’appartenenza.”

Now, this emanation, for Dionysius, is an orderly one. The beings that are most unified and participate most fully in the divinity are the first in the hierarchy; conversely, those that are least unified and complete are last. He describes this ordered manner of procession as a "hierarchy," and dedicates two entire works, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesial Hierarchy*, to the idea.<sup>19</sup> The world, then, is arranged hierarchically, in a cascade-like fashion, according to the degree of unity, being, and perfection that each being has. Each thing (as well as the One-beyond-being) gives being to what is directly below it. What is below receives its being from what is above; for instance, the seraphim and cherubim proceed from the thrones. Each being is caused by what precedes it and each participates in its cause.<sup>20</sup>

Just as the divinity abides in itself and shoots forth out of itself into multiplicity, so each being abides and differentiates itself into inferior, less unified beings. In the words of Dionysius, "a being is nearer to God and more divine than the rest by more greatly participating in the one and unlimitedly-giving God."<sup>21</sup> Thus, "living beings are extended beyond mere beings, sensible beings are extended beyond living beings, rational beings are extended beyond sensible beings, and the intellects [i.e., angels] are extended beyond rational beings, for these last beings are about God and nearer to it than the others."<sup>22</sup>

Just as what is caused by the Thearchy is an image and participation of the Thearchy, so what is caused by a certain being is an image and participation of that being. Through *eros*, each

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<sup>19</sup> Although the notion of hierarchy also permeates his other writings, in particular, his *Letters*. See Ronald HATHAWAY: *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A Study in the Form and Meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings*, The Hague: Nijhoff 1969. Cf. Eric PERL: "Hierarchy and Participation in Dionysius the Areopagite and Greek Neoplatonism", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXVIII (1994), pp. 15-30.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. JONES, *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> *Divine Names* 5.3 (PG 3, 817B).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 5.3 (PG 3, 817A).

being becomes differentiated into an inferior one to which it gives its goodness. He explains that all beings, “are good-forms and, as the divine law demands, they communicate to those that come after them the gifts that go forth out of the good into them.”<sup>23</sup> As the divinity is the exemplar from which the many are modeled, so a being is the exemplar from which what it causes is modeled. And just as the divinity abides while beings proceed from it, so beings abide while inferiors proceed from them. Thus, every cause possesses all the perfections that the effects have, except in a more pre-eminent, perfect, and unified (that is, less-differentiated) fashion. Therefore, Dionysius, speaking of beings, remarks that, “they have their abiding from goodness... they communicate to those that come after them the gifts that go forth out of the good into them.”<sup>24</sup> We see from all this that, since each being possesses its being and unity as derived from its cause, ultimately, the entire cosmos is a hierarchically ordered participation in the unity of the Thearchy. Thus, in a sense, there is nothing other than the Thearchy, for the entire cosmos is the proceeding Thearchy, the divinity shooting forth from itself, differentiating itself into being and multiplicity.

### 3. The Reversion of Things to the One in Dionysius

The third moment of the one is the reversion (*epistrophê*) of the world, the differentiated One, back to the unity of the abiding One. This consists both in each particular being attaining the being (*ousia*) of that which is directly above it, and in the whole universe’s participation in the unity of the One. As Jones remarks, “the being of anything that is lies in achieving what pertains to its logos or nature.”<sup>25</sup> And since the cosmos is nothing other than the divinity differentiated, then the completion of the cosmos is

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 4.1 (PG 3, 696A).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 42.

achieved by attaining unity, by reverting back into the one. Thus, Jones explains Dionysius' reasoning:

[T]he cause is the source of completion and, indeed, is the completion of what it causes. In achieving its completion, what is caused attains to its good-being, for the completion of a being is its goodness. Further, its completion consists in its partaking in its cause; thus, it is like its cause. Indeed, the very being of what is caused lies in its partaking in its cause. Its being lies in imitating its cause as far as possible. All of this constitutes its tendency toward its reversion to its cause.<sup>26</sup>

This approach allows Dionysius not only to echo the Greek tradition by saying that the good is "that which all desire,"<sup>27</sup> but also to modify this tradition by applying the term "good" (and also the term "beautiful" as convertible with it) to the divinity as that to which all things revert.<sup>28</sup> Thus, we see that Dionysius'

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> *Divine Names* 4.4 (PG 3, 700B). Cf. ARISTOTLE: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1, 1094a1.

<sup>28</sup> This move made by Dionysius —and by Plotinus before him— is, of course, one that will have a monumental significance for the mediaeval tradition. We see it as early as Augustine. Cf. AUGUSTINE, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 3; *De libero arbitrio* 2.9-10; *Confessiones* 10.20.29-23.33; *De Trinitate* XIII.3.6-6.9. Interestingly, however, Aquinas explicitly rejects this move. Although he does accept the Dionysian reversion scheme, he chooses not to read it into the Aristotelian dictum that, "the good is that which all desire"; for Aquinas, this dictum means, not that all things desire one and the same object, "the Good" (or God), but rather that everything tends toward whatever is its perfection—a perfection that is relative to the nature of each creature; for example, a rock seeks its good by tending downwards, and humans seek their good by perfecting their powers. Cf. AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q.6, a. 2 ad 2: '[B]onum est quod omnia appetunt' non sic intelligit, quasi unumquodque bonum ab omnibus appetat; sed quia quicquid appetit, rationem boni habet. Cf. also *In Eth.* I.1. For Aquinas' reception of Dionysius, see O'ROURKE, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics...*, pp. 234-249.

writings are replete of passages that talk about how all beings desire the good. He writes:

Similarly, goodness—as unifying and authoritative divinity—returns all to itself and is the source of the binding of those that are sundered. All desire it as source, connection, and end....<sup>29</sup>

All beings desire the beautiful and the good with respect to every cause [and] no being fails to partake of the beautiful and good....<sup>30</sup>

All rest and motion are... for the sake of it....<sup>31</sup>

Simply all being... is returned to the beautiful and the good... all look toward it....<sup>32</sup>

For every being, the beautiful and good is desired, loved, and beloved. Indeed, every being produces and intends whatever it produces and intends by desiring the beautiful and the good....<sup>33</sup>

This desire of all beings for the good, Dionysius asserts, is also a function of divine *eros*. *Eros*, then, is not only the movement of procession and differentiation from the good into beings, from oneness into multiplicity, but also the movement of *reversion* and unification from beings into the good, from multiplicity into unity<sup>34</sup>; here, goodness and unity are also convertible. In addition,

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<sup>29</sup> *Divine Names* 4.4 (PG 3, 700A).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 4.7 (PG 3, 704B).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 4.10 (PG 3, 705C).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 4.10 (PG 3, 705D). Cf. Caroline PUTNAM: *Beauty in the Pseudo-Dionysius*, Series: Philosophical Studies, Number 190, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 1960, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Divine Names* 4.10 (PG 3, 708A).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 9.1 (PG 3, 948D); 13.13 (PG 3, 980C). Beyond the fact that this process consists in returning to unity, Dionysius does not explain any further



since each being has a different nature or *logos* according to which it exists and acts, it follows that each being *reverts* according to its nature or *logos*. Thus, Dionysius maintains that *eros* is specific to the nature of the being in question. Every being, he says, seeks or reverts to the good in its own way: "we consider *eros* to be divine, angelic, intellectual, psychic or natural...."<sup>35</sup> Also:

[The good is] that into which all are returned according to the proper limit of each being. It is that which all desire. Intellects and rational beings are turned knowingly; sensible beings, sensibly; living beings without sensation, by the emerging-motion of their desire for life; lifeless beings, by being enabled to share only in being.<sup>36</sup>

Further, since every being reverts according to its own *logos*, and the *logos* of a being determines the place of that being in the hierarchy, every being is said to revert *according to its place in the hierarchy*. Thus, not only does the divinity emanate through divine *eros* into a differentiated and hierarchically ordered cosmos, where each inferior imitates and participates in the superior; each

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how this process takes place. Cf. Paul ROREM, "The Place of *The Mystical Theology* in the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus", *Dionysius IV* (1980) pp. 90-91.

<sup>35</sup> *Divine Names* 4.15 (PG 3, 713A-B).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 4.4 (PG 3, 700B). This is the context in which Dionysius develops his symbolic and negative theologies, which are nothing other than reversion in a specifically human way. Early Neoplatonists (in general) tended to underscore the broader, metaphysical view of this movement, but from the time of Dionysius, Christians started to shift the emphasis to the epistemological aspect of the theory; it is in Dionysius that we find the epistemological aspect best put into its metaphysical context. Cf. Stephen GERSH: *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1978. For this reading of Dionysius' Negative Theology, I depend on John Jones' unpublished essay, "Hyper by Any Other Name: The Logic of Negative Theology in Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas and Damascius" (full reference in note 1 above).

inferior also reverts back to its superior, as to its completing and unifying cause.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, we see that Dionysius talks not only of the reversion of inferiors to their superiors (and of the corresponding “providence” of the superiors for their inferiors), but of a third movement in the hierarchy: the “bond” or love of “communion” between equals. Regarding this movement, however, Dionysius does not seem to specify the manner in which (or the reason why) it occurs; we can only speculate and conjecture that since equals share the same end (that is, they share the same cause — the same superior — and thus perfection), they are coordinated and co-operate for the sake of that end, thus seeking the good for one another. That is, their “bond” or “communion” seems to be based on their place (and thus, teleology) within the hierarchy.<sup>38</sup>

Summarizing the three movements, Dionysius writes:

We must understand [divine *eros*] to be a unifying and binding power which moves superiors to provide for the weaker, which moves equals into a communion with one another, and finally which moves inferiors towards the return to those which are greater than they and which are placed beyond them....<sup>39</sup>

And in other places, he also states that: “because of [the good], inferiors love superiors admiringly, those of the same rank love one another communally, superiors love their inferiors

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. AQUINAS, *In librum Beati Dionysii...*, Cap. 4, lect. 9, n. 407: “Primus [modus amoris] est secundum quod inferius amat suum superius; et hoc est quod dicit quia *propter* bonum et pulchrum *et ipsius gratia*, *minora*, idest inferiora, *amant meliora*, idest superiora, *convertendo se ad ea*, quia in eis habent suam perfectionem.”

<sup>38</sup> This interpretation is based on that given by Thomas Aquinas. Cf. *Ibid.*: “*ordinata*, idest ea quae sunt unius ordinis, *amant coordinata*, idest aequalia *communicative*, idest inquantum communicant cum eis vel in specie vel in quocumque ordine.” Cf. *Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 60, a. 4, co.

<sup>39</sup> *Divine Names* 4.15 (PG 3, 713B).

providentially, and all of these love each other in a unified way...";<sup>40</sup> and that, "from out of the beautiful and good... the providences of superiors, the bonds of equals, and the reversion of inferiors."<sup>41</sup>

It seems that we can safely infer that these movements are identical to those of procession and reversion: superiors shoot forth inferiors giving them being, and thus goodness and perfection, and in turn the inferiors by their very being desire unity, that is, goodness and perfection, which they find in their superiors. Moreover, in the same way that equals are given being in common (they are in communion with respect to the same *logos*), so they act in communion for the same good.

So we see that reversion is the completion or perfection of procession: while the latter is a differentiation of the divinity, the former is a re-unification of the (differentiated) divinity. Thus, every being has a twofold tendency: (1) it emanates or proceeds from its cause as its imitation and differentiated participation, and (2) by being what it is, it reverts back into its superior, as to its completing and unifying cause.

So these two "movements" are not really different events: they are merely two moments or aspects of the same reality. Eric Perl explains this in a remarkable way. Using the terms "creation" and "illumination/self-revelation" in place of "procession" and "reversion" (respectively), he writes:

In [Pseudo-Dionysius'] ontology, it is impossible to draw any distinction between creation and illumination. God's creative 'downward' movement, his self-revelation to the world, is at once, identically, his illuminative 'upward' drawing of the world into communion with himself... This illumination which God sends down upon creatures and which draws creatures

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 4.10 (PG 3, 708A).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 4.7 (PG 3, 704B).

to himself is not merely an added perfection given to an already existing creature, but rather, is nothing other than the act of creation itself.<sup>42</sup>

I believe Perl exaggerates when he says that “it is impossible to draw any distinction” between procession and reversion. Procession and reversion are not *strictly* identical (distinct in no respect); rather, they point to different aspects or moments of the same reality. This is seen more clearly if we recognize the fact that Dionysius is modifying an idea from the Greek tradition. For the Greeks, especially for Aristotle, goodness is the perfection of a nature, that is to say, the extent to which a certain nature possesses fullness of being. Therefore, a being is good to the extent that it possesses the being due to its nature. And since, for Dionysius, procession is the movement by which things come to be (that is, by which things “receive” the being due to their nature), that very act of procession is an act of perfection; to be and, thus, to *come* to be, is to be good/perfected to some extent. Dionysius’ distinction between procession and reversion, then, is in a sense parallel to Aristotle’s distinction between first and second act: procession is the process whereby a creature obtains its first act, its having an essence, whereas reversion is the process whereby it receives its second act, or actuality.<sup>43</sup> Perl, again, explains: “creatures do not first exist and then receive [perfections], but rather come to be *by*... receiving God as their perfections, all of which are contained in their being.”<sup>44</sup> Dionysius himself remarks about beings that, “in desiring goodness they have being and good being; they are conformed to goodness as far as possible.”<sup>45</sup> The universe, then,

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<sup>42</sup> PERL: “Hierarchy and Participation...”, pp. 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE: *De anima* 2.1, 412a6-b9.

<sup>44</sup> PERL: “Hierarchy and Participation...”, p. 19, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> *Divine Names* 4.1 (PG 3, 696A). This has important implications concerning the production evil in Dionysius. For him, evil is a being’s falling away from its place in the hierarchy/circle due to that being’s lack of perfection, that is, its falling short of what it should be by nature. So one might ask, if reversion is not a temporal event occurring *after* procession, then how does evil

does not *first* emanate from the One, and then revert at a *later* time; it is not a linear process. Rather, emanation-reversion is a simultaneous and ongoing process in each being, as it oscillates or spirals between multiplicity and unity. If we understand the triadic structure this way, Dionysius' metaphysics will seem more realistic and less difficult to accept.

Yet the image of a great circle of causation —which is the most important and popular imagery used to explain the entire structure of procession and reversion— perhaps seems to stand in the way of this interpretation, for it gives the impression that things *first* proceed from the divinity, and *then* revert back into it. But we must realize that when Dionysius uses the image of a great circle of causation, he is *not* thinking in temporal terms:

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come to be, since beings then would have no "time in between" to fall away? If they are perfected (reverted) insofar as (or "as soon as") they proceed, then how is evil possible? We might answer by saying that if we understood procession and reversion as a process of coming down and then going back up, and evil (falling away from the circle) occurring somewhere in between, then it would be problematic to claim that procession and reversion are merely different moments of the same reality. But if we take into account that the circle imagery does not intend to posit beings as literally coming down and then going back up, then we would not have this problem. An evil being is not one that has completely proceeded from the divinity but that has not successfully completed its process of reversion. Rather, an evil being is one that—in Jones' words—"possesses a way of be-ing which is incompatible with its nature, or... lacks a way of be-ing which is necessary for it to completely function in conformity with its nature" (JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 83). So since evil a being's lack of fullness of being (the being due to its nature), and this fullness of being is that which the being obtains in procession-reversion, we can thus say that evil is the truncation or incompleteness of procession-reversion in a being. An evil being is one that falls short in processing-reversion of receiving the fullness of being that is due to it by nature—though this does not imply that the divinity is the cause of evil. Cf. Dionysius' analogy between the divinity's productivity and the sun's in *Divine Names* 4.4, (PG 3, 697B-700A), as well as Jones' comments on the analogy, in *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, pp. 56-57; for Dionysius' understanding of the nature of evil, see Jones, *ibid.*, pp. 73-88; see also, Rosa PADELLARO DE ANGELIS: *L'influenza di Dionigi l'Areopagita sul pensiero medievale*, Rome: Editrice Elia 1975, pp. 50-61.

Flowing forth out of the good to beings, returning again to the good; in this the divine *eros* is excellently manifested to be *without beginning and without end*. The divine *eros* is like an *everlasting circle*: moving around in unerring convolution through the good, out of the good, in the good, into the good, *always* abiding, proceeding and returning, in the same, and according to the same.<sup>46</sup>

These three aspects of causation do not occur in any temporal order; in fact, causation for Dionysius is primarily an a-temporal phenomenon. We have to understand these aspects of causation as occurring simultaneously (or, better, *eternally*) in the cosmos. They are merely aspects or moments under which we consider beings.

Thus, the structure of procession-reversion as a whole is the entire movement that the differentiated and unifying divinity undergoes: both the coming-to-be and the coming-to-perfection of all beings. As Dionysius puts it, *eros* is, “the rest and motion of the intellects, souls and bodies. That beyond all rest and motion is the rest and motion for all, as founding each being in its logos, and moving each being according to its proper motion.”<sup>47</sup> The procession of things from, and their reversion to, the One, then, far from being distinct and clear-cut events, can be understood as intertwined, simultaneous, and co-eternal ‘moments’ of the same cosmic reality, whereby a given thing spirals between unity and multiplicity.

Now that we have seen the details of Dionysius’ doctrine on the abiding-reversion-procession of the divinity, we are ready to

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<sup>46</sup> *Divine Names* 4.14 (PG 3, 712C-713A), my emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> *Divine Names* 4.7 (PG 3, 704C). Cf. GOLITZIN: *Et introibo...*, p. 97.

turn to an examination of the place of human beings in this triadic causal structure.

#### 4. Dionysius' Mystical Itinerary

As a part of the world's return to the One, human beings must strive to reach a mystical state of *henosis* (lit., "one-ification," that is, union/identity with the One).<sup>48</sup> In other words, humans must endeavor to raise their minds from the sensible world, which is imbedded in multiplicity, to higher things until their minds become one with the One. For Dionysius, this process seems to have many stages.

We can gather much about this issue from Dionysius' remarks in his *Mystical Theology* about his own works. He implies that, in principle, his writings constitute a sort of mystical itinerary intended as a mystical guide for their addressee (his co-presbyter Timothy). His four mystical works, namely, *Symbolic Theology*, *Outlines of Theology*, *Divine Names*, and *Mystical Theology*, are supposed to lead the soul through the path of contemplation, through affirmative and negative theologies, to the final goal of *henosis*.<sup>49</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, *Symbolic Theology* and *Outlines of Theology* are not extant. In fact, many scholars consider them as possibly a literary fiction, or even an intentional pun or joke by the author.<sup>50</sup> Yet, regardless of their real existence or of their authenticity, I argue that they are of doctrinal significance in Dionysius' mystical thought. Whether literary fictions or actual

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<sup>48</sup> For a full-length study of *henosis* in Dionysius, see Ysabel de ANDÍA Y ELIO: *Henosis: L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*, Collection: Philosophia antiqua 71, Leiden: Brill 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Aquinas notices this fourfold division of the mystical life and calls it "artificial"; cf. AQUINAS, *In librum Beati Dionysii...*, prooemium.

<sup>50</sup> Among authors who do so are Hathaway, Rorem, Brons, and Jones, whereas other authors, such as von Balthasar and Golitzin, think they are simply lost, authentic works. See GOLITZIN, *Et introibo...*, Introduction.

writings, for Dionysius they represent stages in a mystical process whereby human beings undergo *henosis*.

The first step of this itinerary is represented by the *Symbolic Theology*, which consists in opening the mind to the non-literal meaning of sensible religious symbolism. Dionysius writes to Timothy:

In our *Symbolic Theology* we have discussed the names which are transferred from sensibles to what is divine. Thus we have determined what are the divine forms, figures, parts, organs, places, worlds, curses, pains, sadnesses, indignations, drunks, hangovers, oaths, periods of sleep, periods of wakefulness, and whatever other sacredly molded forms which symbolize the divine form.<sup>51</sup>

This type of discourse must necessarily come first in the itinerary, for it consists in denying of the One what is farthest from it, namely, the physical. That is, it consists in denying the predication of sensibles to the divine.

But why, you will ask, do we begin the divine denial from the last of beings when we positioned the divine positions from the first beings? The reason is this: to position that beyond all position it is necessary to position the hypothetical affirmations from those which are more akin to it; in denying that beyond all denial, it is necessary to deny from those which are farthest away from it. For is 'not life and goodness' more than air and stones? And is it 'not drunkenness' or 'not anger' more than 'not spoken' or 'not thought'?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Mystical Theology* 3 (PG 3, 1033A-B).

<sup>52</sup> *Mystical Theology* 3 (PG 3, 1033C-D); the single-quotation marks are added for clarity.



The second work, *Outlines of Theology*, which consists in the study of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, represents the second step in the mystical path. This is the peak of *affirmative* theology. Dionysius again says to Timothy:

In our *Outlines of Theology* we have treated what is of greatest importance in affirmative theology. That is, how the divine and good nature is called both one and three, what fatherhood and sonhood are in it, and what the theology of the spirit is. We have celebrated how the lights which remain in the heart of goodness have flowed forth from the immaterial and invisible good and, in so shooting up, have without wandering remained abiding and co-eternal in the good, in themselves, and in one another. Further we have celebrated how Jesus, [is] beyond being; took on being among humans. We have celebrated whatever else is manifested in the writings in our *Outlines of Theology*.<sup>53</sup>

This is only the second rung of Dionysius' mystical path, and yet it contains what we today known as Christian theology. Discourse on Trinitarian theology, Christology, etc., is then, for Dionysius, an affirmative theology that is inferior to the higher, apophatic path of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*. As Jones points out,

Affirmative theology celebrates the divine causality; it seeks to know the divinity as cause of all that is through a knowledge of beings. In affirmative theology, the divinity is all-named and completely intelligible. The *Outlines of Theology* contain what is most proper to affirmative theology: Trinitarian

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (PG 3, 1032D-1033A).

theology and Christology. Thus, this work contains what is unique to Christian Theology.<sup>54</sup>

*The Divine Names* is next in the path of contemplation: "After having considered the *Outlines of Theology*, I shall proceed as far as I am able to the unfolding of the *Divine Names*."<sup>55</sup> The most metaphysical of his (extant) works, *The Divine Names* attempts to build a bridge between affirmative and negative theologies. It deals with the names that are purely intelligible (whose referents are free from any privations), such as good, life, wisdom, power, etc., and thus can be said of God as causal designations; these names, nevertheless, do not describe the One's essence, since the One is beyond-essence and is thus indescribable. Dionysius remarks that at this point, discourse is becoming scanty due to the nature of the path of negation:

You will have noticed how much more extensive are the last than the former. Necessarily the *Outlines of Theology* and the unfolding of the *Divine Names* are more briefly spoken than the *Symbolic Theology*; for the higher we ascend the more our language becomes restricted by the more synoptic view of what is intelligible... In affirmative theology the *logos* descends from what is above down to the last, and increases according to the measure of the descent towards an analogical multitude. But here, as we ascend from the highest to what lies beyond, the *logos* is drawn inward according to the measure of the ascent.<sup>56</sup>

The final step in the itinerary is the *Mystical Theology*. It consists in attaining *henosis*, the complete union between the soul and the One. This is achieved through a purely negative theology, the

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<sup>54</sup> JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> *Divine Names* 1.1 (PG 3, 585B).

<sup>56</sup> *Mystical Theology* 3 (PG 3, 1033B-C).

denial of everything with regards to the One. Since the One is pure oneness, beyond all multiplicity, it is completely unknowable; in turn, since it is unknowable, it cannot be spoken of. This level of mysticism is the one that truly reaches the reality of God beyond all others. Dionysius introduces his co-presbyter Timothy to the peak of the mystical union with the One.

Now, however, that we are to enter the darkness beyond intellect, you will not find a brief discourse but a complete absence of discourse and intelligibility... After all ascent it will be wholly without sound and wholly united to the unspeakable.<sup>57</sup>

Following the lead of the Patristic mystical tradition, Dionysius proposes Moses as the paradigmatic candidate for *henosis*.<sup>58</sup> He first underwent initiation and purification.

It is not to be taken lightly that the divine Moses was ordered first to purify himself, and again to be separated from those who were not pure; after every purification he hears the many sounded trumpets, he sees the many pure lights which flash forth and the greatly flowing rays. Then he is separated from the many and, with those who are sacred and select, he overtakes the summits of the divine ascents. Yet with these he does not come to be with God himself; he does not see God — for God is unseen — but the place where God is.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Other ancient writers who cite Moses as the prototypical mystic are Philo of Alexandria, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, and Saint Augustine of Hippo. Cf. Michael D. SPENCER: "Moses as Mystic", *Studies in Spirituality* XVII (2007), pp. 127-146.

<sup>59</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1 (PG 3, 1000D).

After he cleared his mind of all symbols, sensibles, and intelligibles, Moses was able to rise up to union with the one.

And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing; in this he shuts out every knowing apprehension and comes to be in the wholly imperceptible and invisible, be-ing entirely of that beyond all — of nothing, neither himself nor another, united most excellently by the completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, for Dionysius, Moses exemplifies the soul's movement from cataphaticism to apophaticism multiplicity to unity.

Nevertheless, it would be all too simplistic to think that, in the mystical itinerary, the mind moves in a linear way from cataphatic to apophatic discourses, or from multiplicity to unity. Even though Dionysius' mystical itinerary seems clear-cut in theory, the usage of different types of discourse in his different works is not so clear-cut in practice. Although each work has a specific type of discourse in principle (for example, affirmative theology in the *Outlines of Theology*), the entire *Corpus* intermingles affirmative and negative theologies, symbolic and demonstrative discourses, philosophically rigorous discussions along with poetic "celebrations" or hymns, etc. The soul, rather than moving linearly, oscillates or spirals between multiplicity and unity.<sup>61</sup> Even at the highest level of the path, that of the *Mystical Theology*, which, in theory, is characterized by complete apophaticism and the absence of all discourse, in practice there is certainly some discourse going on, and not all of it negative. This shows that, in practice, affirmative and negative theologies do not represent discrete stages in the mystical path for Dionysius,

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Dionysius himself uses the imagery of spiral movement to describe the ascent of souls as they revert back to the One; cf. *Divine Names* 4.10 (PG 3, 705A).

but rather, are intermingled throughout the ascent to *henosis*. As Dionysius himself explains, apophatic and cataphatic discourses are intertwined or “woven together”:

The theological tradition is double, being on the one hand a tradition which is not expressed in words and which is mystical and, on the other hand, a tradition which makes manifest and is better known. One is symbolic and aims at initiation, the other is philosophical and demonstrative. What is not said is woven together with what is said. One persuades and makes known the truth of what is said, the other fulfills and situates souls in God through mystical guidance which is not learned by teaching.<sup>62</sup>

Jones comments on this passage saying that:

Indeed, even a cursory reading of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* shows an intricate and bewildering convolution of affirmative and negative theology. We see an explicit recognition of this in the... text [cited above]....<sup>63</sup>

Just as the triadic causal structure in Dionysius’ metaphysics must be understood as a simultaneous, intertwined, eternal process, so we must understand the mystical itinerary in this, more nuanced way: as the simultaneous, intertwined, spiraled path of the soul between multiplicity and unity. Thus understood, Dionysius’ mysticism is more realistic and less difficult to accept.

### **Conclusion: Dionysius’ Metaphysical Mysticism**

We have seen that Dionysius’ mystical itinerary is a special case of his procession-reversion metaphysics: mysticism is the

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<sup>62</sup> Letter 9.1 (PG 3, 1105C-D).

<sup>63</sup> JONES: *Pseudo-Dionysius...*, p. 15.

soul's own reversion to the One. This explains why the mind also intertwines cataphatic and apophatic mystical discourses, as it oscillates or spirals between unity and multiplicity. Just as procession and reversion represent different moments of the differentiation and unification of the cosmos at the metaphysical level, so affirmative and negative theologies represent different moments of the mystical path to *henosis*. But we saw that the differentiation and unification of the cosmos is not a linear path from unity to multiplicity and from multiplicity to unity; rather, it is an ongoing, simultaneous, eternal cycle where there is coexistence between the different moments whereby beings oscillate between multiplicity and unity. It stands to reason, then, that, in the same way, the soul's mystical ascent from multiplicity to unity is not a linear one; rather, both affirmative and negative theologies, apophatic and cataphatic discourses, are intertwined, cooperating in the process whereby the soul oscillates between unity and multiplicity, on its way to complete *henosis*. Therefore, just as the distinctions within his triadic structure of abiding-procession-reversion were clear-cut in theory but not in practice, so in the same way, the distinction between affirmative and negative theologies is not as straightforward in practice.

In sum, then, Dionysius' triadic structure of causation of abiding, procession, and reversion (*monê, prodos, epistrophê*) is the proper context within which his mystical doctrine on the reversion of *human beings* to the One must be understood. His mysticism is essentially a special case of his reversion metaphysics. This is seen very clearly through the fact that Dionysius conceived his works as representing stages in the oscillating ascent of human beings from the multiplicity of beings to the unity of the One. Dionysian apophaticism is only one 'moment' of his mystical itinerary, just as his doctrine of reversion is a 'moment' of the triadic causal structure that we find in his metaphysical worldview. This perspective sheds light into the issue of how Dionysius' affirmative and negative theologies coexist simultaneously and harmoniously, just as unity and multiplicity coexist simultaneously (eternally)

and harmoniously in the Dionysian universe. The apophatic and cataphatic elements of his mystical thought are as intertwined as the processes of procession and reversion in his metaphysical thought. This analysis has the advantage of bringing added coherence and realism to Dionysius' metaphysical and mystical doctrines.