

THE *VIA AFFIRMATIVA* IN THE *LETTERS OF DENYS*

by

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For my family

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ABSTRACT

Denys' four treatises (CH, EH, DN, MT) describe the logic of conversion of how the soul achieves a contemplative union with the One beyond-being and beyond-knowing through an informed and deliberate unknowing, by means of an ascending liturgical prayer. A tightly structured reversal of the logic of the four major treatises, Letters I-X demonstrate how the person who has ascended to the contemplative state described in the MT never "leaves behind" that union with the "One beyond-knowing" but by way of the Incarnation through participation in the sacrament of Communion, that contemplative union of the soul is maintained through its descent and she continues to experience union with the One beyond-knowing in every circumstance of daily life. The ascent (CH, EH, DN, MT) and the descent (Letters I-X) do not describe a temporal succession, but both movements are simultaneous in the soul that participates in the Incarnation through the sacraments.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

LXX	Septuagint
<i>Ambigua</i>	<i>On the Difficulties of the Church Fathers</i>
AV	<i>Authorized Version</i>
CD	<i>Corpus Dionysiacum</i>
CH	<i>Celestial Hierarchy</i>
DN	<i>Divine Names</i>
EH	<i>Ecclesiastical Hierachy</i>
Lampe	<i>Lampe: A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i>
MT	<i>Mystical Theology</i>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Recent consideration of Denys' *Letters*

In the only substantial modern monograph devoted to the ten *Letters* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (hereafter “Denys”),¹ Ronald Hathaway’s concern with the larger question of the absence of a political philosophy in Christian Platonism generally leads him to pay particular attention to the possible ethical and political philosophy implicit in the *Letters*.² Hathaway concludes that the absence of these practical sciences in the *Letters* issues from the strained relation of Neoplatonic philosophy and Christian theology in Denys’ thinking: “The *Letters* of Ps.-Dionysius are an example of the fatal weakness of any alliance of Neoplatonism with Christian faith. Neither Neoplatonism nor Christian faith seems capable of producing a political philosophy.”³ Hathaway submits that Denys’ all-consuming interest in the union between God and the soul leaves

¹ Citations in Greek are from the critical edition by Heil, Ritter and Suchla: Pseudo-Dionysius, *Corpus Dionysiaca*, edited by Beate Regina Suchla, Gunter Heil, and Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990-91). English translations are by John Parker: Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker & Co., 1897-9). The identity of the author remains a mystery in many ways. All that is known to scholarship is derived from the CD itself. Denys borrows the name of the first century convert of St Paul, known as “Dionysius the Areopagite” (“Διονύσιος [ὁ] Ἀρεοπαγίτης”) in Acts 17:34. However, in the 1890’s the research of Hugo Koch and Joseph Stiglmayr gave persuasive evidence to show that Denys could not have pre-dated the Neoplatonic philosopher and Diadochos of the Plato’s Academy, Proclus, from whom Denys takes substantial quotations without citing him. The earliest recorded quotation from Denys was by Severus in 528, which provides us with a date by which the CD had been written. For more on the dating and identity of the author of the CD see the following section, 1.2.

² Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*. Medieval commentators like Maximus Confessor (580-662) considered the structure, logic and inter-relationships of the *Letters* within the overall *Corpus Dionysiaca* (hereafter ‘CD’), but Hathaway is the first in the modern period to offer a sustained treatment of the *Letters* as possibly significant in understanding the overall CD. Most recently István Perczel in a series of articles has engaged in a source analysis of some of the main Christological texts of the CD, including Letters III and IV, arguing for their direct dependence upon the radical dyophysite texts of Theodoret, of Cyrillus and Nestorius.

³ Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, 144.

no place in his system for a philosophy of God's self-manifestations in the varied relationships of social intercourse and political community.

In the following analysis of the *Letters* I come to a very different understanding of Denys' thinking. It will become clear that Hathaway misrepresents Denys in his suggestion that Neoplatonism and Christianity are opposing or competing world-views. Rather, for Denys the Neoplatonism of Proclus provides the indispensable intellectual and logical categories adequate to thinking and understanding the Christian faith. Further, although Hathaway says that Denys does not present a political philosophy in the *Letters*, I will show that the intent of the *Letters* is precisely to demonstrate that the Dionysian Hierarchy extends downward to include every particularity of the created order including the establishing of Christian community. I will describe the logic of the *Letters* in which Denys reverses the ascending logic of spiritual uplifting to the contemplative union of the soul with God (this is generally the movement of the argument in the four major treatises of the CD: the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Divine Names*, and the *Mystical Theology*)⁴ and in a logic that begins with the unknowable God of the MT guides the reader through a careful descent to a consideration of friendship and the practicalities of social intercourse based on the sacramental life of the Christian community.

My argument has developed in the light of the recent conversation among scholars initiated by Hathaway's treatment of the *Letters* in which he raised, however obliquely, the question of the significance of created things generally and of human

⁴ Hereafter CH, EH, DN, MT.

relations specifically in the Dionysian hierarchy. I shall suggest that a close reading of the *Letters* systematically discloses how Denys' doctrine of *θέωσις* (union with God) is realized (actualized) in the kataphatic way of his theological system. I shall outline how the *Letters* reveal that the manifestations of God (theophanies) which make up the content of affirmative theology are not left behind or discarded on the soul's journey to its mystical union with God. Rather, through a consideration of the Incarnation Denys shows how the human person simultaneously experiences an ineffable mystical union whilst embracing in appropriate fashion that same divinity in every detail of the created order and social exchange of community life.

Although my argument locates the place of the *Letters* within the overall CD and identifies a logic in the *Letters* that hitherto has not been identified in current scholarship, it is important to understand my argument within the recent discussion of the *Letters*. Hathaway began that conversation by pointing to Denys' doctrine of *θέωσις* in the *Letters* and highlighting questions of divine revelation. Hathaway follows Vanneste in suggesting that, whatever Denys' account is, it is not specifically Christian. Vanneste maintains that Denys never asserts Christian dogma over against Neoplatonic philosophy: "On n'y trouve pas trace d'une expérience chrétienne concrète. Mais seulement l'écho d'une technique néoplatonicienne bien rodée."⁵ Vanneste takes a contrasting position to Roques who says: "le Christe opère vraiment, selon le mot de saint Paul, 'toute chose en tout.' On ne saurait donc exagérer sa place dans les hierarchies: il est partout, il fait-il éduque et il sanctifie tout."⁶ Hathaway suggests that the dichotomy between the two

⁵ Vanneste, *Le mystère de dieu*, 80.

⁶ Roques, *L'univers dionysien: structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys*.

interpretations is a false one. However, it remained for Eric Perl in 2007 to clarify definitively how Denys' account of the doctrinal content of the Christian religion adds nothing to Neoplatonism's metaphysical account of reality. Nonetheless, within that metaphysics, the historical Incarnation (as defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451)⁷ is, for Denys, the effectual cause that enables every created being to realize its potential for union with God in accordance with its given nature. As Corrigan suggests:

[E]ven if Dionysius in a sense 'destroys' the Unmoved Mover, he is the first to articulate the paradox or to show how the ultimate Unmoved Godhead can without departing from its own intimate life fall in love intimately with everything.⁸

The perfect unity of God, in the life of the Trinity, is not compromised even as Christ condescends to make himself one with the basest of creatures.⁹ We can see that the crux of this Dionysian innovation requires a Chalcedonian Christology which affirms the divine and human natures of Christ. It is a hotly contested question, whether Dionysius ascribes to a Chalcedonian or a monophysite Christology, and his Letter IV is at the centre of the debate. However, Denys' use of Chalcedonian terminology throughout the CD to describe a union between divine and created things which nevertheless preserves the integrity of their mutual distinction is suggestive of his orthodox commitments. Wear and Dillon interpret Denys' Letter IV as proof positive of his monophysitism and, according to their reading, it follows from this conviction that the affirmative way is only in the service of the negative way. On the contrary, recent

⁷ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 10-14.

⁸ Corrigan, "How did Aristotle's Unmoved Mover come to love everything by the end of the ancient pagan tradition?" 22.

⁹ Riggs traces the principle of ἔρωσ (love) from its source in the relations of the Persons of the Trinity through the various imitations of the Trinity which comprise the created order, wherein ἔρωσ is operative in an analogous way.

scholarship from Istvan Perczel consults early manuscripts and translations of the *CD* which supports the early interpretation of Letter IV by Maximus that Dionysius never admits that Christ's divine and human natures are altered, even as they are united. The interpretation of Denys as a monophysite, on the other hand, tends toward an alteration or annihilation of the content of affirmative theology in the service of the union with God. Some scholars have taken Denys to be a Christian in name only due to the denial of everything in reference to God which he describes in the negative way of theology. His full embrace of Neoplatonism has been taken to be inconsistent with the distinctively Christian elements of the religion, the significance of which depend upon the ontological union that is achieved between God and the created order in the Incarnation. For instance, Westcott insists that Denys has a diminished notion of the Gospel, of ecclesiastical activity, and of the sacraments. "The end of the discipline of life is, in his view, to help the believer to cast aside all things that belong to earth, and not to find in them gifts which may by consecration to God become hereafter the beginning of a nobler activity."¹⁰ Louth correctly claims that this is an overall misinterpretation of Denys.

Louth understands the whole of the *CD* to be rather

a liturgical theology, [culminating not with] the individual mystic's solitary ascent to God, but the priest's (or rather the bishop's) ascent to the altar: something that takes place with, and on behalf of, the whole people of God. So it would seem that the context of all the writings of the Areopagite is liturgical.¹¹

While Westcott finds that Denys' Christianity is forfeit for the sake of his philosophy, Armstrong, Sheldon-Williams and O'Meara perceive a lack of nuance in Denys as a

¹⁰ Westcott, *Essays in the History of Religious Thought in the West*, 189-91.

¹¹ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 31.

philosopher, as though all the sciences of practical philosophy are swallowed up by the theoretical side of philosophy.¹² Ivanović, on the other hand, defends Denys both as a Christian and as a philosopher. He strikes the right balance in showing how Denys incorporates both the practical and the theoretical in his hierarchical system:

for Dionysius, knowledge is an essential aspect of the ascending path to God – essential, but not the only one. Besides knowledge and understanding, the hierarchy administers the sacraments, which have a dual activity, acting on the soul spiritually and on the body physically, and both of these activities are necessary.¹³

Stang asks the pertinent fundamental question, though he approaches it from a unique direction: “But what does unknowing do to knowledge?”¹⁴ This is the question of how the negative and the affirmative ways of theology are related in the realization of *θέωσις*.

Scholars have proposed answers to this question in different ways through various approaches to the treatises. MT is the undisputed zenith of the CD. Migne’s PG compiles the works in the following order: CH, EH, DN, MT, and the *Letters*, from among other variant arrangements found in the manuscripts.¹⁵ On the other hand,

¹² “On the other hand, the interpretation of *praxis* in theurgic rather than in moral terms has left the ps.-Dionysius, like the other late Neoplatonists, with no moral philosophy at all. Theology, which has already swallowed up the rest of *theōria*, has now engulfed *praxis* as well, a fact which the ps.-Dionysius recognizes by calling his theurgy the Symbolic Theology.” Sheldon-Williams, “The pseudo-Dionysius,” 459. O’Meara corrects some of the interpretations of Denys which see an absence of moral and political philosophy in Denys as a rejection of the practical sciences: “the Dionysian Church represents the highest, most ambitious level of reform, a level of perfection well beyond the more human project of the *Laws* or projects of lesser ambition.” O’Meara, *Platonopolis*, 170.

¹³ “The entire work of salvation is put by Dionysius within the Church. His ecclesiology testifies that only in the Church material things become means of salvation, and that is why Arthur H. Armstrong, not without a lamenting tone, wrote that the ecclesiastical cosmos, not the natural one, appears to be of primary interest for the Christian. While some recognized sacred symbols in the natural world, ‘Dionysius placed them solely within the Church, and by shifting the context of theurgy from the natural to an ecclesiastical world he necessarily changed the very nature of “divine work.”’” Ivanović, “The ecclesiology of Dionysius the Areopagite,” 42, 3.

¹⁴ Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite*, 138.

¹⁵ Suchla catalogues the various orderings of the treatises in her introduction to the 1990 edition of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*.

Gandillac proposed that the order of the treatises can be identified according to clues within the texts indicating chronology in which they were written: DN, MT, CH, and EH. The *Letters* have been considered a kind of appendix to the treatises.¹⁶ Vanneste stresses that while Gandillac's method provides good reasons to read MT after DN and to read EH after CH, these pairs of treatises should be read in distinction from one another. For Vanneste, DN and MT trace the philosophical ascent to God while CH and EH treat the descent of God to the creation through sacred hierarchical orders.

The ways of ἀπόφασις and κατάφασις are also programmatic in Denys' *Letters*. On the one hand, Hathaway seems to trace an ascending progression throughout the *Letters* from the "τὸ σκότος" ("darkness") of Letter I, through references to a gradually increasing light as the *Letters* advance, arriving finally at the letter to John, "τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου τὸν ἥλιον" ("the sun of the Gospel"). He draws an association between the progression of the *Letters* and the ascent of the prisoner in Plato's allegory of the cave. On the other hand, however, Hathaway describes the progression of the *Letters* as advancing in the way of affirmative theology, which is generally conceived as a descent in Denys' system.¹⁷ While this may seem only a point of clarity on a minor inconsistency in Hathaway's exegesis, it yields a significant clue to interpreting the CD. The present commentary on the *Letters* approaches this collection in descending order and interprets the *Letters* as delivering the whole argument of the CD in summary. On this reading, the

¹⁶ Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 39.

¹⁷ "... we can deduce that positive theology begins from ignorance, whereas negative theology ends in ignorance; that positive theology ends in symbolic theology. The first nine letters announce their beginning in Letter 1; clearly it is ignorance (ἄγνοσία). They end in Letter 9, the only place where Ps.-Dionysius explains symbolic theology. The *Letters* contain an abbreviated form of the whole of positive theology... The clear conclusion from these facts is that according to Ps.-Dionysius' explicit testimony, with a hint here and there, the *Letters* are, as supplemented by *On Divine Names*, his positive theology." Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, 99.

content of the *Letters* and that of the treatises squarely overlap, but while the treatises proceed according to the ascending way of negation whereas the *Letters* proceed according to the descending directions of the positive way. Hathaway's identification of the increasing light and knowledge of the *Letters* confirms this interpretation that the *Letters* follow a logic of descent when we read them in parallel with the treatises. The sequence of the *Letters* correspond inversely with the sequence of the treatises as received in the manuscript tradition (CH, EH, DN, and MT). Thus, MT corresponds with Letter I, DN with Letters II-IV, EH with Letters V-VII, and CH with Letters VIII-X. All ten of Denys' extant *Letters* address in some way the question of how God is manifest to human beings and how they can become united with God. I shall indicate how Denys' perspective on this question develops throughout the collection.

Another theme which runs through the *Letters*, and which gives shape to the content of each letter is their hierarchical character. Each of the *Letters* is addressed to a different member of the ecclesiastical community who has a clearly defined hierarchical rank. Denys writes to each of them with deep sensitivity to that relationship. The hierarchical rank of the recipients defines the way in which Denys addresses them.

1.2 The Author and the Text

In 1895 German scholars Koch and Stiglmayr both published independent studies of textual evidence from the CD demonstrating that its author cannot be the 1st Century Athenian convert of St Paul's mentioned in Acts 17:34 and the first bishop of Athens mentioned in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.¹⁸ Rather, the author must have written his

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III.4

works between 476 and 528. The CD contains verbatim quotations from Proclus, the 5th Century diadochos (successor) of Plato who was head of the 800-year-old Academy founded by Plato. The findings of Koch and Stiglmayr also offered strong reasons to suggest that Denys was a Syrian because they interpreted his description of the Holy Communion liturgy (particularly the placement of the creed) according to the order of Antiochian Patriarch Peter the Fuller's liturgy of 476.

The CD first became known to recorded history in 528 when Severus quoted from Letter IV in defense of the monophysite position as part of the Christological debates which followed the Council of Chalcedon. Dionysius was initially unknown to Severus' opponents but was subsequently interpreted by them in support of the dyophysite orthodox position when they became acquainted with the CD. John Scythopolis wrote a commentary on the CD *c.* 532 in which he took Denys to conform to Chalcedonian Christology. In the 7th Century, Maximus the Confessor interpreted Letter IV to illustrate the Chalcedonian definition compellingly, quieting questions of Denys' orthodoxy and identity for several centuries to follow.

The late 19th Century findings of Koch and Stiglmayr prompted further studies in the 20th Century to determine whether the Christian language of the CD is merely a veneer to Denys' genuinely Neoplatonic project. Others have argued that Denys makes subtle yet radical alterations to Neoplatonic principles in favour of Christian dogma.¹⁹ My argument avoids such conjectures about Denys' 'hidden' agenda but rather begins by attempting to understand Denys' argument on the terms by which he presents himself: as

¹⁹ Hankey, "Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic: Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion," 2008.

a First Century Christian who lives and operates as a leader and a teacher within a hierarchically defined community. Denys also presents himself as an inheritor of two great and ancient traditions: the Jewish religion, which comes to him through the “Oracles” or the OT scriptures of his adopted Christian religion, and the Greek philosophical tradition, including his education as a member of the Areopagus, the supreme court of Athens. The synthesis of these two traditions is implied in the Acts account which makes first mention of Dionysius in the context of St Paul’s preaching to a gathering of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on the Areopagus of Athens.

1.3 Eros and Philia in Union with God

Denys’ reliance on Neoplatonism makes him vulnerable to the same criticisms that the pagan philosophical school attracts.²⁰ The argument is that Denys’ way of negative theology is motivated by an ἔρωσ (love) for God of the sort we find in Diotima’s teaching which Socrates delivers in the *Symposium*. In that account, the objects of love are like the steps on a ladder which the lover forgets about or despises as soon as they are used.²¹ The suggestion is that this becomes an un-Christian paradigm for Dionysian θεώσις to adopt. The particular signs of the Christian faith are each forsaken – all the content of affirmative theology – as soon as their instrumental advantages have been gained.

Corrigan rescues Denys from these accusations by defending the Neoplatonic notion of θεώσις (union with God) with which Denys is associated. In the words of

²⁰ Westcott, *Essays in the History of Religious Thought in the West*, 189-90. Cf. note 4, above, “On n’y trouve pas trace d’une expérience chrétienne concrète, mais seulement l’écho d’une technique néoplatonicienne bien rodée.” Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, 80.

²¹ Plato, *Symposium*, 210.a-e.

Plotinus, this is the “flight of the alone to the Alone.”²² Corrigan notes that Plotinus’ teaching has been caricatured as “self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing,”²³ but he defends this notion of *θέωσις* by tracing the use of this word *μόνος* (aloneness) in Homer, Plato and throughout Plotinus to show that it is used in non-solitary ways: in reference to the aloneness of intimacy; in the sense of “oneness” which extends to every “one” thing; and in the aloneness of belonging to one’s self (as opposed to belonging to another), which likens the soul to the Good. Concerning this last aloneness of the soul with the Good, Plotinus says: “They are no longer two but both are one. You could not distinguish between them, as long as the One is present; lovers and their beloveds here below imitate this in their will to be united.”²⁴ The point of Corrigan’s argument is not simply to identify pagan and Christian theories of union with God as indistinguishable, but to insist that both traditions acknowledge the negative way in the pursuit of union with God. Corrigan suggests: “Such a flight involves the painful stripping away of all that is alien or accessory to identity, but it also signifies an integral meeting and union which gives meaningful existence, grace, and light to everything which will come from it.”²⁵ Corrigan shows how this solitude is the fertile ground of divine revelation.²⁶

²² “φυγῆ μόνου πρὸς μόνον,” Plotinus, *Enneads*, (VI, 9 (9) 11, 50). Corrigan points out the variety of English translations of this phrase in a note: “The flight of the alone to the Alone’ is the translation of Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (New York, 1992), p. 51; compare the rendering of Stephen Mackenna “the passing of solitary to solitary” in *Plotinus: The Enneads*, trans. S. Mackenna, 4th ed. revised by B. S. Page (London, 1969; reprint, New York: Burdett, 1992), p. 709; Plotinus, 7 vols., trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass., 1966-88), 7:345; Platins Schriften, 5 vols., German trans. R. Harder (Hamburg, 1956), la:207; Plotin: *Enneades*, 7 vols., ed. and French trans. E. Brehier (Paris, 1924-38), 7:187.”

²³ Corrigan, “‘Solitary’ Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius,” 1996.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI, 7 [38] 34.

²⁵ Corrigan, “‘Solitary’ Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius,” 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The negative way of this ascent is characterized by desiring the Good, apprehending a good, and proceeding to desire something better. This is the way in which Diotima says that we reach better objects of desire and the means whereby the prisoner climbs out of Plato's cave. Indeed, this is not only how human beings pursue the knowledge of God but also the way we come to know our own capacities, as Corrigan mentioned above. Denys puts it this way:

By all things, then, the Beautiful and Good is desired (*ἐραστὸν*) and beloved (*ἀγαπητόν*) and cherished; and by reason of It, and for the sake of It, the less love the greater suppliantly; and those of the same rank their fellows brotherly; and the greater, the less considerately; and these severally love the things of themselves continuously; and all things by aspiring to the Beautiful and Good, do and wish all things whatever they do and wish. Further, it may be boldly said with truth, that even the very Author of all things, by reason of overflowing Goodness, loves all, makes all, perfects all, sustains all, attracts all; and even the Divine Love is Good of Good, by reason of the Good.²⁷

Whereas Vanneste sees no trace of a genuine Christian experience in this negative way of Denys' mystical theology, Robert Crouse identifies this erotic pursuit as the means by which we discover everything good and beautiful in the world.²⁸ My argument will show that for Denys it is not until we are brought by *ἔρωσ* (aspiring love) to a place of union with the God, beyond being and knowing, that we can know the *φιλία* (friendship-love) in reference to which every object of knowledge can be known as a symbol.

1.4 Outline of the Chapters to Follow

²⁷ “Πᾶσιν οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐφετὸν καὶ ἐραστὸν καὶ ἀγαπητόν, καὶ δι' αὐτὸ καὶ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ τὰ ἥττω τῶν κρείττωνων ἐπιστρεπτικῶς ἐρῶσι καὶ κοινωνικῶς τὰ ὁμόστοιχα τῶν ὁμοταγῶν καὶ τὰ κρείττω τῶν ἥττωνων προνοητικῶς καὶ αὐτὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστα συνεκτικῶς, καὶ πάντα τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἐφιέμενα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται πάντα, ὅσα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται. Παρρησιάζεται δὲ καὶ τοῦτο εἰπεῖν ὁ ἀληθῆς λόγος, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ πάντων αἴτιος δι' ἀγαθότητος ὑπερβολὴν πάντων ἐρᾷ, πάντα ποιεῖ, πάντα τελειοῖ, πάντα συνέχει, πάντα ἐπιστρέφει, καὶ ἔστι καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἔρωσ ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθοῦ διὰ τὸ ἀγαθόν.” Denys, DN IV.10.708A. English translations of CD are by John Parker, except where modified by the author.

²⁸ Crouse, “Aristotle's Doctrine of Philia,” 2.

The chapters of this thesis follow the logic of the *Letters* themselves that begin with a description of the soul's union with the One beyond being and knowing by an ecstatic, unknowing contemplation. From here the *Letters* proceed systematically to describe the downward journey of the soul to its relation to the most particular created thing. The *Letters* reveal how both the upward and the downward movements in the soul are distinguished yet simultaneous, akin to the Incarnation in which God and human are perfectly united without confusion yet perfectly distinguished without separation.

Chapter II begins with a consideration of Letter I. It is a description of precisely the union of ἀγνοσία (unknowing) with which the four treatises conclude in MT. One of the earliest Greek philosophers, Parmenides, said that that which is and that which is there for thought are exactly the same.²⁹ On the basis of this philosophical principle, this negative way of ἀγνοσία contemplation constitutes a perfect union between the One beyond knowing, and the one who knows God in this super-knowing way. And while both knower and the One beyond knowing are perfectly united in this ἀγνοσία of God they nevertheless remain perfectly distinct – unconfused – from one another. The very activity of contemplating the One beyond being is itself a manifestation of God in that this activity consists of what exists and also of what is beyond being; of thought and of what is beyond thinking.

In Chapter III I consider how Letters II-IV take up the argument of the DN. Letter II shows how the Person of Son, “the super-divine and super-good (gift), by aid of which we are deified and made good,”³⁰ is anticipated in the Person of the Father, “He, Who is

²⁹ Parmenides, *Fragments*, 1984.

³⁰ Denys, *Letters*, II.1069A.

beyond all, both above source of Divinity and above source of Good.”³¹ Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, who is implied in Letter II, is mentioned explicitly in Letter III, which treats the sudden manifestation of God as a man – a manifestation in which God nevertheless “remains unsaid, and when conceived unknown.”³² The One beyond knowing remains unknown, and eminently so, not in spite of but because of the Incarnation which defies the very thing we know of God: God’s unknowability. In Letter IV, the divine substance beyond substance, who has taken substance as a man (“ranked essentially with all men”),³³ is finally recognized by fellow humans on account of τὴν θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν (human-and-divine activity). Nowhere is God more hidden than in the person of Jesus, and nowhere is God more evident than in his miraculous activities. Thus Denys’ Letter IV treats the third Person of the Trinity because it is the Holy Spirit who is manifest in the human recognition of Jesus’ divinity.³⁴ Chapter I’s most lofty anticipation of the Trinity, manifest in the ἀγνωσία (unknowing) of the One beyond knowing, is made manifest in this first triad of letters (II-IV) in its description of the three Trinitarian Persons.

Chapter IV below continues to follow the descent of the soul in a consideration of the second triad of letters, Letters V-VII, that show how this new, human-and-divine activity of the Trinity, or θεαρχία (Thearchy), is generative of a human-and-divine hierarchy, namely the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Incarnation of God establishes a συμπαθησία (sympathy) between God and human beings – that is, a mean between God

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., III.1069B.

³³ Ibid., IV.1072A.

³⁴ I Corinthians 12:3.

and humanity by which God can act upon human beings and human beings can act upon God. In Neoplatonism, this συμπαθία (sympathy) is of the essence to any practice of θεουργία (theurgy), and for Denys the mediation of God-incarnate is crucial for Christian λειτουργία (liturgy) and for every sacramental activity. Thus, Denys' *Letter V* is written to a λειτουργός (deacon), or "minister," or "liturgist" named Dorotheus, literally "gift of God." The λειτουργός (deacon) belongs to the purifying and initiating rank of ordained ministers in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Deacons share this purifying, initiating function with the sacrament of baptism in the sacramental order above them and the catechumens in the order of laity below them. As Denys explains, every sensible arrangement of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is intended to conduct human beings to a corresponding intellectual imitation of God. The argument of *Letter V* coincides precisely with the intellectual imitation of God which a deacon serves to enable. Denys instructs Dorotheus that the contemplation of God above knowing is the initiation and purification into which enters "every one deemed worthy to know and see God, by the very fact of neither seeing nor knowing, really entering in Him, Who is above vision and knowledge."³⁵

Chapter IV continues with a consideration of *Letter VI* that conveys the intellectual imitation of God, corresponding to the illuminating ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: the sacrament of Communion, the order of priests, and the order of the laity. Whereas purification consists in contemplating God beyond every thought and every being, illumination consists in the gathering of every thought and being into God. In keeping with this illuminating function, Denys tells the priest Sopatros in *Letter VI* that he should not denounce any devotion or opinion which seems not to be good lest he

³⁵ Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

“should overlook the true, which is One and hidden.”³⁶ Just as in the sacrament of Communion all of the sensible things pertaining to the ecclesiastical hierarchy are illuminated by being gathered into union with God, so Denys also instructs Sopatros as a philosopher to contemplate the relation of the One to the many.

Chapter IV concludes with a consideration of Letter VII, addressed to the bishop Polycarp who belongs to the perfecting order of consecrated ministers. The consecrations which the bishop carries out demonstrate that the sympathy between God and human beings established by the Incarnation extends to every sensible thing through the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Maximus’ helpful exegesis of Letter IV shows how the Incarnation enables human beings to interpret everything in the created order as a manifestation of God: “For by virtue of His ineffable conception ‘the Word beyond being’ clothed Himself in all the elements of nature along with nature itself”.³⁷ In Letter VII Denys shows that God is apparent to human beings – first, in the creation of the world *ex nihilo* and, secondly, by assuming the same ontological substance of the created order in the Incarnation: “nothing could be otherwise removed from its heavenly course and movement, if it had not the Sustainer and Cause of its being moving it thereto, who forms all things and ‘transforms them’ according to the sacred text.”³⁸ Denys explains the logic by which the created things are united with God: the fact of a thing’s existence,

³⁶ Ibid., VI.1077A.

³⁷ “Τὰ γὰρ τῆς φύσεως πάντα μετὰ τῆς φύσεως κατὰ σύλληψιν ἄρρητον ὑποδὺς «ὁ ὑπερούσιος Λόγος”. Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.15. Maximus’ commentary corresponds with Denys’ statement in Letter IV: “And it is nothing less, the ever Superessential, super-full of super-essentiality disregards the excess of this, and having come truly into substance, took substance above substance, and above man works the things of man.” (“Ἔστι δὲ οὐδὲν ἦττον ὑπὲρ οὐσιότητος ὑπερπλήρης ὁ αἰεὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἀμέλει τῇ ταύτης περιουσίᾳ, καὶ εἰς οὐσίαν ἀληθῶς ἐλθὼν ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν οὐσιώθη καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου.”) Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072B.

³⁸ Ibid., VII.1080C.

of having been moved from non-existence to existence, means that every created thing is a sign of its Creator. For this reason, Denys argues in Letter VII that Apollophanes, a particular philosopher of the natural sciences, should also be a worshipper of Almighty God simply because of the fact of the creation of the world. The force of Denys' argument, however, is in the miracles in which is seen not only God's creation of the world but also God's activity in transforming the world from its 'heavenly course.' In a way that recalls the line of reasoning in Letter IV, Denys points to miracles recorded in scripture and corroborated in extra-biblical sources as evidence of God's worthiness to be worshipped. Acknowledging that this philosopher is not likely to be convinced by these examples, Denys finally quotes the philosopher's own words when he saw a supernatural eclipse, "these things, O excellent Dionysius, are requitals of Divine deeds,"³⁹ not knowing then that the eclipse transpired at the time of Christ's crucifixion. Denys' argument is not primarily that the whole created order points to God as its Creator, but that everything in the created order points to Christ who is God and yet condescended to the creation by becoming a man. For this reason, Christ is the mediator – the συμπάθεια (sympathy) – between God and every creature. This perfect union of Christ ("the anointed one") with everything in the sensible creation is emphasized by Denys who stresses that the bishop administers the sacrament of Anointing in every consecration he carries out. Thus Letters V-VII, written to a deacon, a priest, and a bishop, treat the manifestation of God in the sensible imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, just as Letters II-IV treated the manifestation of God in the Persons of the Thearchy.

³⁹ Ibid., VII.1081C.

Chapter V below treats the last triad of Letters VIII-X that concludes the argument of the *Letters*, showing how the Christian sacraments make effectual the Incarnation, extending the συμπάθεια between God and humanity to the intelligible active imitations of God in every circumstance of daily life. This συμπάθεια makes possible a friendship between God and man demonstrated in the friendship of John the Apostle with God described in Letter X. The final triad of letters (VIII-X) corresponds with CH, the initial treatise of the ascent in which Denys describes the intelligible imitations of God. Each of the recipients of these final three letters belongs to a perfecting order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: Demophilus of Letter VIII is a monk; Titus of Letter IX is a bishop; and John of Letter X is an apostle (a proto-bishop). The scope of human purification, illumination, and perfection which takes place in Letters VIII-X is that of the human soul. In Letter VIII Denys addresses Demophilus who in an alleged attempt to preserve hierarchical order, defies that very order. As a monk, consecrated to the regulation of the passions and the cultivation of virtues in his own soul, Demophilus' impassioned defiance of hierarchical order demonstrates his imperfection as a monk. He spurns the hierarchical structures which are intended to be emblems of friendship between him and God – the substance of the sympathy between humanity and divinity. This letter treats the purification of the soul's passions, which is the soul's initiation into friendship with God. Letter IX treats the illumination of the soul's capacity for friendship with God. Here Denys teaches symbolic theology to Titus. Symbolic theology comprises the sensible images of sacred scripture, which in turn encompass the whole of the sensible creation. However, the task of symbolic theology consists in the unveiling of these sensible things to illuminate the way they make God

manifest. Denys' instruction here is some of his most lucid philosophy in the CD in that he shows how every object in the created order is best understood as a sign and a token of divine love. The greater the dissimilarity by which the symbol represents God, the more exalted its significance. In Letter X we have the personification of symbolic theology in the Apostle John, who dispassionately suffers every experience and contemplates it with the passionless part of the soul.

Thus, in the *Letters* Denys sets out the theological way of κατάφασις corresponding to the theological way of ἀπόφασις which orients the direction of Denys' four major treatises. The *Letters* show that the manifestations whereby God is affirmed (in the Incarnation, in the sensible and intelligible imitations of God which constitute the sacraments, and in the sacred symbols and the divine names of scripture) are not simply dismissed upon the soul's union with God through unknowing. These manifestations by which humankind is conducted to union with God by ascending the negative way of theology are also the instruments by which human beings may inhabit the most common experiences whilst carrying out every mundane activity in imitation of and participation in God. The person who has ascended to the contemplative state described in the MT never "leaves behind" that union with the "One beyond-knowing" but by way of the Incarnation through participation in the Holy Communion that contemplative union of the soul is maintained through its descent such that the soul continues to experience the union with the One beyond-knowing in every circumstance of daily life.

CHAPTER 2 Letter I

2.1 Introduction to Letter I

Denys' first letter is addressed to the monk Gaius who belongs to the perfected order of the laity.⁴⁰ This letter begins from the point at which the treatises conclude: the mystical union with God.⁴¹ In this letter Denys specifically addresses the theme of *ἄγνοσία* (unknowing) as presented in the MT. Here in Letter I he describes how the contemplation of God by *ἄγνοσία* effects union with God. Thus, in this first letter, the reader recalls the whole of Denys' theology of the mystical union with God by unknowing. The consideration of Letter I in this chapter reviews the theological propositions that are implied in this unknowing union.

The fact that Denys establishes the concluding *ἄγνοσία* of the MT (the conclusion of the argument of the treatises) as the point of departure for the *Letters* suggests that just as the over-all program of the four treatises of the CD proceeds in the direction of apophatic (negative) theology, so the logic of the *Letters* proceeds in the opposite

⁴⁰ There are five occurrences of the name Gaius in NT, but there are no obvious indicators that would help to identify one of them as the intended addressee of this letter. Only in Letter X does Denys make clear the biblical character to which a letter is addressed, although it is safe to accept that Letter VII is addressed to the 2nd Century Christian Bishop and Martyr and that Letter IX is written to the same bishop and martyr to whom St Paul writes his canonical epistle. Letter X is addressed to the Apostle St John. There are Johannine resonances throughout all of the *Letters*, and especially of John's third epistle.

⁴¹ In addition to Hathaway (1989) who affirms the correspondence of the theme of *ἄγνοσία* in Letter I with the MT (cf. note 13, above), Alexander Golitzin has most recently made a case that the MT is the beginning point of the logic of the *Letters*: "Epistle I continues the themes of divine darkness and unknowing which preoccupy the latter treatise: God's transcendent darkness (here *skótos*) is 'hidden by the light of knowledge', Dionysius says, while 'complete unknowing is the knowledge of Him Who is known to transcend all things.'" Golitzin understands the first five letters as a "kind of chiasm which helps to complete the thought of the *Mystical Theology*." I shall show that Letter I intentionally takes up the content of the MT and Letters II – V develop a logic of descent toward the created order that nevertheless never leaves behind the experience of the union with divine described in MT, but Letters II-V simply unfold the character of reality in the light of that completely unknowing knowing. "Revisiting the 'Sudden': Epistle III in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*," 483.

direction towards an ever increasing kataphatic (affirmative) theology. That is to say, the *Letters* begin from the standpoint of God's perfect self-knowledge: both independent of anything that is or can be thought, and at the same time that without which nothing can be thought. The contemplation of God beyond thought and being is described as ecstatic in the treatises because thinking beings must deny what they know in order to become one with God. In the *Letters* Denys completes his overall argument with a description of the logic of divine ecstasy, or of the downward way in which God condescends to be known in the whole of the created order. Each of the subsequent letters after Letter I will show how God becomes known to creatures in increasingly dissimilar manifestations and how these increasingly dissimilar manifestations do not represent a lessening of the soul's union with God but rather increasingly luminous contemplations of God. The beginning point of this argument in Letter I is God's relation to Himself as above thought and being, implying an unresolvable tension between condescension and diminution. This chapter will show that this self-relation within God is generative of that which is other than God, and union with God is the perfect realization and end of being and knowing. Thus the logic of Letter I is self-contained in a circular way, but it is also generative in that it brings us to the question: how is God related to that which is other than God?

2.2 Letter I and the *Mystical Theology*

The order of Denys' four extant treatises (CH, EH, DN, and MT) and the logic of the ten *Letters* are parallel but reversed, proceeding in opposite directions. These two distinct collections are structured in their respective ways by an equal hierarchical structure that results in the realization of hierarchy's purpose and goal of union with God.

The four treatises follow a vector from *κατάφασις* and the luminous manifestations of God, to *ἀπόφασις* and the unknowing union with God. The *Letters* begin from the “darkness” of this unknowing union with God, and proceed by tracing the ecstatic self-emptying of God in which the God beyond thought and essence condescends to – and becomes manifest in – every object of sensible and intelligible perception. Both the treatises and the *Letters* are profoundly shaped by the hierarchical structure of Dionysian cosmology, equally informed by the philosophical method by which Denys enfolds and unfolds the divine names and the sacred symbols of scripture.

The hierarchical works CH and EH rehearse in series of triads the imitations of God the Trinity. This hierarchical arrangement constitutes the whole of the created order, from the loftiest ranks of the Seraphim and other angels to the mortal human body and the elements to which it is committed in the funeral rites.⁴² Every hierarchy encompasses everything that falls under the power of its respective hierarch, and the purpose of every hierarch is to purify, illuminate, and perfect all that falls under it. In accordance with this triadic ordering, Denys’s hierarchical works show how the whole of creation is most accurately understood when it is contemplated as an universal celebration of God comprised in every imitation of the Trinity. In keeping with this pattern DN, no less than CH and EH, is also a ‘hymn’⁴³ to God the Trinity comprised of the divine names found in scripture. Each of these names, from the name “Good” itself to the humble name of “rock,”⁴⁴ praises God according to a greater or lesser similitude. Proceeding from the more universally participated names (which seem to us more similar to the divine nature)

⁴² Denys, CH I.3.201A, EH VII.3.ix.565B.

⁴³ Ibid., DN, I.3.589A, I.4.589D, II.1.636C, II.5.641D.

⁴⁴ Ibid., I.6.596B, C.

to names that are more specific (which seem to us dissimilar to God, though they are better predicates of God for precisely that reason), DN follows after CH and EH in an ascending approach to the contemplation of God. Thus DN continues in the apophatic way of approach to God through the contemplation of the divine names. Denys attributes each name to God as the paradigm of every name – the nameless origin whence every name derives its meaning in the first place, and everything in creation participates in this cosmic hymn, to the extent that it participates in the divine names.⁴⁵ In this way, CH, EH and DN can be read in order as progressing in the direction of the union with God by unknowing with which MT ultimately culminates. Interpreted thus, the treatises constitute an approach to God according to apophatic theology.⁴⁶

In MT Denys denies of God many of the same names as were attributed to God in DN. God is more truly contemplated as excelling beyond these predicates than he is contemplated by any affirmative attribution. Thus, Denys denies every name as inadequate to its divine object. Denys employs an image from Plotinus, comparing this process of negation to the work of a sculptor who cuts away from the raw material of a statue until the hidden image is revealed. The difference between the sculptor's activity and that of knowing God through this process of affirmation and denial, is that in negative theology there is no positive substance at which Denys eventually arrives. Unlike the sculpture which the artist finally exposes from the raw material, God is revealed to be fundamentally different than anything we can conceive. Finally, in MT,

⁴⁵ Ibid., I.3.589A, I.4.589D.

⁴⁶ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 205-10.

nothing remains by which we may predicate of God, and we arrive at a thorough unknowing (ἀγνώσια) which is itself the truest knowledge of God.⁴⁷

Denys insists that this apophatic approach to knowing God is more accurate than the kataphatic approach and that it ultimately achieves union with God. Denys writes to Timothy, following the opening prayer of the MT:

[B]ut thou, O dear Timothy, by thy persistent commerce with the mystic visions, leave behind both sensible perceptions and intellectual efforts, and all objects of sense and intelligence, and all things not being and being, and be raised aloft unknowingly to the union, as far as attainable, with Him Who is above every essence and knowledge.⁴⁸

This shedding of thinking and of thoughts, of beings and of being itself, is an ἔκστασις (ecstasy) of the mind to that which is beyond thinking and being, “to the superessential ray of the Divine darkness.”⁴⁹

The first of Denys’ *Letters* begins by contemplating this same ἀγνώσια (unknowing) with which MT concludes the whole of the four treatises. Denys writes in Letter I: “Darkness becomes invisible by light, and specially by much light. Varied knowledge, and especially much varied knowledge, makes the *Agnosia* to vanish.”⁵⁰ Letter I takes the ‘agnostic’ state of union with God as its point of departure, and I will

⁴⁷ Louth has said that the unknowing union with God which Denys describes is fundamentally different from that described by Plotinus, objecting to Plotinus’ metaphor of “the flight of the unknown to the unknown.” On the contrary, Corrigan argues strongly that Plotinus and Denys are fundamentally speaking about the same way of negative theology and the same union with God. Nuance, however, in their descriptions is only to be expected, according to Corrigan. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 170. Corrigan, “‘Solitary’ Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius,” 28-42.

⁴⁸ “σὺ δέ, ὦ φίλε Τιμόθεε, τῇ περὶ τὰ μυστικὰ θεάματα συντόνω διατριβῇ καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀπόλειπε καὶ τὰς νοεράς ἐνεργείας καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ νοητὰ καὶ πάντα οὐκ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἔνωσιν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι τοῦ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν”. Denys, MT, I.1.997B.

⁴⁹ “πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θεοῦ σκότους ἀκτίνα”. Ibid., I.1.1000A.

⁵⁰ “Τὸ σκότος ἀφανὲς γίνεται τῷ φωτί, καὶ μᾶλλον τῷ πολλῷ φωτί· τὴν ἀγνώσιαν ἀφανίζουσιν αἱ γνώσεις, καὶ μᾶλλον αἱ πολλαὶ γνώσεις”. Denys, *Letters*, I.1065A.

argue that agnostic contemplation of and union with God is the recurring focus that links all of Denys' *Letters*, though approached from varied perspectives and contemplated under different representations.

2.2 *Agnosia* and Union with God

This union with God by ἀγνωσία bears several implications concerning God and knowing and unknowing which we must consider in order first to see how Denys understands this contemplation of God to be a real union of divine and human substance and second to see how the same theme of unknowing union of MT continues in Letter I and in the subsequent letters. The first proposition is the fundamental difference between God and knowing: every object of knowing as well as the activity of knowing itself. The second proposition is God's causal (and perhaps voluntary) responsibility for knowing and for that which is known, as Creator. The third proposition is the relativity of greater and lesser knowing – that every object of thought and activity of thinking belongs within the same ontological continuum. The fourth and final proposition is the co-extension of thought and being – the real identification of these two modes of activity. Each of these four propositions are recollected briefly in the eleven lines of text that comprise Letter I.

In Letter I Denys refers to knowing and light interchangeably, as he does with darkness and unknowing. The clear ontological divide between God and every activity and object of thinking is established several times in this short letter and not least in the first sentence: “Darkness becomes invisible by light, and specially by much light.”⁵¹ Divine substance and the substance of thought are as sharply separate from one another

⁵¹ “Τὸ σκότος ἀφανὲς γίνεται τῷ φωτί, καὶ μᾶλλον τῷ πολλῷ φωτί” Ibid.

as darkness and light. This is the first proposition to take from Letter I. This separation between God and knowing, however, does not suggest a dualistic model of the cosmos or two competing independent principles in the universe. That notion is plainly dismissed in Letter I by insisting that God's creative will is the cause of everything thought and of all thinking:

And, if anyone, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him, but some of his creatures that are existing and known. But He Himself, highly established above mind, and above essence, by the very fact of His being wholly unknown, and not being, both is super-essentially, and is known above mind.⁵²

God as the cause of everything that can be thought or that is (including all thinking and being) is not an equal and opposite principle relative to knowing. Denys uses the interplay between light and darkness but reverses the standard association between God and light, animating darkness instead, with the result that God encompasses knowing both by anticipating and creating it and by hiding from it and escaping it. The causal responsibility of God for creation is the second proposition of Letter I.

The second proposition is that both knowing and the objects of knowing belong to the category of creation. Even the ideas which can only be perceived intelligibly such as those treated in DN, "Good," "Being," "Life," "Wisdom," and "Power" are created by God as are all material things which we perceive by the senses. This common categorization of intelligible and sensible things does not dissolve the distinctions among created things. Denys wants to be clear that all things, visible and invisible, ephemeral

⁵² "Καὶ εἴ τις ἰδὼν θεὸν συνῆκεν, ὃ εἶδεν, οὐκ αὐτὸν ἐώρακεν, ἀλλὰ τι τῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινωσκομένων· αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ οὐσίαν ὑπεριδρυμένος, αὐτῷ τῷ καθόλου μὴ γινώσκεσθαι μηδὲ εἶναι, καὶ ἔστιν ὑπερουσίως καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκεται." Ibid.

and eternal, are all creatures relative to God. Thus Denys insists that while CH treats the intelligible hierarchies of angels and EH treats the sensible hierarchies of the human community, nevertheless both of these arrangements alike are imitations of God. As the highest angel has no natural relation to God, so the intelligible divine names are as incapable of defining or representing God as are the sensible symbols found in scripture.

The third proposition identified in Letter I is that while there is a fundamental separation between God and everything that is caused by God, there is a continuum on which created things belong *qua* created things such that God's relation to each is distinct. This concept is present in Denys' distinction between light and much light, varied knowledge and much varied knowledge: "Varied knowledge, and especially much varied knowledge, makes the Agnosia to vanish"⁵³ It is an oft repeated principle of the CD and programmatic of the *Letters* specifically that God is better represented by dissimilar manifestations than by similar ones. While no image can represent God adequately a similar image is more likely to cause confusion between the image and God whereas a dissimilar image will "shock" the one who contemplates it to acknowledge that God is only represented faintly by the dissimilar image, as by hyperbole.⁵⁴

The fourth proposition of Letter I is the ontological or epistemological identity of thought and being. We have seen that Denys speaks of God in apposition as above mind and above essence, as wholly unknown and beyond being: "[God] both is superessentially, and is above mind".⁵⁵ The Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides first

⁵³“ τὴν ἀγνωσίαν ἀφανίζουσιν αἱ γνώσεις, καὶ μᾶλλον αἱ πολλαὶ γνώσεις.” Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., CH II.5.144D.

⁵⁵ “καὶ ἔστιν ὑπερουσίως καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκεται.” The second half of Letter I is replete with the equation by apposition: “And, if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him, but some of His creatures that are existing and known. But He Himself, highly established above mind,

articulated the logic of this equation of thought and being which has characterized western philosophy through to modern times: “For you could not know that which is not, for it is impossible, nor express it; for the same thing is for thinking and for being”⁵⁶ Perl helpfully articulates the force of Parmenides’ assertion:

It would be incoherent even to postulate an unintelligible being, a being that cannot be thought, for to do so would already be to think such a being. Parmenides’ fragment thus brings to light the obvious but vital point that to think being, that which is, is already to presuppose its intelligibility. To think being is to think it as *thinkable*. Indeed, it follows not merely that being and intelligibility are coextensive, as Parmenides plainly asserts, but that intelligibility is the very meaning of being: by *being* we can only mean ‘what is there for thought,’ for since thought cannot exist for anything else, ‘anything else’ is mere empty noise – in short, nothing (τό μὴ εἶναι).⁵⁷

Parmenides’ defines being as that which is there for thought, and he asserts that thinking is defined by that which is.

2.3 The Ecstasy of Unknowing

Taken together, these four propositions recollected in Letter I summarize the teaching of MT that Dionysian ἀγνώσια (unknowing) and θέωσις (union with God) are an ecstasy of the mind. We contemplate God positively by thoughts predicating God according to created things. Although such contemplation confirms that God exceeds created things as the creative cause of all things, nonetheless our thinking of God remains

and above essence, by the very fact of His being wholly unknown, and not being, but is superessentially, and is known above mind. And the all-perfect Agnosia, in its superior sense, is a knowledge of Him, Who is above all known things.” (“Καὶ εἴ τις ἰδὼν θεὸν συνήκεν, ὃ εἶδεν, οὐκ αὐτὸν ἑώρακεν, ἀλλὰ τι τῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινωσκομένων· αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ οὐσίαν ὑπεριδρυμένος, αὐτῷ τῷ καθόλου μὴ γινώσκεσθαι μηδὲ εἶναι, καὶ ἔστιν ὑπερουσίως καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκειται. Καὶ ἡ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον παντελής ἀγνώσια γινώσις ἐστὶ τοῦ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ γινωσκόμενα.”) Denys, *Letters*, I.1065A.

⁵⁶ “οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ εἶναι (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν)/οὔτε φράσαις. τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι.” Parmenides, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 1:231.

⁵⁷ Perl, *Theophany*, 6.

without content. It is necessary then to deny every thought its reference to God, “in a superlative, but not in a defective sense”.⁵⁸ Ἀγνωσία is achieved by extracting every thought from the contemplation of God together with the thought of thinking itself, or νοῦς (mind). In this way, the whole structure of reality collapses. Even that by which the whole structure of reality is unfolded and enfolded – the mind – is denied of God as unequal to the divine cause of mind. Thus contemplation passes beyond itself in a movement of ontological ecstasy into what Denys calls ἀγνωσία and σκότος (darkness) which is the hiding place of God: “and His pre-eminent darkness is both concealed by every light, and is hidden from every knowledge”.

Ἀγνωσία brings us to the point of this ontological ecstasy beyond the mind and beyond the world of known beings which the mind contains: to the σκότος which is “invisible by light.”⁵⁹ This is the “gloom of the *Agnosia*”⁶⁰ which MT describes as “the place where [God] stood.”⁶¹ This ‘place’ of ecstasy means something different than the merely negative and privative value of that which lacks the stuff of thought. It is the place of divine presence precisely because the mind arrives there by emptying itself of every thought and essence. The difference is that ἀπόφασις implies the activity of denying that which is known by κατάφασις, whereas sheer ignorance implies only a lack or absence of knowing. Ἀπόφασις imitates the ecstatic activity of God by which God brings objects of thought into being. This is because by ἀπόφασις the mind goes beyond the activity of thought and being which is the mind. This activity is, then, no mere

⁵⁸ “Ταῦτα ὑπεροχικῶς, ἀλλὰ μὴ κατὰ στέρησιν ἐκλαβὼν ἀπόφησον ὑπεραληθῶς”. Denys, *Letters*, I.1065A.

⁵⁹ “Τὸ σκότος ἀφανὲς γίνεται τῷ φωτί”. Ibid.

⁶⁰ “τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας”. Ibid., MT, I.3.1001A.

⁶¹ “τὸν τόπον, οὗ ἔστη”. Ibid.

imitation but a real union between God and that which is other than God. This is why and how ἀγνωσία arrives at the place where God is.

The superlative nature of the mind's process of abstraction or denial is significant. It means that our best knowledge of God is our most thorough denial of our knowledge of God – our most thorough ignorance. For Denys, any claim of positive knowledge concerning God indicates confusion on the part of the supposed knower because the content of positive knowledge can only be knowledge of a creature.

Implied in this super-essential ecstasy of the mind to that which is beyond thought and being is that ἀγνωσία is the contemplation of God by means of that which is not God yet which is effected or generated by God. Letter I does not specify the exact relation between God and that which is, and is thought. However, Denys does indicate in this letter that the παντελής ἀγνωσία (all-perfect *Agnosia*) has God as its end. Also, Denys' use of the genitive of source shows that their existence and being known is generated by God: “τι τῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινωσκομένων” (“[they are] some of His creatures that are existing and known”).⁶² Denys is not being specific about what he is referring to as “οὐκ αὐτὸν” (“not [God]”) but as “τι τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινωσκομένων” (“some of his creatures that are existing and known” or “something of his which has being and is knowable.”)⁶³ The ambiguity allows that that which is ‘not God’ might refer either to the relation of the Father to the Son or to the relation of God to creation; the formula can function in terms of θεολογία (“theology” – the Trinitarian relation of the Godhead)⁶⁴ or

⁶² Parker takes some license in his use of the word “creatures.” Denys, *Letters*, I.1065A.

⁶³ Translations by Parker and Luibheid, respectively. *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Lampe, 627.

in terms of οικονομία (economy – the relation between God and creation).⁶⁵ Denys’ framing of this matter does not confine him to one set of relations or another; the notion of God as source is sufficiently general that it may pertain to the relations of either theology or of the divine economy. At this point in Letter I, Denys is not restricting the discussion to one or the other of these modes.

Things existing and known have their source and end in God, but we still do not know *how* that is. This will be the question with which Letter II opens. Are existing and known things generated naturally, like the eternally begotten Word of God who becomes incarnate as a human being? Or are they created by a free act of God, like the world that is brought into being from nothing by divine command? In Letter I Denys introduces God as that which is beyond thought and being, inaccessible to thought and being, which is nevertheless the source and perfection of all thought and being. Still, even this bare assertion begs the question of “how” God and that which is not God are related.⁶⁶

Not in spite of this stark separation between God and knowing and the content of knowing but because of it, Denys claims that unknowing (ἀγνοσία) with respect to God is itself unification with God. Among the instances of union with God which feature in the *Letters*, this treatment of the union by unknowing, in Letter I, is the most spare. For that reason Letter I is especially helpful as a paradigm for seeing the same union and simultaneous distinction between God and that which is not God, as it occurs in the subsequent letters. The elements of this “all-perfect *Agnosia*, in its superior sense” are: the substance of that which is known and unknown, the power of knowing itself, and the

⁶⁵ Lampe, 941.

⁶⁶ Denys, *Letters*, II.1065B.

activity of unknowing with respect to God, which is real union with God. Denys refers to God by means of that which we know and by means of knowing itself, but he does so precisely denying that this stuff of cognition has any relation to God. Denys does not merely locate God beyond all, as ontologically different than all. By thinking all that is, and by his very thinking itself, Denys simultaneously acknowledges God as cause of all yet denies that there is any knowledge of the divine substance. Thus, knowing capitulates by exceeding itself in the contemplation of God. Denys' most perfect knowledge of God is that unknowing whereby the mind goes outside itself in the contemplation of the God which generates that which is other than God.

CHAPTER 3 LETTERS II-IV

3.1 God as Thearchy

Letters I and II form the hinge between Denys' negative and affirmative theologies in the *Letters*. The apposition of these letters provides us with Denys' answer to the question of the relation between God and that which is not God. Letter II describes the God beyond knowing which we encountered in Letter I, as "the very Actuality of the Good-making and God-making gift, and the inimitable imitation of the super-divine and super-good (gift), by aid of which we are deified and made good."⁶⁷ Letter I presents us with a definition of God as precisely that which is beyond all definition, beyond thought and being. For Denys, this non-definition of negative theology is the most accurate contemplation of God that can be had because it actively engages the mind in an ecstasy of itself, and this very activity is an imitation of God. Nevertheless, the fact of that which is not God and the mind which denies itself in the contemplation of God – moves Gaius to inquire into the relation between God and that which is not God. If the mind arrives at union with God by the negative way of denying God's existence as any of the objects of mind including the denial that God is mind itself, then what is God's relation to that which is not God? Or, in the words of Gaius: "How is He, Who is beyond all, both above source of Divinity and above source of Good?"⁶⁸

3.2 Letter II: Super-source of Every Source

In Letter II Denys offers his answer to the very ancient and vexed question of how anything other than perfect simplicity can come from the divine unity. Hathaway has

⁶⁷ Denys, *Letters*, II.1069A.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1065B.

proposed that the unifying logic of Denys' *Letters* is that of the nine hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides* concerning the One.⁶⁹ Whether by coincidence or design, the initial letters and the initial hypotheses of the *Parmenides* share deep thematic links. Proclus' commentary on the *Parmenides* only extends to the first of the nine hypotheses, so Hathaway is constrained to the Platonic text in order to draw most of his connections between the *Letters* and that text. In the first hypothesis of the dialogue, Parmenides poses the question: "If [the one] is one, the one would not be many, would it?"⁷⁰ The second hypothesis asks, conversely: "If one is, we are saying, aren't we, that we must agree on the consequences for it, whatever they happen to be?"⁷¹ Commenting on Denys' approach to the question of the relation of the Neoplatonic One to the multiplicity of human experience and the development of this question in the thought of Plotinus and Proclus, Louth gives a succinct analysis:

Fundamental to Plotinus is his desire to relate the One and the many: the deepest problems in Plotinus's philosophy are due to the fact that any movement from the One takes one immediately to the many. Nevertheless Plotinus seeks to disguise the abruptness of this move by various mediating devices, especially perhaps that of distinguishing between the One and the First Number, and the One as the source of everything else, including number. For Proclus this very problem of mediation is the hinge of his philosophy: and because to relate two things is to invoke a third that mediates, his philosophy comes to abound in triads... These triads are not a static classification, but express a movement that pulsates through everything, a movement expressed in the triad: rest, procession, return. Reality, arranged in levels that mediate and relate one to another, takes the form of 'hierarchies' (the term is Denys's, but the concept is there in Proclus). These hierarchies express the graded levels of reality, all of which link up with one another through a cosmic sympathy that embraces the whole.⁷²

⁶⁹ Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, 99-101.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Parmenides*, 137.c.4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 142.b.3.

⁷² Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 13.

Here Louth explains that implicit in any relation between one and another is a third term, being the relation itself. On this point, Letter II makes reference to the God-making δῶρον (gift) that enables what is not God to become united with God. In an implicit way, we have already seen the Trinity in Letter I: in God as beyond knowing, in the mind which contemplates God unknowingly, and in the activity of unknowing. However, this consideration of God as Trinity becomes explicit in Letter II, with Denys' answer to the question on how God is related to that which is not God.

I argue that in Letters II-IV Denys introduces the Persons of the Trinity to his correspondence with Gaius. Taken together, Letters I-IV are a kind of catechesis for the monk on God according to the common and the distinct names, as Denys sometimes categorizes the divine names in DN. On this reading, Letter II introduces God the Father, the ἀρχή (source) of God and Good, of every divine imitation and every good participation. Twice in this letter Denys refers to the θεαρχία (Thearchy) by which term he frequently calls the Godhead or the Trinity.

We have seen that a kind of hierarchy is implied even in the activity of contemplating God beyond thought and being. This unknowing contemplation involved God, the unknowing contemplation of God by that which is not God, and the activity of unknowing itself. Even in this moment of perfect union between God and that which is not God, the hierarchical elements of which the union is comprised remain perfectly distinct. This indicates the way in which hierarchy collapses in achieving union between God and humanity, as we shall consider this in the three triads of letters which follow Letter I, beginning with Letters II-IV.

Golitzin has submitted that “the first five epistles of the Dionysian corpus function as a kind of chiasm which helps complete the thought of the Mystical Theology.”⁷³ He reads Letter I, as we do also, to be a recapitulation of the darkness of unknowing at which is the culminating moment of Denys’ treatises. Golitzin says that Letter V is ultimately a return to this same moment, although in a modified way. This “punchline” and center of these five letters (I-V) is, for Golitzin the Incarnation which Denys introduces in Letter III. This interpretation has much to recommend it, but it does not take in the remaining five letters (VI-X) to show how the unknowing union between God and humanity in MT and in Letter I is realized three times over in the subsequent three triads of letters.

The key to this interpretation is the hierarchical pattern by which the *Letters* are organized. Denys shows how the difference between divinity and humanity is acknowledged and overcome in a real way, by hierarchical mediation, which does not confuse either term. These hierarchical structures consist of: the Thearchy (Letters II-IV), the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Letters V-VII), and finally the celestial hierarchy (Letters VIII-X) in which the human soul can be raised to intelligible imitations of and participations in the Good, even in the circumstance of daily life. In each of these triads of letters, hierarchy defines the terms that are to be unified, and the hierarchical framework collapses in the real union that is achieved between those terms by the mediation of hierarchy.

⁷³ Golitzin, “Revisiting the ‘Sudden’: Epistle III in the Corpus Dionysiacum,” 483.

Letter II introduces the first triad of letters by referring to the One beyond knowing (of Letter I) twice as “beyond Thearchy” (“ὐπὲρ θεαρχίαν”).⁷⁴ Over the course of Letters II-IV we will see that the Thearchy makes it possible for human beings to imitate and participate in God. The Persons of the Trinitarian hierarchy achieve a real union between God and that which is not God: created human beings. As stated above, Letter III will introduce the Incarnation of God which is an assertion of a perfect union between divinity and humanity. Following from this, Letter IV will show how the realization of Jesus’ divinity and humanity by other human beings is itself a participation and an imitation in the life of God. However, Letter II makes it plain that God is beyond any imitation of God or any participation in God: “He is beyond source of Divinity (“Thearchy”) and source of Goodness, in so far as He is inimitable, and not to be retained – excels the imitations and retentions, and the things which are imitated and those participating.”⁷⁵ Denys’ insistence on God’s distinction as the source of the Trinitarian hierarchy by which we are united with God is another way of talking about God as the Father of God the Son and as the source of God the Holy Spirit. That is to say, Denys’ insistence in Letter II that God is beyond Thearchy shows that there is perfect distinction even in the perfect union that is achieved between God and humanity in the life of the Trinity.

3.3 Letter III: Divinity Hidden in the Manifestation of Christ

Denys shares with the Neoplatonic tradition an understanding that the whole created order, sensible and intelligible, manifests its divine source everywhere by greater

⁷⁴ Denys, *Letters*, II.1065B.

⁷⁵ Denys, *Letters*, II.1069A.

or lesser degrees. The world is a cosmic theophany where God is perceived as immanent and transcendent in each instance. Perl concludes his monograph, *Theophany*, by quoting Denys' third letter to illustrate that the doctrine of the Incarnation does not replace but rather illuminates the Neoplatonic conception of God as creative source, and thus the world as divine manifestation.

Dionysius understands the incarnation in terms of the Neoplatonic metaphysics of procession and reversion. But this need not mean that the incarnation is merely another procession, additional to and parallel with the universal, creative procession of God to all things and all things to God. Rather Dionysius' discussion of the incarnation suggests that the whole of being, as theophany, is to be understood in incarnational terms and that God-incarnate, as the 'principle and perfection of all hierarchies' (EH I.2, 373B), is the fullness of reality itself.⁷⁶

The Incarnation is the express assertion of the claim that the infinite is manifest in finite being. The incomprehensibility of God is hyperbolized and, in the same moment, this incomprehensibility is thoroughly overturned by the eminent manifestation of God in human substance. As Denys writes: "But, He is hidden, even after the manifestation, or to speak more divinely, even in the manifestation."⁷⁷

In the Incarnation, our sole knowledge of God – the paradoxical ἀγνωσία – is hyperbolized by the ineffable condescension of God having taken substance as a man.

Denys opens Letter III as follows:

Sudden is that which, contrary to expectation, and out of the, as yet, unmanifest, is brought into the manifest. But with regard to Christ's love of man, I think that the Word of God suggests even this, that the

⁷⁶ Perl, *Theophany*, 109.

⁷⁷ "Κρύφιος δέ ἐστι καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἔκφανσιν ἢ, ἵνα τὸ θεϊότερον εἴπω, καὶ ἐν τῇ ἐκφάνσει." Denys, *Letters*, III.1069B.

Superessential proceeded forth out of the hidden, into the manifestation amongst us, by having taken substance as man.⁷⁸

Letter III offers a new answer to the earlier question of Letter II which I interpreted as asking, effectively: ‘How is God related to that which is not God?’ The answer of Letter II was that God is known to the mind as above the mind and as its source, by means of the mind’s ἀγνωσία. The only way in which the mind is united with God is by the purification of every object of thought and of the mind itself – that δῶρον (gift) by which God knows himself. This rendering of the mind as δῶρον describes the relation of the Trinitarian Persons: the relation of the Father giving himself completely and freely in begetting the Son (the ‘mind’ or the Word of God), and the relation of the Son giving himself in love for the Father. It also describes God’s relation to creation as giver of a gift and the human soul’s reception of creation as gift of God (via kataphatic theology), as well as the soul’s ascent to God by acknowledging God’s difference from the gift, (via apophatic theology). Letter III offers another response to the same question of Letter II. In light of the Incarnation, the δῶρον of God the Son and the δῶρον of the mind and the whole of creation which it contains are collapsed in the same “gift” of the God-man, Jesus Christ. In Letters I and II we contemplated God as beyond every substance, and thus we denied God by every substance, but in Letter III we are met with the manifestation of God *in* substance. God is manifest in the Incarnation, not only as the cause of a particular being, but God-incarnate condescends to the whole of creation in a human way. Bearing in mind Parmenides’ principle of the coextension of thought and being, the human soul contains the whole created order by her capacity to know

⁷⁸ ““Ἐξαίφνης’ ἐστὶ τὸ παρ’ ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐκ τοῦ τέως ἀφανοῦς εἰς τὸ ἐκφανές ἐξαγόμενον. Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν φιλανθρωπίας καὶ τοῦτο οἶμαι τὴν θεολογίαν αἰνίττεσθαι, τὸ ἐκ τοῦ κρυφίου τὸν ὑπερούσιον εἰς τὴν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἐμφάνειαν ἀνθρωπικῶς οὐσιωθέντα προεληλυθέναι.” Ibid.

everything that exists, and so the Incarnation of God in human substance establishes an ontological union between God and the whole of creation, not just one species within the created order.

Perl says that the union of divine and human substance revealed in the Incarnation is perfectly consonant with the union that is achieved in ἀγνωσία by means of philosophically separating God from every substance and every object of knowledge. The soul, along with the world which the soul contains and by which the soul denies God, manifests God and is theophanic. This reality is expressed most fully in the Incarnation. God is revealed by “having taken substance as a man (ἀνθρωπικῶς οὐσιωθέντα).”⁷⁹ Because of the Incarnation the infinite is revealed in finitude without being defined whatsoever in itself. Rather, by the ineffable condescension of divinity in manifestation, God confounds the one certainty we held concerning the divine, namely unknowability itself.

On account of the Incarnation, God is known both as the cause of creation (standing above and beyond it) and also known in a substantial way. God the Father is given in God the Son substantially, in accordance with the divine nature. The different approaches to God by kataphatic and apophatic theologies find a certain resolution in the contemplation of Christ, even as both ways are also confounded by the Incarnation. In Letter III Denys introduces the term κατὰ Χριστὸν φιλανθρωπία (Christ’s love of man or Christ’s philanthropy) as the basis of all affirmative knowledge of God.⁸⁰ The self-emptying philanthropy in the Incarnation and the philosophical ecstasy of the soul in the

⁷⁹ Denys, *Letters*, III.1069B.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

unknowing knowledge of God are, in a sense, reciprocal to one another. The apophatic way of philosophy and the kataphatic way of divine philanthropy correspond as two reciprocal motions in a kind of *φιλία* (friendship) between God and humanity. In Letter III the two ways of understanding the divine paternity, as the source of natural union among the Trinitarian Persons and as the source of creation, converge in the Incarnation.

The philanthropic Incarnation of God demonstrates an ecstasy of the divine substance in the direction opposite to our philosophical ecstasy by which we deny all known substance in pursuit of unknowing union with God. Taking together these “*ἐν ἀλλήλαις χωρήσεις*” (“mutual penetrations”),⁸¹ Louth comments, “The soul in ecstasy meets God’s ecstatic love for herself.”⁸² It is not out of place to speak of love – even an erotic love – in connection with these ecstatic movements. Of course, another version of the word “love” is inseparable from both “*φιλοσοφία*” (“philosophy”) and “*φιλανθρωπία*” (“philanthropy”), and Denys does not hesitate to use different synonyms for a common thing, particularly the word love.⁸³ For Denys, ecstasy is an essential quality of divine love.⁸⁴ Denys defines love as a power that spans every ontological division of nature, which is ever uniting together disparate elements regardless of the divisions between them:

Love, whether we speak of Divine, or Angelic, or intelligent, or psychical, or physical, let us regard as a certain unifying and combining power, moving the superior to forethought for the inferior, and the equals to a

⁸¹ Denys, DN, IV.2.696B.

⁸² Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 170.

⁸³ Denys, DN IV.11.708C.

⁸⁴ “*Ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἐκστατικὸς ὁ θεῖος ἔρω*ς” (“But divine love is extatic”). Ibid. IV.13.712A.

mutual fellowship, and lastly, the inferior to respect towards the higher and superior.⁸⁵

This unifying power of love is the common motivation for both the philosophical desire to know God, which is achieved in unknowing, and the philanthropic love of God for human beings, which is achieved in the Incarnation that renders God no less incomprehensible.

Denys insists that God remains hidden even in the manifestation "... and the mystery with respect to Him has been reached by no word nor mind, but even when spoken, remains unsaid, and when conceived unknown."⁸⁶ When Denys reports the doctrine of the Incarnation as the Superessential proceeding forth out of the hidden, into the manifestation among us, by having taken substance as man, it is helpful to bear in mind Proclus' proposition concerning the descent of the particular soul into temporal process, or becoming (*γένεσιν*), that it descends entire, "there is no part of it which remains above and a part which descends"⁸⁷. It is crucially important that in the Incarnation nothing is added to Jesus' Person that is not natural to man. For the Incarnation to constitute an ontological union between divine and human natures there can be nothing added to or taken away from Jesus' human nature. Does this deny that Christ has two natures? Not at all – rather, this is what must be said in order to maintain the doctrine of Christ's two natures.

⁸⁵ "Τὸν ἔρωτα, εἴτε θεῖον εἴτε ἀγγελικὸν εἴτε νοερὸν εἴτε ψυχικὸν εἴτε φυσικὸν εἴποιμεν, ἐνωτικὴν τινα καὶ συγκρατικὴν ἐννοήσωμεν δύναμιν τὰ μὲν ὑπέρτερα κινουῦσαν ἐπὶ πρόνοιαν τῶν καταδεεστέρων, τὰ δὲ ὁμόστοιχα πάλιν εἰς κοινωνικὴν ἀλληλουχίαν καὶ ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τὰ ὑφειμένα πρὸς τὴν τῶν κρειτόνων καὶ ὑπερκειμένων ἐπιστροφὴν." Ibid. IV.15.713B.

⁸⁶ "καὶ οὐδενὶ λόγῳ οὔτε νῶ τὸ κατ' αὐτὸν ἐξῆκται μυστήριον, ἀλλὰ καὶ λεγόμενον ἄρρητον μένει καὶ νοούμενον ἄγνωστον". Denys, *Letters*, III.1069B.

⁸⁷ "καὶ οὐ τὸ μὲν αὐτῆς ἄνω μένει, τὸ δὲ κάτεισιν". Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Proposition 211.

It is no contradiction that Jesus' divine nature adds nothing to his human nature. As was made clear in Denys' first letter: God is known most truly by unknowing. What then of divinity could be added to the human nature of God incarnate? In Letter II we came to contemplate the fatherhood of God: this is precisely what is distinguished from the Person of the Son who takes on human substance. The divinity of God the Son is not separated from him in the Incarnation, nor does it add anything to his human nature. Rather, both human and divine natures remain perfectly distinct even as they are perfectly united.

What does the Incarnation make manifest? Both the divine nature in human substance and also human nature *par excellence*. Denys relays this tension as it is “hymned” (ὑμνηται) in Hierotheus' book, *Θεολογικὰς αὐτοῦ στοιχειώσεις* (*The Elements of Theology*):

Hence, since through love towards man, He has come even to nature, and really became substantial, and the Super-God lived as Man (may He be merciful with regard to the things we are celebrating, which are beyond mind and expression), and in these He has the supernatural and super-substantial, not only in so far as He communicated with us without alteration and without confusion, suffering no loss as regards His superfulness, from His unutterable emptying of Himself – but also, because the newest of all new things, He was in our physical condition super-physical – in things substantial, super-substantial, excelling all the things – of us – from us – above us.⁸⁸

In the Incarnation, God is revealed in Jesus by his humanity. It is not by overthrowing human nature that divinity is revealed among us but by

⁸⁸“ Ὅθεν ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἕως φύσεως ὑπὲρ φιλανθρωπίας ἐλήλυθε καὶ ἀληθῶς οὐσιώθη καὶ ἀνὴρ ὁ ὑπέρθεος ἐχρημάτισεν, ἴλεω δὲ εἶη πρὸς ἡμῶν τὰ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ λόγον ὑμνούμενα, κὰν τούτοις ἔχει τὸ ὑπερφυῆς καὶ ὑπερούσιον, οὐ μόνον ἢ ἀναλλοιώτως ἡμῖν καὶ ἀσυγχύτως κεκοινωνήκε μηδὲν πεπονθῶς εἰς τὸ ὑπερπλήρες αὐτοῦ πρὸς τῆς ἀφθέγκτου κενώσεως, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ τὸ πάντων καινῶν καινότατον ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἡμῶν ὑπερφυῆς ἦν ἐν τοῖς κατ' οὐσίαν ὑπερούσιος πάντα τὰ ἡμῶν ἐξ ἡμῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ὑπερέχων.”
Denys, DN, II.10.648D.

condescending to it. The Incarnation reveals human nature for what it most truly is: theophany.

The word “Sudden” opens Letter III conspicuously. It indicates that the scope of Letter III is focused on the objective fact of the Incarnation itself, independent of any subjective recognition. While Letter III treats the event of God’s condescension in temporal process, Letter IV will treat the way in which God is actively united with human beings, but Letter III has made clear that the Incarnation changes no aspect of either the human or the divine natures, revealing them most truly for what they are: the divine nature as hyperbolically unknown (*ἀγνωσία*) and the human nature as a revelation of God.

3.4 Letter IV: Human and Divine Activity

In Letter III Denys asserts that God and man are perfectly united in the person of Jesus, while maintaining that his divine and human natures remain perfectly distinguished. This fact of a real union and perfect distinction of divinity and humanity in the Incarnation will be the basis for Denys’ hierarchical understanding of the world. As the core of this hierarchically structured world, the Incarnation constitutes a sympathy, in the literal sense, between divine and human natures. This sympathy between God and creation is not derived naturally but is instituted through the *θεανδρικήν ἐνέργειαν* (human and divine activity) of Jesus. That the divine and human natures are perfectly united and distinguished in the activity of his Person makes it possible for human beings to be actively united with God. In Letter IV, Denys shows how human nature is perfected in an active union of divine and human natures. This

union is signified by the “theandric” activities of Jesus, and insofar as these miraculous signs of Jesus inspire human beings to worship God they also manifest the Holy Spirit.

In DN II, Denys differentiates between those names which can be referred to all of the Trinitarian Persons in common and those names which distinctively describe the relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, the condescension of God to human substance, and the assumption of our nature in God which is accomplished by the Incarnation, constitutes another distinction: “Further, there is another distinction from the goodly work of God towards us, in that the superessential Word was invested with being among us – from us – wholly and truly, and did suffer whatever things are choice and pre-eminent in His human work of God.”⁸⁹ The focus of Letter IV is on this shift between Denys’ treatment of the contemplation of God according to the distinctive names of the Trinity, and it transitions to the contemplation of God incarnate: God’s relation to himself and God’s relation to humankind – what is normally categorized as *θεολογία* “theology” and *οικονομία* “economy”.⁹⁰ In this letter Denys shows how, in Christ, the full realization of human substance is thoroughly united with the Trinitarian life of God.

We have already seen in Letter III that God condescends to human substance entirely in the Incarnation. This contemplation of God as having taken substance as a man is evocative of the greatest mystery of negative theology because the very *ἄγνωσία* (unknowing) by which we truly know God is augmented whereas, in Jesus, God himself

⁸⁹ “Διακρίνεται δὲ τῆς ἀγαθοπρεποῦς εἰς ἡμᾶς θεουργίας τὸ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἐξ ἡμῶν ὀλικῶς καὶ ἀληθῶς οὐσιωθῆναι τὸν ὑπερούσιον λόγον καὶ δρᾶσαι καὶ παθεῖν, ὅσα τῆς ἀνθρωπικῆς αὐτοῦ θεουργίας ἐστὶν ἔκκριτα καὶ ἐξαιρέτα.” Denys, DN, II.6.644C.

⁹⁰ Lampe, 627, 941.

becomes patently knowable. In Letter IV Denys reiterates this point and extends it: “And it is nothing less, the ever Superessential, super-full of super-essentiality, disregards the excess of this, and having come truly into substance, took substance above substance, and above man works the things of man.”⁹¹ In Letter III, the Incarnation is the expression of God’s infinity precisely in assuming finite substance, and on account of this paradox God is hidden “even in the manifestation.” In Letter IV we see the full realization of that definition.

According to the 451 Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon the person of Christ is defined as constituting a perfect union of human and divine natures in perfect distinction. Denys writes in Chalcedonian terms about union and distinction between man and God throughout the CD: “unconfusedly” (ἀσύγχυτως),⁹² “unchangeably” (ἀτρέπτως),⁹³ “indivisibly” (ἀδιαίρετως),⁹⁴ and “ἀχωρίστως” (inseparably).⁹⁵ This definition insists that the integrity of both divine and human nature is preserved entirely in the Incarnation.

Denys says that God “having come truly into substance, took substance above substance” (εἰς οὐσίαν ἀληθῶς ἐλθὼν ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν οὐσιώθη) and also that God “above man works the things of man” (“ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου”).⁹⁶ The superessential (ὑπερούσιος) takes human form and performs human activities. Denys has

⁹¹ “Ἔστι δὲ οὐδὲν ἦττον ὑπὲρ οὐσιότητος ὑπερπλήρης ὁ αἰὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἀμέλει τῇ ταύτης περιουσία, καὶ εἰς οὐσίαν ἀληθῶς ἐλθὼν ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν οὐσιώθη καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου.” Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072B.

⁹² *Ibid.*, DN I.4, II.5, II.10, IV.2, IV.7, V.7, VIII.5, XI.2; CH XI.2; EH III. 11, III.13, V.7

⁹³ *Ibid.*, DN IX.4; CH XIII.4; EH VII.1, MT I.1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, DN VIII.5, XI.2; EH III.12.

⁹⁵ The fourth Chalcedonian adverb, ἀχωρίστως (usually translated “inseparably”) does not occur in CD.

⁹⁶ “And it is nothing less, the ever Superessential, super-full of super-essentiality, disregards the excess of this, and having come truly into substance, took substance above substance, and above man works the things of man. Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072B.

already said that, in Jesus, God and man (together with the whole of nature) are completely assumed in God in a substantial way. What more could be signified by saying that this union is evidenced by Denys' reference to “καινήν τινα τὴν θεανδρικήν ἐνέργειαν” (“a certain new divine-human energy”)⁹⁷ of God having become man?

Maximus explains that Denys is making a distinction between the power (δύναμις) or capacity of a substance and its activity (ἐνέργεια) in reference to the union of divine and human substance and the union of divine and human activity of Jesus.

The only valid proof that this ‘essence’ is present in its ‘entirety,’ moreover, is its natural, constitutive power, which one would not be mistaken in calling a ‘natural energy,’ properly and primarily characteristic of the nature in question, since it is the most generic motion constitutive of a species, and contains every property that naturally belongs to essence, apart from which there is only nonbeing, ‘since only that which has absolutely no being whatsoever’ – according to that great teacher – ‘has neither motion nor existence.’⁹⁸

Maximus comments that Denys understands the activities of Jesus as the sole evidence we have in support of the remarkable claim that God and man are perfectly united in Christ. Every substance has its own “natural, constitutive power” (“φύσιν αὐτῆς συστατικὴ δύναμις”). Any given nature – any species – is defined by its “natural energy” (“φυσικὴν ἐνέργειαν”) which is the activity that is most generic to the nature. The power of a nature is its potential to realize that activity, and activity is the realization of that potential in fact.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1072C

⁹⁸ “ἥς μόνη τε καὶ ἀληθὴς ἐστὶν ἀπόδειξις ἢ κατὰ φύσιν αὐτῆς συστατικὴ δύναμις, ἣν οὐκ ἂν τις ἀμάρτοι τῆς ἀληθείας ‘φυσικὴν’ φήσας ‘ἐνέργειαν,’ κυρίως τε καὶ πρώτως χαρακτηριστικὴν αὐτῆς, ὡς εἰδοποιὸν ὑπάρχουσιν κίνησιν γενικωτάτην πάσης τῆς φθσικῶς αὐτῇ προσούσης περιεκτικῆς ιδιότητος, ἥς χωρὶς μόνον ἐστὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν, ‘ὡς μόνου τοῦ μηδαμῶς ὄντος,’ κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν μέγαν διδάσκαλον, οὔτε κίνησιν οὔτε ὑπαρξιν ἔχοντος.” Maximus, *Ambigua* V.2.

Denys adopts from Aristotle a formula of the constitution of a substance according to these terms: “substance” (οὐσία), “power” (δύναμις), and “activity” (ἐνέργεια).⁹⁹ In the *Metaphysics*, after considering substance in reference to the accidents that depend on it,¹⁰⁰ Aristotle goes on to say that “substance” (οὐσία) can be also considered according to potency, or power, and complete reality, or activity.¹⁰¹ In their turn, power and activity can also be understood in several senses. The power, potency or capacity of a thing refers to the sense in which it is a source of change – either of change in something else or of change in itself in relation to something else *qua* other,¹⁰² “δυνατὸν γὰρ ἐστὶ καὶ τῷ ἔχειν αὐτὸ δύναμιν τοῦ παθεῖν καὶ τῷ ἄλλο ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ” (For a thing is ‘capable’ because it itself possesses the power of being acted upon, and also because something else has the power of being acted upon by it).¹⁰³ Potency, then, is either that which admits of change in a substance (or in one of its qualities, or in some other of its accidents), or it is that by which one substance effects change in another. Potency and impotency are closely related because impotency is simply the deficiency or privation of a substance’s power to act on something else or to be acted on by something else, relative to another substance. Privation can be spoken of in several ways.¹⁰⁴ The simple fact of privation in something, however, means that an existing thing may be less than it is naturally capable of being and yet it may still exist. The power of a substance is

⁹⁹ Sheldon-Williams shows how these Aristotelian terms are developed in Neoplatonism. Sheldon-Williams, “The pseudo-Dionysius,” 459.

¹⁰⁰ *Metaphysics* Z and H, and *Categories*

¹⁰¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ, 1045.b.35.

¹⁰² “ὅσαι δὲ πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ εἶδος, πᾶσαι ἀρχαί τινές εἰσι, καὶ πρὸς πρώτην μίαν λέγονται, ἢ ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ μεταβολῆς ἐν ἄλλῳ ἢ ἢ ἄλλο.” “But all potencies that conform to the same type are originative sources of some kind, and are called potencies in reference to one primary kind of potency, which is an originative source of change in another thing or in the thing itself *qua* other.” Ibid. 1046.a.10

¹⁰³ Ibid. 1046.a.20

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 1046.a.31-36.

the extent to which its nature may be diminished until that substance can no longer be classified as an instance of that species. This means that there is a difference between being and being well, and the range between which a substance may be or be well is its power or capacity (δύναμις).

The full realization of a substance's natural capacity is what Aristotle and Dionysius refer to as "activity" or "actuality" (ἐνέργεια).¹⁰⁵ A substance can be considered either according to its power or according to its activity: whereas power is observed in the thing which suffers or enacts a change, activity is observed in the end of things – the realization of its power and the completely undiminished nature. Aristotle says that a sculpture of Hermes is potentially in a block of wood. He illustrates what activity is by describing a particular rendering of Hermes which is so perfect that it is difficult to say whether the god is inside or outside the painting:¹⁰⁶ the "actuality" or "activity" is in the object toward which the artist is working all along.¹⁰⁷ "For the activity is the end, and the actuality is the activity; hence the term 'actuality' is derived from 'activity,' and tends to have the meaning of 'complete reality.'"¹⁰⁸ Implied in every substance (οὐσία) then is its threshold for privation up to the point that it ceases to exist according to its natural definition, that is, its power (δύναμις). And also implied in every substance is the

¹⁰⁵ "Actuality, then, is the existence of a thing not in the way which we express by 'potentiality,'" Aristotle says: "ἔστι δὲ ἐνέργεια τὸ ὑπάρχειν τὸ πρᾶγμα μὴ οὕτως ὥσπερ λέγομεν δυνάμει". Ibid. 1048.a.33.

¹⁰⁶ On the use of analogy to convey the meaning of what activity is: "δῆλον δ' ἐπὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα τῆ ἐπαγωγῆ ὁ βουλόμεθα λέγειν, καὶ οὐ δεῖ παντὸς ὅρον ζητεῖν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἀνάλογον συνορᾶν, ὅτι ὡς τὸ οἰκοδομοῦν πρὸς τὸ οἰκοδομικόν". ("Our meaning can be seen in the particular cases by induction, and we must not seek a definition of everything but be content to grasp the analogy.") Ibid., 1048.a.36.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 1050.a.20.

¹⁰⁸ "[T]ὸ γὰρ ἔργον τέλος, ἡ δὲ ἐνέργεια τὸ ἔργον, διὸ καὶ τοῦνομα ἐνέργεια λέγεται κατὰ τὸ ἔργον καὶ συντείνει πρὸς τὴν ἐντελέχειαν." Ibid. 1050a23.

full realization of its nature toward which the given substance ceaselessly moves until it is realized, that is, its activity (ἐνέργεια).

As God and man, Jesus' substance is both divine and human. "But we do not define the Lord Jesus, humanly, for He is not man only, (neither superessential nor man only), but truly man, He Who is pre-eminently a lover of man, the Super-essential, taking substance, above men and after men, from the substance of men."¹⁰⁹ Just as every nature is manifest in the exercise of its proper activity, Jesus' human and divine natures are both realized in a perfect union even as he carries out his work (ἔργον) in the finitude of temporal process. This moves Denys to expound the way in which Jesus worked the things of man above man:¹¹⁰ "not having done things Divine as God, nor things human as man, but exercising for us a certain new human and divine activity of God having become man."¹¹¹ Jesus is not God and man in such a way as only to appear to be an instance of divine or human nature. In Him both natures are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably. The Incarnation is not only the substantial ecstasy of God outside God (the mysterious condescension of God in self-emptying privation) but also God's assumption of all human substance into Himself. God is manifest in Jesus as the human subject who both suffers change and effects change in others. God is manifest in the realization of Jesus' human capacity.

¹⁰⁹ "Ἡμεῖς δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν οὐκ ἀνθρωπικῶς ἀφορίζομεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος μόνον —οὐδὲ ὑπερούσιος, εἰ ἄνθρωπος μόνον—, ἀλλ' ἄνθρωπος ἀληθῶς ὁ διαφερόντως φιλόανθρωπος, ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπους καὶ κατὰ ἀνθρώπους ἐκ τῆς ἀνθρώπων οὐσίας ὁ ὑπερούσιος οὐσιωμένος." Denys, *Letters*, IV. 1072A.

¹¹⁰ "ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνέργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου". Ibid., 1072B.

¹¹¹ "οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δράσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ, καινὴν τινα τὴν θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῖν πεπολιτευμένος." Ibid., 1072C.

We cannot speak of God the Trinity simply as a union of substance, power and activity, but we can nevertheless see the perfect union and distinction of the Trinitarian Persons reflected in the structure of created things. At several key points in CD, Denys shows how this structure runs through the whole of the created order, chiefly in the ranks of angels and demons and in his treatment of the first divine name “Good.” In CH XI, at the conclusion of Denys’ treatment of the celestial hierarchies in general and immediately before he proceeds to treat the specific ranks and orders of the angelic powers, he says that every intellectual being comprises substance (οὐσία), power (δύναμις), and activity (ἐνέργεια).¹¹² When Denys seeks to find out what evil is in an extended meditation of DN IV, he considers where it might belong within the created order and he begins his consideration with the fallen angels. Ultimately, however, he finds that if the demons are really evil, then evil would have to exist in some aspect of their nature – substance, power or activity.¹¹³ Denys uses this Aristotelian constitution of a given thing, as substance, power, and activity explicitly to describe the way in which angels and demons participate in the Good.¹¹⁴ At the very outset of his treatment of the Good Denys makes it very plain

¹¹² “ἀλλ’ ἐπειδὴ εἰς τρία διήρηται τῶ κατ’ αὐτοὺς ὑπερκοσμίῳ λόγῳ πάντες οἱ θεῖοι νόες, εἰς οὐσίαν καὶ δύναμιν καὶ ἐνέργειαν, ὅταν ἢ τινὰς αὐτῶν ἀπαρατηρήτως οὐρανίας οὐσίας ἢ οὐρανίας δυνάμεις ἀποκαλοῦμεν, αὐτοὺς περιφραστικῶς τοὺς περὶ ὧν ὁ λόγος ἐμφαίνειν ἡμᾶς οἰητέον ἐκ τῆς καθ’ ἕκαστον αὐτῶν οὐσίας ἢ δυνάμεως.” (“But, inasmuch as all the Divine Minds, by the supermundane description given of them, are distributed into three, - into essence, and power, and energy, - when we speak of them all, or some of them, indiscriminately, as Heavenly Beings or Heavenly Powers, we must consider that we manifest those about whom we speak in a general way, from their essence or power severally.”) Denys, CH, XI.2.284D.

¹¹³ “Ἐπειτα ἑαυτοῖς εἰσι κακοὶ ἢ ἐτέροις; Εἰ μὲν ἑαυτοῖς, καὶ φθείρουσιν ἑαυτούς, εἰ δὲ ἄλλοις, πῶς φθείροντες ἢ τί φθείροντες· οὐσίαν ἢ δύναμιν ἢ ἐνέργειαν;” ... “Ὅστε τὸ τοιοῦτον οὐ κακόν, ἀλλ’ ἐλλειπὲς ἀγαθόν. Τὸ γὰρ πάντῃ ἄμοιρον τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ οὔτε ἐν τοῖς οὐσιν ἔσται” (“Then, are they evil to themselves or to others? If to themselves, they also destroy themselves; but if to others, how destroying? – Essence, or power, or energy? ... so that, such a thing is not an evil, but a defective good, for that which has no part of the Good will not be among things which exist.”) DN IV.23.724C.

¹¹⁴ Aristotle is clear that the triadic constitution of things as substance, power, and activity applies both to rational and to non-rational beings, though these are distinguished in that rational beings are capable of producing one effect in a given context whereas rational souls are capable of contrary effects. Sheldon-Williams says that these terms are used by the middle Platonists in order to show how corruption is

that the nature of things as substance, power and activity is reflective of its source in God, and he says that everything bears this triadic mark in its intelligible existence:

For, even as our sun – not as calculating or choosing, but by its very being, enlightens all things able to partake of it light in their own degree – so too the Good – as superior to a sun, as the archetype par excellence, is above an obscure image – by Its very existence sends to all things that be, the rays of Its whole goodness, according to their capacity. By reason of these (rays) subsisted all the intelligible essences and powers and energies.¹¹⁵

Everything that participates in the Good is a substance that has a capacity for its privation and for its full realization – its activity (ἐνέργεια). It is in the realization of a substance’s capacity that the true nature of a substance is manifest. A substance *qua* substance, apart from the accidents that depend on it, is completely hidden. Similarly, as a pure potentiality a substance is not recognizable. A substance that is considered according to its perfect activity is observed precisely for the way in which it manifests its natural capacity. It is only to the degree that the potential of a substance is realized that its nature becomes manifest.

As the source of substance God is utterly beyond knowing. God’s unknowability is all the more intensified for us as he is manifest and simultaneously hidden in his condescension to human capacity. However, in the perfection of divine and human capacity – in Jesus’ activity, Denys says that God “ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου” (“above man works the things of man”).¹¹⁶ In the condescension of God to our capacity,

possible for creatures lower than God which are yet endowed with intelligence. Sheldon-Williams, “The reaction against Proclus,” 473-477.

¹¹⁵ “Καὶ γὰρ ὡσπερ ὁ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἥλιος οὐ λογιζόμενος ἢ προαιρούμενος, ἀλλ’ αὐτῷ τῷ εἶναι φωτίζει πάντα τὰ μετέχειν τοῦ φωτὸς αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὸν οἰκείον δυνάμενα λόγον, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τὰγαθὸν ὑπὲρ ἥλιον ὡς ὑπὲρ ἀμυδρὰν εἰκόνα τὸ ἐξηρημένως ἀρχέτυπον αὐτῇ τῇ ὑπάρξει πᾶσι τοῖς οὖσιν ἀναλόγως ἐφήσει τὰς τῆς ὅλης ἀγαθότητος ἀκτῖνας. Διὰ ταύτας ὑπέστησαν αἰ νοηταὶ καὶ νοεραὶ πᾶσαι καὶ οὐσίαι καὶ δυνάμεις καὶ ἐνέργειαι.” Dionysius the Areopagite, DN, IV.1.693B.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., *Letters*, IV.1072B.

human nature is united with God in a purely potential way. The infinite takes on the definition of human power, and “Εξάιφνης” (“On a sudden”)¹¹⁷ human nature, every nature, and nature itself is ontologically linked with God in the person of Jesus. Human and divine natures are suddenly related to one another. More than this, the union between God and humanity is mediated by Christ’s humanity and extended to the whole of creation as a function of Parmenides’ equation of thought and being. But, considered thus, this relation is still only potential. It is only perfected insofar as the divine and human natures are united in activity. Also, until the union between divine and human natures is realized actively, the union is completely imperceptible. All substance manifests God as its source, but God is not in any substance *qua* substance. The God-man Jesus manifests the Father in human form, but God is completely hidden in Jesus *qua* man. It is only the “θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν” (God-manly activity) of Jesus, which manifests God in human activity such that God incarnate is manifest *as* God incarnate. I will argue that the recognition of this manifestation is the work of the Holy Spirit.

As we have seen from Maximus, the natural activity (ἐνέργεια) of a power (δύναμις) is the only valid proof that a substance (οὐσία) is present in its entirety.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the human and divine activity of Jesus needs to be considered according to κατάφασις (“positive theology”) and ἀπόφασις (negative theology) alike. Dionysius says that Jesus’ θεανδρικά (human and divine) ἐνέργεια (activity) carries with it “δύναμιν ὑπεροχικῆς ἀποφάσεω” (“A force of superlative negation”) such that the union achieved

¹¹⁷ “Εξάιφνης” is the opening word of Letter III. “On a sudden” is the translation offered in Lampe.

¹¹⁸ Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.2.

by our contemplation of Jesus' deeds, words, and sufferings inspires the same unknowing (ἀγνωσία) as that to which we were brought in the previous letters.

For, even, to speak summarily, He was not man, not as not being man, but as being from men beyond men, and as above man, having truly been born man, and for the rest, not having done things Divine as God, nor things human as man, but exercising for us a certain new God-incarnate energy of God having become man.¹¹⁹

Not having done things divine as God, nor things human as man,¹²⁰ every action and experience of Jesus inspires in the one who contemplates them the same unknowing (ἀγνωσία) as the contemplation of God as unknowable, which we considered in Letters I-III. And this unknowing contemplation of Jesus' God-manly activities is no less effective of union with God than is the contemplation of the first three letters.

The union between God and man is contemplated in a particular way in each of the letters to Gaius. In Letter I God is contemplated as unknowable, and the mind is united with God by a 'superlative' unknowing which takes it beyond the stuff of knowing to "the place where God stood."¹²¹ In Letter II we contemplate God as the source of mind and that which it knows, and thus we are united with God as immanent and transcendent in every substance that is given to our perception. In Letter III, the unknowing by which we contemplate God as cause of everything we know is heightened and inverted on account of the Incarnation. God takes on human substance, becoming known to us as one of us, and thus God overturns the sole certainty that we had

¹¹⁹ "Καὶ γάρ, ἵνα συνελόντες εἴπωμεν, οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπος ἦν, οὐχ ὡς μὴ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀνθρώπων ἐπέκεινα καὶ ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπων ἀληθῶς ἄνθρωπος γεγονώς, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δράσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ, καινὴν τινα τὴν θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῖν πεπολιτευμένος." Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072C.

¹²⁰ Tome of Pope Leo

¹²¹ Denys, MT I.3.1000C.

concerning the divine, namely our unknowing of God. In the Incarnation we are united with God in a potential way, simply by sharing our humanity with the God-incarnate. In Letter IV we contemplate Jesus' every activity: his virgin birth as well as his every miracle and even his most mundane experiences. Each of these activities possesses a force of superlative negation in that each is an affirmative manifestation of the unknowable cause of all.¹²² Letter IV shows that God is revealed in the human and divine activities of Jesus, and human beings are actively united with God in that they perform the works of God in imitation of Jesus. Maximus concludes his exegesis of Denys' fourth letter with a reference to St Paul:¹²³ “Ὁν ἔχοντες, ἡγιασμένοι, λόγῳ τε καὶ βίῳ μορφούμενον μιμήσασθε τὴν μακροθυμίαν” (“Since He has taken shape in your speech and life, O sanctified ones, imitate His long-suffering”).¹²⁴ The particular character of the unknowing union presented in Letter IV is that of an active union. Letter IV shows that human substance is united with and distinguished from God in that God-incarnate exercised a God-manly activity “οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δράσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον” (“not having done things Divine as God, nor things human as man”).¹²⁵

In Letters II-IV, Denys shows how God is manifest in the three Persons of the Trinity. Letter II treats the manifestation of God the Father as the source of all substance. Letter III treats the manifestation of God the Son in the substantial self-othering of God that is the Incarnation – the begetting of God from God and in the condescension of the

¹²² Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072C.

¹²³ Ephesians 5:1, I Timothy 1:16

¹²⁴ Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.27.

¹²⁵ Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072C.

Superessential in human substance. Letter IV treats the manifestation of God the Holy Spirit in the realization of an active union between God and humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ: his virgin birth, his miracles and every detail of his life in space and time. In Letter IV Jesus' divinity is manifest not merely in his definition as God and man – the powers, or potentialities, corresponding to his two natures. Jesus' divinity is manifest in the perfection of his human activity, and the recognition of divinity in his fully human substance is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Denys catalogues a few of Jesus' miracles which demonstrate this new, human and divine activity:

And a virgin supernaturally conceiving, and unstable water, holding up weight of material and earthly feet, and not giving way, but, by a supernatural power standing together so as not to be divided, demonstrate this. Why should anyone go through the rest, which are very many?¹²⁶

The recognition of the infinite God in finite substance is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The characteristic trait of the Holy Spirit is to demonstrate the power of God, as is plain to a cursory reading of the Nicene Creed,¹²⁷ or as St. Paul says, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁸ Denys identifies the same significance of making God manifest in DN.

Again, that the Father is fontal Deity, but the Lord Jesus and the Spirit are, if one may so speak, God-planted shoots, and as it were Flowers and superessential Lights of the God-bearing Deity, we have received from the holy Oracles; but how these things are, it is neither possible to say, nor to conceive.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ “Καὶ δηλοῖ παρθένος ὑπερφυῶς κύουσα καὶ ὕδωρ ἄστατον ὕλικῶν καὶ γεηρῶν ποδῶν ἀνέχον βάρους καὶ μὴ ὑπεῖκον, ἀλλ’ ὑπερφυεῖ δυνάμει πρὸς τὸ ἀδιάχυτον συνιστάμενον. Τί ἂν τις τὰ λοιπὰ πάμπολλα ὄντα διέλθοι;” Ibid., 1072B.

¹²⁷ “...incarnate by the Holy Ghost...” and “...Who spake by the Prophets...”

¹²⁸ I Corinthians 12:3.

¹²⁹ Denys, DN, II.7. 645B.

God is manifest in each of Jesus' activities because there is sympathy between God and man, established by Christ's philanthropic condescension which encompasses human nature: substance, capacity and activity. Maximus elaborates the way in which Jesus performs human activities in a divine way and divine things in a human way:

As God, He was the motivating principle of His own humanity, and as man He was the revelatory principle of His own divinity. One could say, then, that He experienced suffering in a divine way, since it was voluntary (and He was not mere man); and that He worked miracles in a human way, since they were accomplished through the flesh (for He was not naked God). Therefore His sufferings are wondrous, for they have been renewed by the natural divine power of the one who suffered. So too are His wonders wedded to passibility, for they were completed by the naturally passible power of the flesh of the one who worked them.¹³⁰

Everything done and suffered by Jesus is a revelation of God in that it inspires our unknowing (ἀγνωσία) with reference to God, either in virtue of his voluntary condescension, even to the minutiae of human life, or else in virtue of his perfect human activity by which he reveals the divine will in his physical experience.

3.5 Imitation of the Inimitable

By the way of negative theology human beings are capable of an ἀγνωσία (unknowing) knowledge of God as precisely unknowable. God is the unknown source of all that we do know, the cause of all that is. It is only by the condescension of God in Jesus that human beings become capable of an affirmative knowledge of God. The appearance of divine and human natures in Jesus at once reveals God as Father – the source of God the Son – and, insofar as Jesus' divinity is recognized in his humanity, the

¹³⁰ “Ὡς μὲν Θεὸς τῆς ἰδίας ἦν κινητικὸς ἀνθρωπότητος, ὡς ἄνθρωπος δὲ τῆς οἰκειᾶς ἐκφαντικὸς ὑπῆρχε θεότητος, θεϊκῶς μὲν, ἴν' οὕτως εἶπω, τὸ πάσχειν ἔχων, ἐκούσιον γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ἀνθρωπικῶς δὲ τὸ θαυματουργεῖν, διὰ σαρκὸς γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ γυμνὸς ὑπῆρχε Θεός, ὡς εἶναι τὰ μὲν πάθη θαύματα παθητά, τῇ κατὰ φύσιν τοῦ αὐτὰ θαυματουργοῦντος παθητικῆς δυνάμει συμπληρούμενα τῆς σαρκός.” Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.18.

Incarnation is also the revelation of God the Holy Spirit, by whom the divine Word is manifest. This manifestation of hierarchy in God – of Thearchy – makes God knowable for human beings. And in the condescension of God to human beings, which is the Incarnation, the hierarchical structure is collapsed. Divine and human natures unite in the person of Jesus, according to the Chalcedonian definition.¹³¹

Divine and human natures are not united in such a way that either is altered. Rather, both human and divine natures are manifest in Jesus in their entirety: the human in accordance with substance, power, and activity; and the divine nature is manifest as source of all substance in the virgin birth and the miracles and as no substance in that nothing is added to Jesus' human nature. Divine and human substances are manifest in every activity of Jesus, as Maximus explained.¹³² Christ's miraculous activities are the proof of his in-fleshed divinity, confirming the union of the two natures. His human sufferings enhance the distinction of God beyond anything conceivable in that God, who we know precisely by superlative unknowing, confounds even that most modest definition by willing to be identifiable in our every human experience. Notwithstanding the immediate knowledge of God afforded by this divine condescension to human substance, the doctrine of the Incarnation does not excuse human beings of an active part in their unification with God. God condescends to human nature in its entirety,

¹³¹ Christ is one Person whose two natures (human and divine) remain perfectly distinct even as they are perfectly united: “unconfusedly” (ἀσύγχθτως), “unchangeably” (ἀτρέπτως), “indivisibly” (ἀδιαρέτως), and ἀχωρίστως (inseparably).

¹³² “θεϊκῶς μὲν, ἴν’ οὕτως εἶπω, τὸ πάσχειν ἔχων, ἐκούσιον γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ἀνθρωπικῶς δὲ τὸ θαυματουργεῖν, διὰ σαρκὸς γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ γυμνὸς ὑπῆρχε Θεός” (“One could say, then, that He experienced suffering in a divine way, since it was voluntary (and He was not mere man); and that He worked miracles in a human way, since they were accomplished through the flesh (for He was not naked God).”) Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.18.

substance, power and activity in order that human beings may be united with God with the whole of their nature, substance, power and activity.

CHAPTER 4 LETTERS V-VII

4.1 The Church as Hierarchy

Maximus concludes his exposition of Denys' fourth letter with a Pauline call to imitate the divine and human works of Jesus.¹³³ The language of imitation was introduced in Letter II where the Father is described as 'beyond source of Divinity' yet the one who begets the Son (Letter III) and He is the One from whom the Spirit proceeds (Letter IV). Likewise, in Letter II the Father is described as 'inimitable' yet related to 'the things which are imitated'. Letters II and IV outline how the inimitable is able to be imitated in potentiality because of the Son, and in actuality because of the Holy Spirit. Thus Maximus' call to imitation as conclusion to his consideration of Letter IV confirms the dominant theme of imitation in the first triad of letters (II-IV). I shall also show in this chapter how the concept of imitation also anticipates the theme of the second triad of letters (Letters V-VII), viz. the achievement of union with God through ethical, prayerful and theurgical activity in imitation of the Incarnation. If the first triad of letters considered the notion of imitation from a contemplative perspective as addressed to a monk, the second triad of letters, considered in this chapter, considers imitation from a more practical and theurgical perspective in letters addressed to a deacon, a priest, and a bishop.

Letter V is addressed to a "λειτουργός" (deacon, or more literally "liturgist") named "Δωρόθεος" ("gift of God"). The pairing of this name with this title is a helpful reminder of Denys' insistence in Letter II that God's relation to that which is not God is

¹³³ "Since He has taken shape in your speech and life, O sanctified ones, imitate His long-suffering" ("Ὁν ἔχοντες, ἡγιασμένοι, λόγῳ τε καὶ βίῳ μορφούμενον μιμήσασθε τὴν μακροθυμίαν"). Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.27. The reference to St Paul is in Ephesians 5.1 and also I Timothy 1.16.

fundamentally that of a gift. God is known as the source of the gift which characterizes the relations of the Persons of the Thearchy, as well as the gift which characterizes humanity's knowledge of God 'above mind.' The Father is given entirely in the Person of the Son (the mind or the Word of God) and thus the Son is the gift offered by the Father by which human beings are made deified and good.¹³⁴ The Incarnation (introduced in Letter III, and made effectual in the Holy Spirit as described in Letter IV) is the ground of any and all sympathy by which created beings are enabled to imitate and participate in God.

Whereas the Thearchy is the revelation which orders our contemplation of God in Letters II-IV, in Letters V-VII the ecclesiastical hierarchy orders the human assimilation in God.¹³⁵ Letters II-IV treated the purification of all thought and substance in the unifying contemplation of God (Letter II), in the illumination of God's unknowable power demonstrated in the Incarnation (Letter III), and in the perfect union and distinction of divine and human natures in the Holy Spirit's activity which is the human realization of God-incarnate (Letter IV). Letters V-VII continue the discussion of the union of man with God made possible by the Incarnation. Letters II-IV describe how the Thearchy condescends to make God knowable to human beings: Letters V-VII show how the ecclesiastical hierarchy makes that condescension effectual such that human beings are able to achieve contemplation and union with God. In Letter V to a deacon, Denys

¹³⁴ Denys, *Letters*, II.1.69A.

¹³⁵ The *EH* begins, "Now the assimilation to, and union with, God, as far as attainable, is deification. And this is the common goal of every Hierarchy ... the clinging love towards God and Divine things divinely and uniformly ministered." Denys, *EH* I.3. 376A.

explains how the human soul must be purified in its sensible and intelligible perception so that the soul can receive the very thing that she acknowledges to be impossible, “really entering in Him, Who is above vision and knowledge, knowing this very thing, that he is after all the object of sensible and intellectual perception.” In Letter VI to a priest, Denys describes how the capacity of human beings for union with God is illumined through a turning away from false and apparent things and a turning toward that which is One and hidden. In Letter VII to a bishop, Denys argues that the highest philosophy of the Greeks is unable to rise above the creation to discover the Creator, but only the revelation of Christ as supernatural Cause of all can demonstrate the created order as divine theophany. Thus Dionysius encourages Polycarp the Bishop to supply what is lacking in the philosophy of the Sophist Apollophanes:

But you are capable, both to supply the deficiency, and to bring eventually to God that distinguished man, who is wise in many things, and who perhaps will not disdain to meekly learn the truth, which is above wisdom, of our religion.¹³⁶

In the Incarnation the human and divine natures are united in the person of Jesus. Because the divine and human natures are not at all altered in the God-man, it can be said that the transcendence of God has its fullest realization in the immanence of Christ. Likewise, human beings are so united to God by the imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that the hierarchical mediations give way to real union with God. Nevertheless, in accordance with Chalcedonian logic, both the condescension of God to human substance and the assimilation of human beings to divine substance preserve the integrity

¹³⁶ Denys, *Letters*, VII.3.1081C.

of the divine and human natures. Union with God does not annihilate human nature, but is its fullest realization.

The first triad of Letters (II-IV) showed how in the Incarnation God assumes human nature in substance (οὐσία), capacity (δύναμις), and activity (ἐνέργεια). This activity of the God-man (θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν) is the basis of a real sympathy (συμπάθεια) between humanity and divinity, making it possible for people to join in the activity of God. Thus the second triad of Letters (V-VII) further describes a liturgical hierarchy that makes possible the human imitation of the divine and assimilation with God. The human and divine activities of Jesus make Christian theurgy and liturgy possible: the mutual penetrations (αἱ ἐν ἀλλήλαις χωρήσεις)¹³⁷ between heaven and earth. In Letters V-VII Denys instructs a deacon to discern between the sacred and the profane, counsels a priest in his work to illumine the truth (described as One and hidden), and explains to a bishop that philosophy and worship are not opposed but that worship is required as the perfection of the revealed Wisdom of the Incarnate Christ as Cause of the created order.

4.2. Letter V: Entering into God

In Letters I-IV Denys delivers a kind of catechesis to the monk Gaius, whose place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy is defined by contemplation. This catechesis has prepared Denys in Letter V to write to Dorotheus of “really entering in Him.” Whereas Gaius contemplates the condescension of God in the Incarnation as making possible

¹³⁷ Denys, DN, IV.2.696B.

man's deification and imitation of God,¹³⁸ Dorotheus has an active role in enabling the practice of that imitation and extending this condescension of God effectually in the activity of the Church. While the Incarnation achieves an immediate union of God with man, the human imitation of God is carried out according to hierarchical structures. Letters V-VII indicate a liturgical universe that reveals what it means for human substance, capacity, and activity to be united with the divine nature.

Letter V is addressed to a λειτουργός (deacon). The word is formed from λειτουργία (liturgy) which takes its roots from λιτός and ἔργον. Literally, liturgy means "the work of the people."¹³⁹ Details of Dorotheus' office are instructive relative to the logic of Letter V. The work performed by deacons in the liturgical context, as outlined in EH, corresponds to the argument of Letter V: both the content of the letter and the work of a deacon are concerned with initiation into union with God and the purification of external non-essential things in the process of entering into God. For instance, in the μυστήριον φωτισματος (the sacrament of Baptism, or literally the mystery of illumination) the deacons are appointed to strip the catechumen of his sandals and clothing,¹⁴⁰ representing the renunciation of everything contrary to the divine likeness: "But he must be resistless and resolute, as regards all separations from the uniform. This it is which the teaching of the symbols reverently and enigmatically intimates, by

¹³⁸ "... and the inimitable imitation of the super-divine and super-good (gift), by aid of which we are deified and made good." Denys, *Letters*, II.

¹³⁹ Naphtali Lewis follows Hugo Strathman in outlining the transition in the use of this word, mostly in Athens in the 4th Century, from a technical term for the sponsorship of specific public projects by wealthy citizens (such as the funding of a trireme or a chorus) to a more generalized use for any kind of public service. Lewis, "Leitourgia and related terms," 175–84.

¹⁴⁰ EH II.2.vi.396B.

stripping the proselyte, as it were, of his former life.”¹⁴¹ In the *μυστήριον συνάξεως* or *κοινωνίας* (the sacrament of Communion) it is the place of the deacon to conduct people to participate in the celebration appropriately. They keep the doors so that none of the un-initiated congregants remain in the church to see the divine mysteries take place. The deacons must discern between those who may be present for the readings of scripture but must be dismissed for the creed and everything that follows after it,¹⁴² those who may be present for the duration of the liturgy but who may not receive the sacrament itself,¹⁴³ and those who are baptized and are admitted to receive the sacrament. The catechumens are dismissed after the readings while the possessed and the penitents may remain, but none of these are permitted to receive the sacrament. This work is carried “ὕπὸ τῆς τοῦ λειτουργοῦ διακριτικῆς” (“by the discriminating authority of the Deacon”).¹⁴⁴

In these duties the deacon is responsible to discern between the substance of a thing and its external accidents.¹⁴⁵ The deacon also must discern between the catechumens who lack initiation,¹⁴⁶ the possessed who lack illumination,¹⁴⁷ and the

¹⁴¹ “ἀλλ’ ἄσχετον εἶναι καὶ ἀκατάτακτον ἐν πάσαις ταῖς τοῦ ἐνοειδοῦς διαιρέσεσιν. Ὅπερ ἢ τῶν συμβόλων παράδοσις ἱερῶς αἰνισσομένη τὸν προσιόντα τὴν οἶον προτέραν ζωὴν ἀπεκδύσσασα.” EH II.3.v.401A.

¹⁴² Denys, EH, III.2.425C., and EH, III.3.vi.429A.

¹⁴³ Ibid., III.3.vii.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ The clothing of the baptismal candidate is particularly representative of the sinful passions which clings to the human nature. After the baptism, the initiate is clothed in white, symbolizing the restoration of the divine likeness obscured by sin. Ibid. II.3.viii.404B.

¹⁴⁶ “Ἡ μὲν οὖν ἐσχάτη τοῖς κατηγουμένοις ἀπονενέμηται τάξις. Εἰσὶ γὰρ ἀμέθεκτοι καὶ ἀμύητοι παντὸς ἱεραρχικοῦ τελεστηρίου μηδὲ τὴν κατὰ θεῖαν ἀπὸτεξιν ἐνθεον ἐσχηκότες ὑπαρξιν” (“The lowest rank, then, is assigned to the catechumens, for they are without participation and instruction in every Hierarchical initiation, not even having the being in God by Divine Birth”). Denys, III.3.vi.432D.

¹⁴⁷ “... ἐνεργουμένους ἐναγεστάτην ἐνέργειαν, ὅσοι τῆς θεοειδοῦς ἀποστάντες ζωῆς ὁμόφροντές τε καὶ ὁμότροποι τοῖς ὀλεθρίοις γίνονται δαίμοσι... Οὐ γὰρ θεμιτὸν αὐτοῖς [ἐνεργουμένοις] ἑτέρου τινὸς ἱεροῦ μετασχεῖν ἢ τῆς τῶν λογίων ἐπιστρεπτικῆς ἐπὶ τὰ κρείττω διδασκαλίας.” (“... such as are possessed with a most detestable possession, by departing from the Godlike like, become of one mind and condition with destructive demons... for it is not permitted to them [the possessed] to have part in any other holy function than the teaching of the Oracles, which is likely to turn them to better things.”) Ibid. III.3.vii.433D.

penitents who lack perfection.¹⁴⁸ These discerning functions of the deacon correspond with Denys' instruction to Dorotheus that those deemed worthy to enter into God do so in an unknowing way: "knowing this very thing, that He is beyond all the objects of sensible and intelligent perception."¹⁴⁹ The deacon's activity ensures that the sensibly perceptible motions of the liturgy are in agreement with the superessential actions of which they are imitations. It is of utmost concern for Denys in EH, that the imitations performed in the Church not be confusing for those participating in the liturgy. Those who participate in the liturgy must contemplate God as he really is and are thus united with God. The deacon sees to it that only the worthy receive the sacrament.¹⁵⁰

The aim of every hierarchy is the perfection of those beings which pertain to a given hierarchy. The ecclesiastical hierarchy pertains to human souls, descended 'entire into temporal process.'¹⁵¹ In proportion to this human condition, the ecclesiastical hierarchy employs sensible things to communicate to human beings, as much as possible, the divine nature and the divine philanthropy. As an extension of this divine philanthropy, the mysteries of the Church effect the assimilation of human beings into union with God, which is the end for which they were created. This assimilation takes place through processes of *κάθαρσις* (purification), *φωτισμός* (illumination), and

¹⁴⁸ "Εἰ γὰρ ἡ τῶν θεῶν ὑπερκόσμιος ἱερουργία καὶ τοὺς ἐν μετανοίᾳ καίτοι πρὸς αὐτὴν ἤδη γεγονότας ἀποκρύπτεται τὸ μὴ παντελῶς ἱερώτατον οὐ προσιεμένη" ("the supermundane Service of the Divine Mysteries excludes those under penitence, and those who already attained it, not permitting anything to come near which is not completely perfect"). Ibid. III.3.vii.436B.

¹⁴⁹ "τοῦτο αὐτὸ γινώσκων, ὅτι μετὰ πάντα ἐστὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ καὶ τὰ νοητά." Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

¹⁵⁰ This discerning activity does not suggest separation from God of anything in nature. Denys can hardly be accused of a spiritualism or dualism which sees the corporeal as evil or opposed to God in some sense. After all, it is precisely the body of the baptismal candidate which is being identified for initiation in Baptism. On the contrary, the discrimination of participants in the sacrament of Communion is reflective of the principle that everything should be united with God "according to its capacity," which is an often repeated formula of Denys'.

¹⁵¹ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 211.

τελείωσις (perfection). Among the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the λειτουργοί (deacons) are tasked with sacramental actions which correspond to their characteristic work of purification and which symbolize the purgative aspect of the soul's conversion. Denys explicitly associates each of the orders of ministers with one of these three powers of κάθαρσις (purification), φωτισμός (illumination), and τελείωσις (perfection).¹⁵² The functions of the deacons which we have observed in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion are but two examples of the purifying function, but they exist within a wider framework.¹⁵³ The sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Anointing, share this triple function of purification, illumination and perfection with the sacerdotal orders of deacons, priests, and bishops, and with the lay orders of monks, the possessed, and the catechumens, respectively. There are likewise three hierarchies which encompass the whole of creation, beyond the ecclesiastical hierarchy but according to this same structure: the legal hierarchy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the celestial hierarchy.¹⁵⁴

Dionysius defines hierarchy in general in CH as a τάξις (order), ἐπιστήμη (science), and ἐνέργεια (operation) that is conducive to the attainment of the divine

¹⁵² “Ἡ δὲ τῶν ἱερουργῶν διακόσμησις ἐν μὲν τῇ δυνάμει τῇ πρώτῃ διὰ τῶν τελετῶν ἀποκαθαίρει τοὺς ἀτελέστους, ἐν τῇ μέσῃ δὲ φωταγωγεῖ τοὺς καθαρθέντας, ἐν ἐσχάτῃ δὲ καὶ ἀκροτάτῃ τῶν ἱερουργῶν δυνάμεων ἀποτελεῖ τοὺς τῷ θεῷ φωτὶ κεκοινωνηκότας ἐν ταῖς τῶν θεωρηθεισῶν ἐλλάμψεων ἐπιστημονικαῖς τελειώσεσιν.” (“and the order of the Ministers, in the first power, cleanses the uninitiated through the Mystic Rites; and in the second, conducts to light the purified; and in the last and highest of the Ministering Powers, makes perfect those who have participated in the Divine light, by the scientific completions of the illuminations contemplated.”) Denys, EH, V.1.iii.504B.

¹⁵³ “τοῦ θειοτάτου δείπνου καὶ ἀρχισυμβόλου τῶν τελουμένων” (“the most Divine Supper, and arch-symbol of the rites performed”). Ibid. III.3.i.428B.

¹⁵⁴ Roques identifies a dysymmetry in the ecclesiastical hierarchy as compared with the celestial hierarchy because he reads the ecclesiastical to be constituted of only two orders (the consecrated ministers and the orders of the laity), while the celestial is constituted of three orders. O'Meara suggests that this dysymmetry makes the ecclesiastical hierarchy similar to Plato's Republic, however Ivanovic shows correctly that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is indeed comprised of three orders of triads if one includes the three sacraments of the Church: Baptism, Communion, and Anointing. Roques, *L'univers Dionysien*, 173-175, 183, 196-199. O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 166-167. Ivanovic, “The ecclesiology of Dionysius the Areopagite,” 38.

likeness.¹⁵⁵ Hierarchies exist and function relative to the capacity of a given creature. The ecclesiastical hierarchy is accommodated to human beings in particular in order to conduct them to the contemplation of God and union with God.¹⁵⁶ The ecclesiastical hierarchy is accommodated to human beings in that, just as human beings know by sensation as well as by intellect, so the imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are sensible and they conduct human beings to intellectual imitations of God. These imitations complement and help in achieving a real union with God through contemplation. Dorotheus' duties as a deacon demonstrate, in a way that is available to the senses, the same purification about which Denys writes to him in Letter V though in an intellectual way: the purifying activities of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are sensible imitations of the same purifying activity which Denys discusses with Dorotheus in an intellectual way. These purifying actions of the deacon are in symmetry (ἐν συμμετρία)¹⁵⁷ with the purification of our contemplation of God, which is the subject of Letter V.

Letter V is about entering into union with God, who is utterly imperceptible, by means of sensible and intelligible perception. The premise of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, is that sensible things can be used to bring people into unifying contemplation of God. It is taken for granted in the discourse between Denys and Dorotheus that God is

¹⁵⁵ “Ἔστι μὲν ἱεραρχία κατ' ἐμὲ τάξις ἱερὰ καὶ ἐπιστήμη καὶ ἐνέργεια πρὸς τὸ θεοειδὲς ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοιουμένη καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἐνδιδομένας αὐτῇ θεόθεν ἐλλάμψεις ἀναλόγως ἐπὶ τὸ θεομίμητον ἀναγομένη” (“Hierarchy is, in my judgement, a sacred order and science and operation, assimilated, as far as attainable, to the likeness of God, and conducted to the illuminations granted to it from God according to capacity, with a view to the Divine imitation”). Denys, CH, III.1.164D.

¹⁵⁶ “τὴν [ἱεραρχία] καθ' ἡμᾶς δὲ ὀρθῶμεν ἀναλόγως ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς τῇ τῶν αἰσθητῶν συμβόλων ποικιλία πληθυνομένην, ὑφ' ᾧ ἰεραρχικῶς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐνοειδῆ θέωσιν ἐν συμμετρία τῇ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀναγόμεθα [θεὸν τε καὶ θεϊαν ἀρετήν].” (“but let us view our Hierarchy, conformably to ourselves, abounding in the variety of the sensible symbols, by which, in proportion to our capacity, we are conducted, hierarchically according to our measure, to the uniform deification – God and divine virtue.”) Denys, EH, I.2.372D.

¹⁵⁷ Denys, EH, I.2.373B.

unknowable and only contemplated by unknowing. Letter V opens with an abridged account of that fundamental principle of negative theology.¹⁵⁸ The interlocutors concur that the “The Divine gloom... in which God is said to dwell” (“Ο θεῖος γνώφος... ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται”) is itself obscured by the Incarnation, precisely in that Jesus is the express manifestation of God among human beings. “[T]he unapproachable light,”¹⁵⁹ as Denys speaks of Jesus in this letter, hides the darkness which is the unknowing contemplation of God and our point of union with God.

I have already described how the Incarnation heightens our unknowing of God, and Denys acknowledges the particular challenge that this heightened unknowing brings. In Letter I we attended to the darkness which becomes invisible by light, but in the Incarnation we encounter a blindness that is brought about by overwhelming light. Letter V contains a recapitulation of the two kinds of unknowing we have already identified in the *Letters*. Both the union with God by unknowing and the union with God by divine condescension are acknowledged here. The unknowing way of negative theology denies that God is in his effects or that they have any meaningful relation to their divine cause. This brings us to the “The Divine gloom” (“ὁ θεῖος γνώφος”) which is the place where God is. The fact of the Incarnation asserts that this very God has met human beings in the person of Jesus Christ, in the realm of temporal process. This bold affirmation is the necessary point of beginning for positive knowledge of God.

¹⁵⁸ “Ο θεῖος γνώφος ἐστὶ τὸ ἀπρόσιτον φῶς, ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται” (“The Divine gloom is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell”). Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A. Cf. Denys, MT, I.3.1000C.

¹⁵⁹ Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

The problem of the Incarnation is that to know God only in the ecstatic mode of affirmation is not to know God as he really is. Or, in Denys' phrase, it is not "really entering in Him, Who is above vision and knowledge".¹⁶⁰ We have come to know and to be united with God by unknowing (ἀγνώσια), but this unknowing contemplation is challenged and confounded by the Incarnation. How then do we come really to enter into God?

As the Cause of all things – sensible and intelligible, God is manifest in all things and in none of them, because God is beyond all things, "in a superlative sense, but not in a defective sense."¹⁶¹ Just as our intelligible perception is scandalized in the condescension of God to human potentiality, so also our sensible perception is overwhelmed by Jesus' human and divine activities carried out in the flesh. The Incarnation is properly understood not as a contradiction of the notion that the world is a manifestation of God, but as the fullest expression of that philosophically reasoned position.¹⁶² The human and divine activities of Jesus demonstrate to our sensible perception the world as theophany, previously contemplated only by the intellect.

In Letter V, the darkness where God is, is utterly invisible and unapproachable. This recapitulates the encounter with the darkness of unknowing in Letter I, and the contemplation of God as the unknowable source of everything that is known in Letter II. The Incarnation is introduced in Letter III where God is described as most hidden as He is most manifest. In Letter IV the full force of this is brought to bear in Jesus' activities. In his *Ambiguum V*, writing on the fourth letter of Denys, Maximus makes explicit what

¹⁶⁰ "ἀληθῶς ἐν τῷ ὑπὲρ ὄρασιν καὶ γνῶσιν γιγνόμενος". Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

¹⁶¹ Denys, *Letters*, I.1065A.

¹⁶² Perl, *Theophany*. 109

is implicit in the Incarnation, that God has not only taken on the substance of a particular human being, but has illuminated all substance: “Τὰ γὰρ τῆς φύσεως πάντα μετὰ τῆς φύσεως κατὰ σύλληψιν ἄρρητον ὑποδὸς ‘ὁ ὑπερούσιος Λόγος” (“For by virtue of His ineffable conception ‘the Word beyond being’ clothed Himself in all the elements of nature along with nature itself”).¹⁶³

Denys shows that God’s unknowability is demonstrated to our sensible perception in the conception of Jesus’ body without the seed of a human father and in the supernatural way that water solidified in acknowledgement of Jesus’ weight.¹⁶⁴ Nature itself is God’s clothing, as Maximus puts it. Taken in their context, the psalm¹⁶⁵ and the letters of St Paul¹⁶⁶ which Denys quotes in Letter V express most clearly the total immersion of the world in divinity, which is asserted in the doctrine of the Incarnation. In a way, the psalmist’s question, “whither shall I flee from thy presence?” is the same as the question Letter V is answering: How it is that we really enter into God? If God pervades everything – is manifest in everything, and yet is hidden in manifestation, then the question is simultaneously: ‘whither shall I flee from thy presence’ and ‘how do we enter into God?’

¹⁶³ Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.15.

¹⁶⁴ As for all the other miraculous instances in which the created order deferred to him, says Denys, “Τί ἄν τις τὰ λοιπὰ πάμπολλα ὄντα διέλθοι;” (“Why should anyone go through the rest, which are very many?”) Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072B.

¹⁶⁵ “ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν λόγος ἐν γλώσση μου ἰδοὺ κύριε σὺ ἔγνωσ ἅπαντα τὰ ἔσχατα καὶ τὰ ἀρχαῖα σὺ ἐπλασάς με καὶ ἔθηκας ἐπ’ ἐμὲ τὴν χειρὰ σου ἐθαυμαστώθη ἡ γνώσις σου ἐξ ἐμοῦ ἐκραταιώθη σὺ μὴ δύνωμαι πρὸς αὐτὴν ποῦ πορευθῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός σου καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου σου ποῦ φύγω ἐὰν ἀναβῶ εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν σὺ εἶ ἐκεῖ ἐὰν καταβῶ εἰς τὸν ἄδην ἀρᾶς” (“For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.”) LXX 138/9.4-8, trans. AV.

¹⁶⁶ Romans 11.33-36, II Corinthians 9.15, Philippians 4.7

In typical Dionysian fashion, the solution consists precisely in acknowledging that the very manifestation of God incarnate makes God yet still more unknowable to us.

And in this gloom, invisible indeed, on account of the surpassing brightness, and unapproachable on account of the excess of the superessential stream of light, enters every one deemed worthy to know and to see God, by the very fact of neither seeing nor knowing, really entering in Him, Who is above vision and knowledge, knowing this very thing, that He is beyond all the objects of sensible and intelligent perception.¹⁶⁷

The whole world is illuminated by the fact of the Incarnation. The manifestation of that union in the θεανδρικά ἐνέργεια of Jesus (Letter IV) is the evidence that everything is illuminated by an unapproachable, super-essential light. Thus we come to see in a sensible way even as we had contemplated by the intellect that we are blinded by the light, and the knowledge of our blindness is itself our entry into God. This is the kataphatic way of theology.

Just as Jesus' activities make God perceptible to our senses, the sacraments conduct initiates to the contemplation of God by means of the senses. The sacramental rites convey participants from the sensation of material things to the contemplation of God and θέωσις (union with God), in proportion to their power.¹⁶⁸ The sacrament of Baptism, as Denys understands it, is an imitation of Jesus' death,¹⁶⁹ and it achieves the

¹⁶⁷ “καὶ ἀοράτῳ γε ὄντι διὰ τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν φανότητα καὶ ἀπρο σίτῳ τῷ αὐτῷ δι' ὑπερβολὴν ὑπερουσίου φωτοχυσίας. Ἐν τούτῳ γί γινεται πᾶς ὁ θεὸν γινῶναι καὶ ἰδεῖν ἀξιούμενος, αὐτῷ τῷ μὴ ὄρᾶν μηδὲ γινώσκειν· ἀληθῶς ἐν τῷ ὑπὲρ ὄρασιν καὶ γινῶσιν γινόμενος τοῦτο αὐτὸ γινώσκων, ὅτι μετὰ πάντα ἐστὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ καὶ τὰ νοητά...” Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

¹⁶⁸ “τὰ μὲν αἰσθητῶς ἱερά τῶν νοητῶν ἀπεικονίσματα καὶ ἐπ' αὐτὰ χειραγωγία καὶ ὁδός, τὰ δὲ νοητὰ τῶν κατ' αἴσθησιν ἱεραρχικῶν ἀρχὴ καὶ ἐπιστήμη.” (“sacred things in sensible forms are copies of things intelligible, to which they lead and shew the way; and things intelligible are source and science of things hierarchical cognizable by the senses.”) Denys, *EH*, II.3.ii.397C.

¹⁶⁹ “δι' ὕδατος ὀλικὴ κάλυψις εἰς τὴν τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ τῆς ταφῆς ἀειδοῦς εἰκόνα παρὲιληπται. Τὸν οὖν ἱερῶς βαπτιζόμενον ἡ συμβολικὴ διδασκαλία μυσταγωγεῖ ταῖς ἐν τῷ ὕδατι τρισὶ καταδύσεσι τὸν θεαρχικὸν τῆς τριμερονύκτου ταφῆς Ἰησοῦ τοῦ ζωοδότου” (“the whole covering by water would be taken as an

birth of the initiate in God.¹⁷⁰ By the stripping off of the initiate’s clothing and the triple immersion in water, Baptism simulates the abandonment of sinful activities and the imitation of Jesus’ activities, chief of which being his passion and death. In a sensible figure, the triple emergence from the water and the donning of a white garment simulates the birth in God and the recovery of our created nature, no longer diminished by sin. The symmetry of this divine death and of the birth in God is not accidental. Representing the three-day burial of the life-giving Jesus (“τὸν θεαρχικὸν τῆς τριημερονύκτου ταφῆς Ἰησοῦ τοῦ ζωοδότου”),¹⁷¹ Baptism is a figure of our passing from human existence into the life of God. In symmetry with the taking on of human substance, which is the Incarnation, Jesus’ death is the passage of human substance into God. Thus the sacrament of Baptism involves the senses in its imitation of this unification between humanity and divinity accomplished by Jesus.

While something is communicated in a sensible way in the sacrament of Baptism, the significance of Baptism is not limited to the purification that is observed merely through the sensible cleansing of the body with water. Each of the sacraments, in so far as they are perceived by the senses and by the intellect, effect a purification, illumination, or perfection of the human soul. They are means by which the soul becomes united with God. For this reason, Denys treats each of the sacraments in EH according to the

image of death, and the invisible tomb. The symbolical teaching, then, reveals in mystery that the man baptized according to religious rites, imitates, so far as Divine imitation is attainable to men, by the three immersions in the water, the supremely Divine death of the Life-giving Jesus, Who spent three days and three nights in the tomb”). Denys, EH, II.3.vii.404B.

¹⁷⁰ “Αὕτη μὲν ὡς ἔω συμβόλοις ἢ τῆς ἱερας τελετῆς θεογενεσίας οὐδὲν ἀπρεπὲς ἢ ἀνίερων οὐδὲ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἔχουσα εἰκόνων, ἀλλ’ ἀξιοθέου θεωρίας αἰνίγματα φυσικοῖς καὶ ἀνθρωποπρεπέσιν ἐσόποροις ἐνεικονιζόμενα.” (“This initiation, then, of the holy birth in God, as in symbols, has nothing unbecoming or irreverent, nor anything of the sensible images, but (contains) enigmas of a contemplation worthy of God, likened to physical and human images.”) Denys, EH, II.3.i.397B.

¹⁷¹ Denys, EH, II.2.vii.396D.

μυστήριον (mystery) and the θεωρία (contemplation). In his account of the μυστήριον Denys gives a bare description of the liturgical action, as it would be observed and without theological commentary. In the θεωρία Denys addresses the theological significance of the actions. The argument of Letter V is that the mysteries are only properly contemplated when one knows God to be beyond both the sensible and the intelligible perception. This knowledge of our unknowing is the way into liturgical action, and this unknowing contemplation is figured in the immersion and emersion of Baptism. The initiate sheds the old garments and dons the white garment which symbolizes human nature purified in the death and life of Christ. Just as the deacons strip the candidate before the person is initiated into the ecclesiastical community, so also we must know God to be beyond any of the sensible things or intelligible ideas that belong to our perception. We are made worthy to enter into God precisely by not knowing God, that is, by contemplating God as beyond every sensible and intelligible perception.

4.3 Letter VI: One Hidden Truth and Many False Appearances

In his fifth letter to Dorotheus Denys establishes that the human soul is purified through the imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the soul's potential to know God is initiated "by the very fact of neither seeing nor knowing, really entering in Him, Who is above vision and knowledge."¹⁷² The human's initiation into the sensible and intellectual imitation of God consists in stripping the body of everything external and purifying the mind of every conception of God. In Letter VI Denys makes the case to the priest Sopatros that the illumination of the human soul's potential to know God consists in more than the denial of this or that false representation of God. Rather, in the

¹⁷² Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy the soul is illuminated in such a way that enables her to perceive everything belonging to the ecclesiastical hierarchy as an appearance of the God “which is One and hidden.”¹⁷³ However, the appearances of God in created beings in themselves, without the aid of the sacraments, are always false and multifarious. Denys directs the priest to “so speak on behalf of truth that everything said is altogether unquestionable.”¹⁷⁴ This captures the illuminating function of the priest to mediate between the one God who is hidden and the many created effects of God which are manifest. It is the same illuminating function that is demonstrated again in the liturgical work of the priest in the sacrament of Communion.

Following his description of the initiation into human imitations of God in Letter V, in Letter VI Denys gives the priest Sopatros an illustration of the way of mediation between the divine One and the many effects of God, a union that does not collapse distinctions. Sopatros is presented as an outspoken opponent of many religious teachings and observances which promote heterodox theology. While Denys does not condone the teachings and observances which Sopatros opposes, neither does he congratulate Sopatros for his condemnation of heresy.¹⁷⁵ Rather, Denys advises Sopatros to refrain from denouncing unorthodox theological opinions and religious practices since there is no advantage in denouncing an opinion or religious practice that is intended to represent God who is ineffable and inimitable. Any representation of God is as inadequate as the next. “For neither, if anything is not red, is it therefore white, nor if something is not a

¹⁷³ Denys, *Letters*, VI.1077A.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ “οὐδὲ γάρ, οὐδ' εἰ κεκριμένως αὐτὴν ἐξελέγξεις, ἤδη τὰ Σωπάτρου καλά” (“For neither – even if you should have convicted him accurately – are the (teachings) of Sopatros consequently good”). Denys, *Letters*, VI.1077A.

horse, is it necessarily a man.”¹⁷⁶ It does not improve our thinking about God in a meaningful way simply to deny that God is accurately described by a particular quality or that God is identified as a particular thing.

Denys acknowledges this initial problem of theology in DN I.6 when he says of God’s ineffability: “The theologians, having knowledge of this, celebrate It, both without Name and from every Name.”¹⁷⁷ Even if Sopatros manages to convince his interlocutors that God should not be described in a particular way, nevertheless every other way, though invariably inadequate, remains uncontested. Denys corrects Sopatros’ approach to theological argument by drawing attention to his polemical method. More than this, however, Denys cautions Sopatros’ method because, in spite of his contrary approach to theology, Sopatros does not problematize our human thinking about God relative to our thinking about any other kind of substance. The ordinary categories of human thought, according to the substance and accidents of a given thing, can apply to God only in an analogous way at best. Denys instructs the priest not to consider it a victory to oppose any particular idea about God as though he himself were defending a correct idea about God because that would only entrench the error more deeply.

As a priest Sopatros understands the world as theophany which we have seen to be a contemplation of the world which finds its fullest expression in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Denys gives Sopatros an illustration of this dynamic between God and the world in his use of Aristotle’s philosophical categories of substance and accidents. The

¹⁷⁶ “Οὐδὲ γάρ, εἴ τι μὴ ἐρυθρόν, ἤδη λευκόν· οὐδέ, εἴ τις μὴ ἵππος, ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄνθρωπος.” Denys, *Letters*, VI.1077A.

¹⁷⁷ “Τοῦτο γοῦν εἰδότες οἱ θεολόγοι καὶ ὡς ἀνόνημον αὐτήν ὑμνοῦσι καὶ ἐκ παντὸς ὀνόματος.” Denys, DN I.6.596A.

analogy is as follows: the One that is true and hidden is related to the many which are false and apparent in that, like the accidents of substance, the many created effects of God make manifest the one who is otherwise hidden to our sense and intellect. Also, God is independent of created things while they are dependent upon God absolutely, just as a substance is logically prior to its accidents. We can see how this analogy functions in that the accidents of a substance, while non-essential to the substance, make the substance manifest, just as the creation makes God manifest without having any positive relation to God independent of the Incarnation. In spite of the limitations of this analogy, it does show how that which is One, true and hidden is related to the many things that are false and apparent as that on which all things depend and of which all things are manifestations.

Denys counsels Sopatros not to occupy himself in denouncing the many false theologies and dubious religious practices, but to exercise his office as an illuminator in extemporaneous conversation even as he carries out his illuminating operations in the sacramental liturgies of the Church. Just as the Incarnation illuminates the created order by uniting our nature with God, so also in the sacrament of Communion the whole of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is gathered into union with God. In the Incarnation God illuminates the entire cosmos, as Maximus puts it in his commentary on Letter IV: “For by virtue of His ineffable conception ‘the Word beyond being’ clothed Himself in all the elements of nature along with nature itself.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ “Τὰ γὰρ τῆς φύσεως πάντα μετὰ τῆς φύσεως κατὰ σύλληψιν ἄρρήτον ὑποδύς ‘ὁ ὑπερούσιος Λόγος’”. Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.15.

The contemplation of God as unknowable and yet manifest in all things is an intellectual imitation of the divine assumption of the created order, and the sacrament of Communion is a sensible imitation of that same dynamic. The fact that every priestly task is shared with other consecrated ministers is reflective of their mediating operation in general. Mediation is the work in which Dionysius seeks to strengthen Sopatros in his warning that the priest might overlook the true which is one and hidden in his occupation in many things that are false and apparent.

For when he [the bishop] has unveiled the veiled and undivided Bread, and divided it into many, and has divided the Oneness of the Cup to all, he symbolically multiplies and distributes the unity, completing in these an altogether most holy ministration. For the 'one,' and 'simple,' and 'hidden,' of Jesus, the most supremely Divine Word, by His incarnation amongst us, came forth, out of goodness and love towards man, to the compound and visible, and benevolently devised the unifying communion, having united, to the utmost, our lowliness to the most Divine of Himself.¹⁷⁹

The mediation of human and divine natures is also the principal activity in the sacrament of Communion. The distinctiveness of human potential is illuminated as it is gathered into God in Communion.

Just as Sopatros assists in conducting people to union with God through sensible imitations, in the sacrament of Communion, so he should also conduct people to union with God through intellectual imitations. For this reason, Denys warns Sopatros that it is possible, "both that you and others, whilst occupied in many things that are false and

¹⁷⁹ "Τὸν γὰρ ἐγκεκαλυμμένον καὶ ἀδιαίρετον ἄρτον ἀνακαλύψας καὶ εἰς πολλὰ διελὼν καὶ τὸ ἐνιαῖον τοῦ ποτηρίου πᾶσι καταμερίσας συμβολικῶς τὴν ἐνότητα πληθύνει καὶ διανέμει παναγεστάτην ἐν τούτοις ἱεουργίαν τελῶν. Τὸ γὰρ ἓν καὶ ἀπλοῦν καὶ κρύφιον Ἰησοῦ τοῦ θεαρχικωτάτου λόγου τῆ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐνανθρωπήσει πρὸς τὸ σύνθετόν τε καὶ ὄρατόν ἀναλλοιώτως ἀγαθότητι καὶ φιλανθρωπία προελήλυθε καὶ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡμῶν ἐνοποιὸν κοινωνίαν ἀγαθουργῶς διεπραγματεύσατο τὰ καθ' ἡμᾶς ταπεινὰ τοῖς θειοτάτοις αὐτοῦ κατ' ἄκρον ἐνώσας, εἴπερ καὶ ἡμεῖς ὡς μέλη σώματι συναρμολογηθῶμεν αὐτῷ κατὰ τὸ ταῦτόν τῆς ἄλωβήτου καὶ θείας ζωῆς καὶ μὴ τοῖς φθοροποιοῖς πάθεσι κατανεκρωθέντες ἀνάρμοστοι καὶ ἀκόλλητοι καὶ ἀσύζωοι γενώμεθα πρὸς τὰ θεῖα μέλη καὶ ὑγιέστατα." Denys, EH, III.3.xii.444A, B.

apparent, should overlook the true, which is One and hidden.”¹⁸⁰ It falls within the range of human power both, “to speak on behalf of truth, that everything said will be altogether unquestionable,” and it is possible, whilst occupied in many things that are false and apparent, “to overlook the true, which is one and hidden.” Put simply, this capacity to speak on behalf of truth is the human capacity to mediate between the many appearances and the hidden One.

We have considered the potential, or power (*δύναμις*) of a given substance in Aristotelian terms, defining it as the capacity of a substance to act upon another substance or to be acted upon by another substance. The power (*δύναμις*) of a substance is the whole range of possibility, either for the corruption or for the realization, of a substance. If a substance were to completely lack all power, then it would no longer exist as the substance in question. Conversely, a substance becomes completely active at the point that its potential is fully realized. This point of full realization is, for Denys, also the point at which it is theophanic: substance is united with God and God is made manifest in substance, as much as possible.

Denys’ understanding of union with God and his understanding of hierarchy are closely related. Denys treats union with God as precisely an ecstasy of the soul to the unmediated contemplation of God beyond thought and being. Through the purification, illumination and union or perfection that is effected by hierarchy, God is revealed in the substance, power, and activity of every nature.

¹⁸⁰ Denys, *Letters*, VI.1073A.

Letters II-IV show how our contemplation of God is purified, illuminated and perfected in the manifestation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We contemplate the divine substance as beyond every substance, “Who is super-source of every source.”¹⁸¹ We contemplate divine power in the ineffable condescension of the infinite to human finitude, “by having taken substance as a man.”¹⁸² And we contemplate union with God in the human and divine activity of Jesus, “a certain new God-incarnate energy of God having become man.”¹⁸³ As Letter V treats our coming to be in God through the purification of our substance (“knowing this very thing, that He is after all the object of sensible and intelligible perception”),¹⁸⁴ so Letter VI proceeds to treat our capacity for God through the illumination of human potential. And Letter VII will treat the realization of this potential.

In Letter III Denys says that God is hidden even in manifestation, meaning that the thorough condescension to human nature makes God perfectly manifest as man and perfectly imperceptible as divine. This illumination of our nature in the Incarnation displays the full breadth of human power, from the manifest union of divine and human activities (for instance, the miracles) to the depletion of human capacity in Jesus’ death. In Jesus, human power is illuminated in the full extent of human capacity to act upon others and in the full extent of his capacity to be acted upon by others.

Communion is the sensible imitation of God’s hiddenness and manifestation and of the union and distinction of Jesus’ two natures. This sacrament is the illumination of

¹⁸¹ Denys, *Letters*, II.1069A.

¹⁸² Denys, *Letters*, III.1069B.

¹⁸³ Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072C.

¹⁸⁴ Denys, *Letters*, V.1073A.

the human's capacity for union with God. As such it gathers together (Σύναξις literally means "gathering together") all who are united with God according to this capacity. This illuminating character of the sacrament is particularly apparent in the actions of the priests, the illuminators among the ecclesiastical hierarchy's consecrated orders. The Communion liturgy demonstrates the meeting of divine and human natures, in the Incarnation and extending to the whole human community. The double significance of these opposite motions is held in tension in the sacramental action, and this is the illumination of our union with God according to human power.

In Denys' account of Communion, both in the μυστήριον (mystery *or* sacrament) and in the θεωρία (contemplation) of the sacrament, it is noteworthy that he makes no mention of the priests doing anything before the singing of the Creed.¹⁸⁵ This suggests that it would not be suitable for the illuminations of the priest to be seen by the uninitiated who are only dismissed when the creed is sung. It is also significant that there is no particular action that is performed exclusively by the priests in the course of the Communion rites. Every operation of the priests is carried out with either the deacons or with the bishop. This signifies the mediating role of the priests, always conducting between the many and the one, between that which is being purified and that which is perfecting.

¹⁸⁵ "when these have been excluded from the divine temple and the service which is too high for them, the all-holy ministers and loving contemplators of things all-holy, gazing reverently upon the most pure rite, sing in an universal Hymn of Praise the Author and Giver of all good, from Whom the sacred Rites were exhibited to us... For, it seems to me the record of all the works of God related to have been done for us in song". Denys, EH, III.3.vii. Rorem and Luibheid say this is most likely the Creed. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 218.

The priest's actions in the Communion liturgy convey several things at once. The priests and chosen deacons lay the holy bread and the cup of blessing on the altar; the holy peace is proclaimed by the bishop and the kiss of peace is passed to all; and the priests read the names of those who reached the end of a virtuous life.¹⁸⁶ Each of these actions is an illustration of the way God is united with the created order and distinguished from it in the Incarnation. The simultaneity of these actions is also meaningful when we remember Denys' treatment of the Incarnation in Letter III, that this illumination, this simultaneous manifestation and hiding, takes place "suddenly" ("ἐξαίφνης"). The veiled bread and cup illustrate the way in which God is revealed in manifestation just as Jesus clothes himself in all the elements of nature, demonstrating his infinite power by condescending to human finitude and passion. Furthermore the unveiling of the undivided bread and cup symbolizes the purification of our contemplation of the divine substance.¹⁸⁷ The kiss of peace illustrates that the whole of human nature is assumed in the divine philanthropy, only excluding sin from our nature, which is not natural to humankind in any case.¹⁸⁸ It also shows that the unification between divine and human natures will not respect divisions within the human community.¹⁸⁹ The recitation of the names illustrates that the union performed in this sacrament achieves the perfection of

¹⁸⁶ Denys, EH, III.2.425D. EH III.3.viii.437A.

¹⁸⁷ "For when he [the bishop] has unveiled the veiled and undivided Bread, and divided it into many, and has divided the Oneness of the Cup to all, he symbolically multiplies and distributes the unity, completing in these an altogether most holy ministration". Denys, EH, III.3.xii.444A.

¹⁸⁸ Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.15.

¹⁸⁹ "For it is not possible to be collected to the One, and to partake of the peaceful union with the One, when people are divided among themselves. For if, being illuminated by the contemplation and knowledge of the One, we would be united to an uniform and Divine agreement, we must not permit ourselves to descend to divided lusts, from which are formed earthly enmities, envious and passionate, against that which is according to nature." Denys, EH, III.3.viii.437A.

humankind, so it is perfectly logical that those who have passed beyond death should also be united in this communion.¹⁹⁰

After these simultaneous imitations of the purification, illumination and perfection of human nature, the priests and the bishop wash their hands. The purification of the bodily extremities symbolizes the preparation of even their faintest imaginations to be receptive of divine visions in union with God. At this point, after these liturgical imitations of the divine works among human beings, there is no mention of the priests again until the final thanksgiving. Denys only names the bishop as having an active role in the prayers that follow, in the unveiling of the bread and the cup, and in the distribution of the bread and cup. It remains for the priests only to receive and to give thanks for the hierarchical ministrations.

4.4 Letter VII: The Truth above Wisdom

In Letter VII, Denys responds to the accusation of the contemporary pagan intellectual Apollophanes who criticizes Denys for “using, not piously, the writings of the Greeks against the Greeks.”¹⁹¹ Denys counters his detractor: “Yet, in reply to him, it were more true for us to say, that Greeks use, not piously, things Divine against things Divine, attempting through the wisdom of Almighty God to eject the Divine Worship.” The argument of Letter VII is that the worship of God is in no way extraneous to philosophy, but rather that it is the full realization of the philosophical project. Just as the perfection of a nature is the realization of its capacity to become theophany, so also

¹⁹⁰ “The recital of the holy tablets after the ‘peace’ proclaims those who have passed through life holily, and have reached the term of a virtuous life without faltering, urging and conducting us to their blessed communion and Divine repose, through similarity to them, and, announcing them as living, and, as the Word of God says, ‘not dead, but as having passed from death to a most divine life.’” Denys, EH, III.3.viii.

¹⁹¹ Denys, *Letters*, VII.1.1077C.

worship is the perfection of philosophy because the realization of the distinctly human capacity to know is to contemplate God beyond knowing, and this is synonymous with worship. Letter VII contains the second discussion about miracles in the *Letters*, the first being in Letter IV. When human nature is assumed by God in the Incarnation, its truly theophanic capacity is manifest in the human and divine activity, and when the soul contemplates God beyond thought and beyond mind itself its truly theophanic capacity is manifest in divine worship.

Denys articulates the controlling principle of this argument: “nothing could otherwise be removed from its heavenly course and movement, if it had not the Sustainer and Cause of its being moving it thereto, who forms all things and ‘transforms them’ according to the sacred text.”¹⁹² For something to be moved from its heavenly course (that is, for a given power to surpass its natural motion) is clear evidence of divine activity. Only the cause of a being can animate a natural power to move in a supernatural way or cause a thing to be in a way other than it is. Thus Denys defends “Divine Worship” as perfectly consonant with “the knowledge of things created, well called Philosophy by [Apollophanes], and by the divine Paul named Wisdom of God.”¹⁹³

Apollophanes stands on the other side of this argument, claiming that Denys perverts Greek philosophy, “the Sophist Apollophanes rails at me, and callσ me parricide, as using, not piously, the writings of Greeks against the Greeks.”¹⁹⁴ In principle, Denys and Apollophanes do not disagree that only a supernatural power could move something from its natural course, but the burden of proof is on Denys to present evidence of

¹⁹² Denys, *Letters*, VII.1.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

supernatural activity in the first place that would persuade Apollophanes to acknowledge a supernatural being. Neoplatonic emanationist paradigms provide their own answer to the coming into being of the cosmos which do not require divine intervention of the sort implied in the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Denys insists that, however the world comes to be, the cause of its creation must be God and must be deserving of worship, and thus he puts the question back to Apollophanes: “How then does he not worship Him, known to us even from this, and verily being God of the whole, admiring Him for His all-causative and super-inexpressible power”?¹⁹⁵ Denys moves the argument beyond this stalemate over the genesis of the cosmos by citing other instances in which natural motions have been interrupted by divine intervention. If Denys can convince Apollophanes of one such instance, then he will have to acknowledge a super-essential power that is worthy of worship as God. Even if Apollophanes does not acknowledge the OT record of miraculous motions of celestial bodies, nor the corroboration of other pagan nations which both acknowledge these events and consider them to be effects of divine activity, yet Apollophanes must explain his own acknowledgement of a similar event. Denys instructs Polycarp to remind Apollophanes of his own unwitting and ‘prophetic’ utterance when he said of the eclipse which coincided with time of Christ’s crucifixion: “these things, O blessed Dionysius, are requitals of Divine deeds.”¹⁹⁶

Letter VII is poignant, particularly when taken together with the other letters and the extra-textual information with which this study is not directly concerned: the sun appears as an image throughout the CD and not least in DN IV when Denys has been

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Denys, *Letters*, VII.3.1081C.

interpreted to adopt an emanationist cosmology, but here the eclipse of the sun is interlaced with the crucifixion of Christ as observed at Heliopolis by a man named Apollophanes; the self-emptying death of the God-man on the cross – the apex of God’s self-revelation – is juxtaposed with a scene of darkness associated in the CD with negative theology; the death of both Denys and Polycarp as martyrs adds to the imagery that is operative in this letter; and the central position of Letter VII among the seven recipients of Denys’ *Letters* is an enticing consideration as well. Our focus, for the specific purpose of this study, will be the argument of this letter as it corresponds with the hierarchical place of the bishop, to whom the letter is addressed.

Denys does not oppose the doctrine of emanation directly in Letter VII but he counters Apollophanes’ reductionist denial of God’s superessentiality by linking God’s superessential power to create with God’s superessential power to move something from its natural course. He finds no shortage of accounts of miraculous events within the OT and in pagan sources alike, but he acknowledges that Apollophanes will not be persuaded by these. The only evidence to which Denys can resort is Apollophanes’ own acknowledgment that an astronomically impossible eclipse which he and Denys observed together must be a response to divine activity. As we have seen in Maximus’ commentary on Letter IV, the activity of a natural power is the only valid proof that the essence of this nature is present in its entirety.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ The only valid proof that this “essence” is present in its “entirety,” moreover, is its natural, constitutive power, which one would not be mistaken in calling a “natural energy,” properly and primarily characteristic of the nature in question, since it is the most generic motion constitutive of a species, and contains every property that naturally belongs to essence, apart from which there is only nonbeing, “since only that which has absolutely no being whatsoever” – according to that great teacher – “has neither motion nor existence.” Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.2.

The mere reminder of this acknowledgement by Apollophanes might be enough to put the sophist into a rhetorically defensive position, but Denys goes further in identifying this acknowledgement with the self-revelation of God in the death of God-incarnate. This is the fulcrum on which Denys' argument turns in this letter; the weaker logic that precedes this evidence is only a set-up for it, and in the light of this evidence the rest of the argument takes on new strength. Denys situates Apollophanes with the centurion of the NT account who declares Jesus to be the Son of God upon witnessing his death, and the Imperial representative Pilate who has the inscription written on the cross, in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew: "Jesus on Nazareth King of the Jews." It is at once a moment of extreme affirmation and of extreme negation. We have encountered this dynamic in Letter IV where Denys says:

He Who is pre-eminently a lover of men, the Superessential, taking substance, above men and after men... works things of men... through which he who looks with a divine vision, will know beyond mind, even the things affirmed respecting the love towards man, of (the Lord) Jesus, - things which possess a force of superlative negation.¹⁹⁸

As Denys shows in Letter IV Jesus is born entirely a human but without the seed of a human father; likewise in Letter VII Denys shows that Jesus dies an entirely human death but in such a way as to move the sun and the moon.

How should this argument inspire Apollophanes to divine worship? Denys argues that Apollophanes' amazement at the unpredictable eclipse is itself a kind of worship, a knowledge of God beyond knowing. But it is not proper that Apollophanes should

¹⁹⁸ “ὁ διαφερόντως φιλόανθρωπος, ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπους καὶ κατὰ ἀνθρώπους ἐκ τῆς ἀνθρώπων οὐσίας... καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου... Δι' ὧν ὁ θεῖος ὄρων ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσεται καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καταφασκόμενα, δύναμιν ὑπεροχικῆς ἀποφάσεως ἔχοντα.” Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072B.

contradict himself by identifying God as the super-natural on the one hand and by denying that there is any God beyond nature on the other hand. Denys makes reference to St Paul's letter to the Romans in his letter to Polycarp: "for by the knowledge of things created, well called Philosophy by him, and by the divine Paul named Wisdom of God, the true philosophers ought to have been elevated to the Cause of things created and of the knowledge of them."¹⁹⁹ Denys continues:

How then does he not worship Him, known to us even from this, and verily being God of the whole, admiring Him for His all-causative and super-inexpressible power, when sun and moon, together with the universe, with a power and stability most supernatural, were fixed by them to entire immobility, and, for a measure of a whole day, all the constellations stood in the same places...²⁰⁰

Denys treatment of the miraculous heavenly signs of God's superessential power demonstrates the relation we observed in Letter VI between the One which is true and hidden and the many effects of God which are many and apparent. Each of them has their source in God and the perfection of each of them is to realize their potential to become theophanic. Likewise, the theophanic perfection of the human soul, with her philosophical capacity to mediate between the one and the many, the true and the apparent, is to acknowledge the God beyond knowing, which is what it means to Worship.

The argument of Letter VII gives us a working definition of divine activity as the realization of the divine potential which "forms all things and 'transforms them'."²⁰¹ We can see how Denys' letter proves fitting instruction for Bishop Polycarp, who belongs to

¹⁹⁹ Denys, *Letters*, VII.2.1080B. The reference to Paul is in Romans 2:10.

²⁰⁰ Denys, *Letters*, VII.2.1080C.

²⁰¹ Denys, *Letters*, VII.1.1080C.

the perfecting order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. As a bishop he arranges the sensible imitations belonging to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in order to conduct human beings to the perfect, unifying contemplations of God. The divine and human activities of Jesus are the *sine qua non* of Denys' affirmative theology generally and of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in particular. The consecrations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy stem from and are imitations of Jesus' activities: his exemplary Baptism; his commandment that the disciples remember him in Communion; and Christ's every activity among human beings is summed up in the sacrament of Anointing, as indicated by his title.

The title "Christ" or "The Anointed One" is derived from the word *chrism* or oil. The sacrament of Anointing is the perfecting sacrament, just as the bishop – or hierarchy – is the perfecting minister. Thus the sacrament of Anointing is instructive of the bishop's ministry. The hierarchy uses the sacrament of Anointing in every consecration, demonstrating vividly that every liturgical activity is a function of the Incarnation. Also, the visible sign of this sacrament is rather imperceptible except by its heavenly aromas, but this too is significant whereas it demonstrates that the perfect union between God and a created thing does not alter or confuse the divine and created natures, in keeping with Chalcedonian theology. Anointing's every application seals the object that is being consecrated, whereas the object of consecration is completely unchanged even as it fully realized as a theophany.

The distinctive rite in the consecration of bishops is when the Oracles (or the scriptures) are placed on the head of the ordinand indicating his capacity to interpret everything sensible that is employed as a symbol and everything that participates in the divine names found in the scriptures. In short, the bishop is empowered to interpret

everything in the created order, sensible and intelligible, which avails itself to human perception. Both books, of nature and of revelation, are implied in this consecration. The activity of the bishop – that is, the perfection of human activity – is to interpret every symbol and every name (in both books) as a theophany: a perfect union of God and that which is not God.²⁰² The same perfecting activity is attributed to the bishop in another way at the conclusion of the sacrament of Communion, discussed above, when he proceeds to contemplate further visions.²⁰³

Wear and Dillon judge that Denys makes a straw man of Apollophanes, using the conflict to show his Christian allegiance but contradicting Apollophanes on no point of his Neoplatonic doctrine.²⁰⁴ I think that this is precisely Denys' point: the Incarnation is not in contradiction with Neoplatonic philosophy but the Incarnation allows us to have an affirmative way of theology as well.

It is the goal of the whole ecclesiastical hierarchy, that, finally, the division between human life and divine life collapses even as it collapses in the person of Jesus. Maximus' interpretation of Letter IV has already helped us to understand the interpenetration of divine and human suffering in the person of Christ.²⁰⁵ The same

²⁰² Ivanović shows that there is no difference between God and divine mediation for Denys. Ivanović, "The ecclesiology of Dionysius the Areopagite," 39.

²⁰³ "When he has received and distributed the supremely Divine Communion, he terminates with a holy thanksgiving; whilst the multitude have merely glanced at the divine symbols alone, he is ever conducted by the Divine Spirit, as becomes a Hierarch, in the purity of a Godlike condition, to the holy sources of the things performed, in blessed and intelligible visions." Denys, EH, III.2.428A.

²⁰⁴ Dillon and Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition*, 131.

²⁰⁵ "As God, He was the motivating principle of His own humanity, and as man He was the revelatory principle of His own divinity. One could say, then, that He experienced suffering in a divine way, since it was voluntary (and He was not mere man); and that He worked miracles in a human way, since they were accomplished through the flesh (for He was not naked God). Therefore His sufferings are wondrous, for they have been renewed by the natural divine power of the one who suffered. So too are His wonders wedded to passibility, for they were completed by the naturally passible power of the flesh of the one who

principle is operative here in the liturgical life of the hierarch. The bishop fully realizes his theophanic place in the created order in the sensible and intelligible imitation of God that is liturgy. He suffers human things in a divine way insofar as he voluntarily imitates Jesus' suffering; and he carries out divine activities in a human way, insofar as he accomplishes them in the flesh.

Hierarchy stems from the sympathy established between God and the human over the first four letters, which sympathy Maximus correctly identifies as the basis for imitation of God. Over the course of Letters V-VII we see how hierarchy extends this field of sympathy – this place of mediation between God and man – beginning from the person of Jesus and encompassing the whole created order. There is no division or separation between the hierarch's pedestrian activities and his theurgical activities. Even the course of the conversation between Apollophanes and Polycarp has a hierarchical character. Denys initiates a conversation about the truth by declining to contend with his opponents over false accounts of the truth (purification). Then he gathers together the disparate views of Apollophanes and himself according to a unified account of the truth (illumination). Denys concludes his reconciliation between his own position and Apollophanes' by finding his own perspective articulated in the words of Apollophanes (union). The pattern of argumentation in Letter VII mirrors the pattern by which

worked them.” “Ὡς μὲν Θεὸς τῆς ἰδίας ἦν κινητικὸς ἀνθρωπότητος, ὡς ἄνθρωπος δὲ τῆς οἰκειᾶς ἐκφαντικὸς ὑπῆρχε θεότητος, θεϊκῶς μὲν, ἴν' οὕτως εἶπω, τὸ πάσχειν ἔχων, ἐκούσιον γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος ἦν, ἀνθρωπικῶς δὲ τὸ θαυματουργεῖν, διὰ σαρκὸς γάρ, ἐπεὶ μὴ γυμνὸς ὑπῆρχε Θεός, ὡς εἶναι τὰ πάθη θαυμαστά, τῇ κατὰ φύσιν θεϊκῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πάσχοντος καινιζόμενα, τὰ δὲ θαύματα παθητά, τῇ κατὰ φύσιν τοῦ αὐτὰ θαυματουργοῦντος παθητικῇ δυνάμει συμπληρούμενα τῆς σαρκός.” Maximus, *Ambigua* V.18.

hierarchy conducts the mind to the unifying contemplation of God, through purification, illumination, and union or perfection.

4.5 Liturgy and Theophany

In Letters II-IV Denys shows how God comes to be known in human substance: as Father and ἀρχή (source), as assuming human substance in the Incarnation of God the Son, and as the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus' perfect union of divinity and humanity in his activity. Letters V-VII stem from the sympathy that is established between God and humanity in the Incarnation, allowing human beings to participate in the life of God by means of sensible and intelligible imitations of the God-man. In Letters V-VII Denys writes to consecrated members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy concerning the intelligible imitations corresponding to the sensible imitations of their hierarchical orders. Letter V is written to a deacon who belongs to the purifying and initiating rank of consecrated ministers. The deacon's rank associates him with the purifying and initiating sacrament of Baptism. The argument of Letter V is that the soul must be purified of sensible and intelligible perceptions in order to enter into God, just as in Baptism the deacons assist in stripping the candidate of all external clothing to imitate the purification of the soul's contemplation in the union with God by negative theology. Letter VI is written to a priest who belongs to the illuminating rank of consecrated ministers and whose rank associates him with the illuminating sacrament of Communion. The argument of Letter VI is that the human soul's power is that of mediation: to know every sensible and intelligible thing as a representation of God – every (devotion) and (opinion) in so far as it represents God indeed. Just as the sacrament of Communion is a gathering of every power that falls within the ecclesiastical hierarchy into union with God according to the

capacity of each, so the priest should illuminate every devotion and opinion according to the truth which each communicates, rather than judging any particular thing to be absolutely true or absolutely false. In Communion, the gathering into union with God of all that falls within the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a sensible imitation of the illumination of the soul. Letter VII is written to a bishop who belongs to the perfecting rank of consecrated ministers. His rank associates him with the perfecting sacrament of Anointing. The argument of Letter VII is that the perfection of the human soul consists in her active realization of the soul and of everything she knows to be theophany. Correspondingly, the sacrament of Anointing is involved in every consecration of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and Denys refers to it as the most theurgical of all the sacraments because it makes actual the capacity of sensible things to be theophanies – manifestations of God. Just as the sacrament of Anointing realizes the theophanic capacity of sensible things, it belongs to the perfecting work of a bishop to conduct people's intellectual activity to the contemplation of God.

CHAPTER 5 LETTERS VIII-X

5.1 Hierarchy as Symbol

It may be hard to imagine a cosmology more saturated with divinity than that described at the conclusion of Letter VII. The third triad of letters (Letters VIII-X) demonstrates how this comprehensive divine presence and providence in every detail of the created cosmos is adequate to both unconverted and converted souls, able through its hierarchical structure of reality to work its providential governance and care in spite of human ignorance, error and sin. Thus the argument of the *Letters* concludes with a triad that indicates how hierarchy ultimately shapes and determines the saving character of all human friendship and community as imitation of the divine life. This final triad appropriately refers to the mysterious *Symbolic Theology* that theoretically would reveal divine theophany in every particular of the cosmos, including the human soul and community.

Letter VIII begins this final triad of letters with the challenge of an individual who willfully rejects the hierarchy that Denys has described as the structure of reality. Demophilus asserts his own particular perspective as more conducive to imitation of the Good than the hierarchy would achieve. That is, in spite of Demophilus' consecration to the perfected order of the laity, his adherence to his hierarchical orders remains imperfect. I am not suggesting that Demophilus' deficiency is concerned particularly with his ranking in one order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as opposed to another. As Louth explains, the trajectory in Denys' hierarchical systems is not one of ascending through the ranks. "[V]ery rarely does ascent mean movement up the system of the hierarchies... What ascent means – at least in part – is a more perfect union with that

divine energy (or will) which establishes one in the hierarchy. So one ‘ascends’ *into* hierarchy rather than up it.”²⁰⁶ Demophilus’ imperfection does not consist primarily in his hierarchical status. Neither is Demophilus’ imperfection principally due to his deficient understanding of the intelligible imitations of God pertaining to his sensible imitations as a monk in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In Letters V-VII we considered the perfection of creation through the ascending orders of the hierarchy. Here, in Letters VIII-X, we see that another kind of perfection is required having to do with the purification, illumination and perfection of the human soul. Demophilus’ impurity of soul – the passions – interfere with his fulfilling hierarchical duty to his superior (the priest), to his inferior (the penitent), and to his equals of the same order as he shirks his monastic responsibility to attend to “preside over his own house.”

The scope of Letters VIII-X, then, is psychic (pertaining to the purification, illumination, and perfection of the human soul), but it is also cosmic in scope. Letter VIII is largely Denys’ indictment that Demophilus’ confusion of hierarchical order and – in parallel with this – the overthrow of his reasoning soul by the passions is an offence to the order of the cosmos and to God. Demophilus’ offense threatens to exclude him from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that cosmic arrangement which discerns between the profane and initiated which are in process of sanctification and union with God. Denys argues that Demophilus’ offense makes the monk analogous to the elder brother from the parable of the prodigal son who is excluded from the celebration of the whole household of that story. Denys’ juxtaposes this analogy between Demophilus and the parable with an account of the creation *ex nihilo* in such a way as to suggest a further analogy.

²⁰⁶ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 166.

Demophilus' resistance of the penitent's reconciliation is in the same order as the elder brother's resistance of the father's love for the prodigal, and the resistance, as it were, of the fringes of the cosmos to be dragged into existence. The cosmic and psychic convergence of Demophilus' incident is well illustrated by a further analogy at the conclusion of Letter VIII. In Carpus' vision the proverbial veil which hides the intelligible reality is drawn back to show the cosmic repercussions of Carpus' grudge against an apostate and a catechumen.

5.2 Letter VIII: A Symbol of Divine Friendship

O'Meara, Hathaway, Sheldon-Williams, Vanneste, and Westcott agree that Denys' hierarchical system, like other Neoplatonic conceptions of human community, is absent of a political or ethical theory whereas the structures of the ecclesiastical community are only instrumental means to a mystical end: union with God. The above scholars are in agreement that a deficiency inherent in the erotic quality of Denys' Neoplatonic inspired hierarchy is that the body and the body politic is forfeited for the sake of the spiritual interest of achieving union with God. In this interpretation, the lesser goods represented in Plato by the lower rungs of Diotima's 'ladder of love,' the images and shadows found in the depths of Plato's allegorical cave, and the contingent ways of knowing and being that belong to the visible divisions of Plato's divided line, serve as stepping-stones by which the soul ascends to higher states of being and knowing.

On the other hand, in an insightful article on Aristotle's concept of *φιλία*, Robert Crouse challenges the view that Denys (and other interpreters of Plato) has a purely instrumental understanding of the visible world, politics, and ethics. Crouse insists that there is no other starting point in approaching the good life other than the erotic. We

begin with what appears good to the senses and then proceed to desire better things: “the instinctive love of physical beauty is a necessary stepping-stone to a higher love, which could not be approached otherwise. One must begin with the shadows at the bottom of the cave and not elsewhere.”²⁰⁷ Prior to any discussion of what is to be done with the sensible, corporeal world and the sensible, practical ways of engaging it, it must be acknowledged that there would be no discussion of anything else – no discourse at all – if it were not for the ἔρωσ (aspiring love) by which the soul desires that which is better, more stable, and more lovely. On Crouse’s reading of Aristotle, however, the highest conceivable love is that of friendship with God, although the Philosopher understands this to be impossible: “a life too high for man.”²⁰⁸ Denys’ eighth letter introduces the notion of friendship, and specifically friendship with God, in terms that resemble Aristotelian φιλία.

In Denys’ discussion on divine friendship in his letter to Demophilus the first characteristic of φιλία which we note in comparison with ἔρωσ is the subtle but important point that, while the soul can be brought to the love of virtue in the course of her desiring after the Good, friendship with God is itself the sum of all the virtues. Denys argues this point explicitly in the first section of Letter VIII by highlighting heroes of the OT whose surpassing virtue is assumed in their friendship with God. Moses’ familiarity with God the Good (ὁμιλοῦντα θεῷ τὰγαθῷ), his exceptional similarity to God the Good (πρὸς τὸ ὅτι μάλιστα ὁμοιότατον), and his performance of deeds of good friendship (τὰς ἀγαθοφιλεῖς ἐργατείας) are all of a piece.²⁰⁹ Denys’ use of the verb ὁμιλέω in this

²⁰⁷ Crouse, *Aristotle’s Doctrine of Philia*, p. 4.

²⁰⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.7.1159a.

²⁰⁹ Denys, *Letters*, VIII.1.1085A-1088A.

context reminds of the scriptural description of Moses' encountering the Lord in the tabernacle, "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend."²¹⁰ Moses' "conversation" with God consists in deeds of good friendship. Denys takes David to be a second case in point. His friendship with God is demonstrated in the excellent and godlike virtue of doing good deeds for the sake of one's enemies.²¹¹ In both cases φιλία (friendship-love) is seen to have a distinct quality in comparison with the desiring love of ἔρως whereas the virtues are, for Denys, expressions of friendship with God, not simply means of attaining to God.

The second distinctive quality of φιλία is that it is grounded in defined relationships. Unlike ἔρως which continually deserts one object of its love in preference for another, φιλία is bound by the fixed parameters of a particular friendship. Denys demonstrates this characteristic of the loving union with God very strongly in Letter VIII. The friendship between God and human beings is defined by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and Denys does not concede to Demophilus that there is any instance in which hierarchical order should be contradicted. Without minimizing in any way the gravity of human shortcomings and the need for correction, Denys insists that this perfection of hierarchical order must take place by means of hierarchical order: "amongst all existing things their due is assigned through the first to the second, by the well-ordered and most just forethought of all. Let those, then, who have been ordered by God to superintend

²¹⁰ "καὶ ἐλάλησεν κύριος πρὸς Μωϋσῆν ἐνώπιος ἐνωπίω ὡς εἴ τις λαλήσει πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ φίλον". Exodus 33:11.

²¹¹ "And what makes David, the father of God, a friend of God? Even for being good and generous toward enemies. The Super-Good and Friend of God says – 'I have found a man after my own heart.'" ("Τί δὲ τὸν θεοπάτορα Δαυὶδ ἐποίησε θεοφιλεῖ; Καὶ γὰρ ἀγαθὸν ὄντα, καὶ περὶ ἐχθροὺς ἀγαθόν· 'Εὔρηκα' φησὶν, ὁ ὑπεράγαθος ὁ φιλάγαθος, 'ἄνδρα κατὰ τὴν καρδίαν μου.'") ²¹¹ Denys, *Letters*, VIII.1.1085B.

others, distribute after themselves their due to their inferiors.”²¹² Whereas the imperfection of a particular good might motivate the soul to aspire after a more perfect good, abandoning the imperfect object she formerly desired, such that ἔρωσ carries the lover from one good to another, φιλία begins and ends in the activity of a particular relationship.

The third quality of φιλία (friendship-love) is that it equalizes those which are unequal. Aristotle says that friendship is natural between equals, but it also occurs between those which are unequal because of its equalizing character. On this point, φιλία and ἔρωσ are identical; the mutual desire has its vital place within the love of friendship. Indeed, this equalizing love between differing lovers makes manifest the superiority of the one even as it perfects the inferiority of the other.²¹³ Letter VIII shows how this equalization is a characteristic of φιλία by a negative example, in Demophilus’ defiance of his hierarchical superior, his failure to govern the passions of his own soul (whereas the passions are themselves the hierarchical inferiors over which monks are to rule), and in shirking this monastic duty which he shares with his equals in the ecclesiastical

²¹² “ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς οὔσι διὰ τῶν πρώτων τοῖς δευτέροις ἀπονέμεται τὰ κατ’ ἀξίαν ὑπὸ τῆς πάντων εὐτάκτου καὶ δικαιοτάτης προνοίας. Οἱ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλων ἐπάρχειν ὑπὸ θεοῦ ταχθέντες ἀπονεύωσι μεθ’ ἑαυτοῦς καὶ τοῖς ὑπηκόοις τὰ κατ’ ἀξίαν.” Denys, *Letters*, VIII.3.1093A.

²¹³ “By all things, then, the Beautiful and Good is desired and beloved and cherished; and, by reason of It, and for the sake of It, the less love the greater suppliantly; and those of the same rank, their fellows brotherly; and the greater, the less considerately; and these severally love the things of themselves continuously; and all things by aspiring to the Beautiful and Good, do and wish all things whatever they do and wish. Further, it may be boldly said with truth, that even the very Author of all things, by reason of overflowing Goodness, loves all, perfects all, sustains all, attracts all; and even the Divine Love is Good of Good, by reason of the Good.” (“Πᾶσιν οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐφετὸν καὶ ἐραστὸν καὶ ἀγαπητὸν, καὶ δι’ αὐτὸ καὶ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ τὰ ἥττω τῶν κρείττωνων ἐπιστρεπτικῶς ἐρῶσι καὶ κοινωνικῶς τὰ ὁμόστοιχα τῶν ὁμοταγῶν καὶ τὰ κρείττω τῶν ἡττόνων προνοητικῶς καὶ αὐτὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστα συνεκτικῶς, καὶ πάντα τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἐφιέμενα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται πάντα, ὅσα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται. Παρρησιάζεται δὲ καὶ τοῦτο εἰπεῖν ὁ ἀληθῆς λόγος, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ πάντων αἴτιος δι’ ἀγαθότητος ὑπερβολὴν πάντων ἐρᾷ, πάντα ποιεῖ, πάντα τελειοῖ, πάντα συνέχει, πάντα ἐπιστρέφει, καὶ ἐστὶ καὶ ὁ θεῖος ἔρωσ ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθοῦ διὰ τὸ ἀγαθόν.”) Denys, DN, IV.10.708A, B.

hierarchy. Both φιλία and ἔρως alike can be seen to share this equalizing quality. Letter VIII extends this beyond the human relationships of which the ecclesiastical hierarchy consists and shows how the whole of the created order is a playing-out of the friendship between God and humanity. Denys demonstrates this equalizing characteristic of φιλία by juxtaposing the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the parable of the prodigal son. He draws an analogy between the father's love of his prodigal son and God's creation of the world out of nothing to show how the divine φιλία reconciles things that are fundamentally different.

Finally, φιλία must be active. While we have seen that φιλία (friendship-love) cannot be divorced from the concrete relationship between the friends, neither can a relationship consist merely of the external signs of friendship if the relationship is empty of the activity which they signify. Again, this point is made explicitly in Letter VIII where Denys responds to the anticipated objection of Demophilus: “‘What then,’ thou sayest, ‘is it not necessary to correct the priests who are acting irreverently... through the transgression of the Law?’”²¹⁴ To this Denys responds:

And those which are somewhat nearer to the true light, are at once more luminous, and more illuminating; and do not understand the nearness topically, but according to God-receptive aptitude. If, then, the order of the priests is the illuminating, entirely has he fallen from the priestly rank and power, who does not illuminate, or perhaps rather (he becomes) the unilluminated. And he seems, to me at least, rash who, being such, undertakes the priestly functions, and has no fear, and does not blush, when performing things Divine, contrary to propriety... This one is not a

²¹⁴ “Τί οὖν, φήεις, οὐ χρηὶ τοὺς ἱερέας ἀσεβοῦντας ἢ ἄλλο τι τῶν ἀτόπων ἐξελεγχομένους εὐθύνεσθαι, μόνοις δὲ ἐξέεται τοῖς καυχόμενοις ἐν νόμῳ διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζειν;” Denys, *Letters*, VIII.2.1092A-1092B.

priest, - No! - but devilish - crafty a deceiver of himself - and a wolf to the people of God, clothed in sheep's clothing.²¹⁵

A person belongs to a particular order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy precisely to the extent that such a person performs the activities of that order. So much for the priestly order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but Denys' argument cuts in more than one way. Demophilus' friendship with God is active to the extent that he exercises his place in all the dynamics of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a monk: "the less love the greater suppliantly; and those of the same rank, their fellows brotherly; and the greater, the less considerately".²¹⁶

Belonging as he does to the contemplative order of the church everything that Demophilus experiences by way of his superiors, his fellows, and his inferiors presents an occasion for contemplation. In the subsequent letters, IX and X, we see that every human experience bears the potential to be interpreted philosophically, as a token of God's love for humanity or of the divine *φιλανθρωπία* (philanthropy). These letters demonstrate how the person who has ascended to the contemplative state of unknowing union with God never 'leaves behind' that union with the One beyond-knowing but can imitate the human and divine activities of God-incarnate through the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the temporal process of human life. In this way, nothing is neutral in the friendship between divinity and humanity. The soul's every experience is a

²¹⁵ τῆς μᾶλλον ἀφεστηκυίας ἐστί, καὶ φωτεινότερα ἅμα καὶ φωτιστικώτερα τὰ μᾶλλον τῷ ἀληθινῷ φωτὶ πλησιαίτερα. Καὶ μὴ τοπικῶς ἐκλάβοις, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν θεοδόχον ἐπιτη δεϊότητα τὸν πλησιασμόν. Εἰ τοίνυν ἢ τῶν ἱερέων ἐστὶ διακόσμησις ἢ φωτιστικὴ, παντελῶς ἀποπέπτωκε τῆς ἱερατικῆς τάξεως καὶ δυνάμεως ὁ μὴ φωτιστικός, ἢ ποῦ γε μᾶλλον ὁ ἀφώτιστος. Καὶ τολμηρὸς ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ τοῖς ἱερατικοῖς ὁ τοιοῦτος ἐγχειρῶν, καὶ οὐ δέδοικεν οὐδὲ αἰσχύνεται τὰ θεῖα ... Οὐκ ἐστὶν οὗτος ἱερεὺς, οὐκ ἐστὶν, ἀλλὰ δυσμενής, δόλιος, ἐμπαίκτης ἑαυτοῦ καὶ λύκος ἐπὶ τὸν θεῖον λαὸν κωδίῳ καθωπλισμένος. Denys, *Letters*, VIII.2.

²¹⁶ "τὰ ἥττω τῶν κρείττωνων ἐπιστρεπτικῶς ἐρῶσι καὶ κοινωνικῶς τὰ ὁμόστοιχα τῶν ὁμοταγῶν καὶ τὰ κρείττω τῶν ἡττόνων προνοητικῶς καὶ αὐτὰ ἑαυτῶν ἕκαστα συνεκτικῶς". Denys, DN, IV.10.1092B-1092C.

theophany and an occasion for contemplative ascent to God, and her every activity can be an imitation of the Jesus' condescension – simultaneously an act of worship and an extension of God's philanthropy.

Contra the positions of O'Meara, Hathaway, Sheldon-Williams, Vanneste, and Westcott, our consideration of divine friendship in Letter VIII, as the virtue which implies every virtue and the love which orders the soul's many loves, has shown that Denys does not treat human community exclusively as a means to union with God. To be sure, the human community and the sacraments of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, anchored as they are on the Incarnation, are the only positive means by which the soul can be united with God. But this in no way diminishes the significance of human relationships, of sensible experience, or of embodied life. On the contrary, it affirms the final significance of everything as, in some way, making God manifest in that which is not God. Indeed, we have no other union with God except that which is mediated by the human beings of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the human being who is God: Jesus. Ivanović insists that for Denys there is no difference between God and the mediation by which we encounter God.²¹⁷ If this last point was not demonstrated in Letters V-VII, in which we considered directly the sensible and the intelligible imitations by which human beings are united with God, then the identity between God and divine mediation is unmistakable in Letter VIII. That is to say, for Denys, *φιλία* is conceived in the context of personal relationships.

²¹⁷ Ivanovic, "The ecclesiology of Dionysius the Areopagite," 39.

For Denys, the union of friendship-love between God and humanity is not an unending aspiration for satisfaction, but it is made possible by the Incarnation. Through the mediation of the Church, this can be actively realized in the circumstance of daily life. This ultimate friendship-love between humanity and God does not finally reject the lower loves, but embraces them, and it is in the context of this all-embracing love that every other love finds its ordered place.

Corrigan describes the view that divine love involves a certain sympathy which carries through in the activities of all living things as a Neoplatonic development that makes explicit what is implicit in Plato and Aristotle themselves. But he says that Denys brings this to a pitch when he asserts, in the light of the Incarnation, that “the Unmoved God is simultaneously moved to care for everything. Of course, this is no longer Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, but it is the culmination of a long pagan tradition starting with Plato and Aristotle.” As Corrigan says, “even if Dionysius in a sense ‘destroys’ the Unmoved Mover, he is the first to articulate the paradox or to show how the ultimate Unmoved Godhead can without departing from its own intimate life fall in love intimately with everything.”²¹⁸

5.3 Letter IX: Monstrous Exterior and Beautiful Interior

Letter IX is the second longest of Denys’ *Letters* and warrants a summary on account of the sheer scale of its themes. Beyond this, however, it also contains Dionysius’ most lucid explanations of symbolic theology and of the synthesis between philosophy and theurgy which is so crucial to his teaching.

²¹⁸ Corrigan, “How did Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover come to love everything by the end of the ancient pagan tradition?” 22.

Denys lays out the basic theory of symbolic theology in the first section of Letter IX. He confines the raw data for symbolic theology to include all those “sensible symbols” concerning God which may be found in sacred scripture.²¹⁹ Thus, the infinite is to be symbolized exclusively by scripturally sanctioned figures of finite things. Denys gives a catalogue of divine symbols in scripture, ranging from the Trinitarian relations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to natural symbols of God, and a host of anthropomorphisms: utensils and ornaments, passions of the soul, and anecdotal episodes from biblical histories.

Denys goes on to explain that this dissimilarity between sign and signified, between the finite symbols and the infinite God, is an essential characteristic of symbolic theology. The dissimilarity of a sensible symbol, relative to God who is beyond knowing, safeguards the interpreter of this symbol from confusion. Since no one is capable of contemplating God beyond thought and being, the dissimilarity of a symbol will ensure that, whether a person interprets an image with the passionless part of the soul or the impassioned, no one will confuse the dissimilar symbol with the God it symbolizes but will seek after a better symbol from among those sanctioned by scripture.²²⁰ The two sides of Denys’ entire theology are divided on this line. Negative theology is the philosophical way of knowing God by unknowing, by a denial of any and all

²¹⁹ “For, we contemplate [the Divine Mysteries] only through the sensible symbols that have grown upon them.” (“θεώμεθα γὰρ μόνον αὐτὰ διὰ τῶν προσπεφυκότων αὐτοῖς αἰσθητῶν συμβόλων.”) Denys, *Letters*, IX.1.

²²⁰ “For, it was seemly, not only that the Holy of holies should be preserved undefiled by the multitude, but also that the Divine knowledge should illuminate the human life, which is at once indivisible and divisible, in a manner suitable to itself; and to limit the passionless part of the soul to the simple, and most inward visions of the most godlike images; but its impassioned part should wait upon, and, at the same time, strive after, the most Divine coverings, through the pre-arranged representations of the typical symbols, as such (coverings) as are congenial to it.” Denys, *Letters*, IX.1.1108A.

symbolization of God. Positive theology is an affirmation of God according to the best symbols that are granted.

In the second section of Letter IX Denys, following St Paul, expands the field of symbols to include the very order of the visible universe.²²¹ The natural order of creation is to be understood as a pattern for the orderly “unfolding” of the sacred symbols. In Sections 3, 4, and 5 of Letter IX Denys addresses Titus’ question directly, which concerns the symbolism of God in scripture as a bowl, as drink, as solid food, and as a house. The bowl is representative of divine providence which contains the whole of creation and which supplies a liquid nourishment in abundance. The drink is a token of a stream which flows liberally for the good cheer, nourishment and perfection of all things. The solid food represents a stable, unshifting knowledge of God which nourishes the contemplating organ of sense. And the house represents the construction of wisdom which houses the bowl, the drink, and the food.

In Sections 5 and 6 Denys offers an explicit yet brief meditation on Jesus’ Last Supper with the disciples, which combines all of the aforementioned symbols, together with the intoxication and the sleep of the company that is gathered. Finally, we learn that the sleep represents God’s incommunicability with created beings and the divine wakefulness represents the providential care of God for all. The letter concludes with a

²²¹ Denys, *Letters*, IX.2.1108B. The reference to Paul is from Romans 1: “τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοῦς ἀναπολογήτους,” (“For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse”).

reiteration that this teaching is but a sample of Denys' greater treatise, *Symbolic Theology*.

Symbolic theology is the method by which Denys understands every scriptural name for God, every hierarchy of the cosmos, and everything in the created order to be a representation of God. We have seen that the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy incorporate everything that is available to sensible perception into a theophanic vision of the universe. But the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself is only one example of the kind of symbols Denys is discussing in Letter IX. In Letter IX Denys employs symbolic theology to unfold the meaning of a particular set of imagery from sacred scripture: “what is the house of wisdom, what the bowl, and what are its meats and drinks?”²²² This letter is but an application of a more comprehensive treatment entitled *Symbolic Theology*, which is not extant, and which Denys alludes to in this letter and elsewhere in the CD.

We have already encountered negative theology in the first four of Denys' letters, and we have encountered positive theology in Letters V-VII. To know God by negative theology is to know that God is not equal to anything sensible or intelligible. The negation is not one of deficiency but one of excess, acknowledging that God is beyond everything that is perceptible either to the senses or to the intellect.

We have also encountered the opposite of negative theology – positive theology – in the *Letters* which Denys writes to ordained ministers of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In Letters V-VII Denys instructs a deacon, a priest, and a bishop in the theological

²²² Denys, *Letters*, IX.1104A.

principles which correspond to their roles in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The ecclesiastical hierarchy employs all manner of sensible images in order to guide human beings to intellectual contemplations of God. This arrangement of hierarchical orders coordinates the whole of the sensible world in correspondence with the intelligible imitations of God which comprise the celestial hierarchy. With Letter VII Denys brings Polycarp to the point of acknowledging that everything in creation, when it is perfectly contemplated, is understood to be a manifestation of God.

To draw out the transition between Letter VIII and Letter IX, for Demophilus, the symbol of the ecclesiastical hierarchy has a monstrous appearance which he cannot bear, both on account of the priest who seems to act irreverently and on account of sinful man seeking absolution. The one appears to him devilish, like a wolf in sheep's clothing who undertakes the priestly function without fear,²²³ and the others appear to him no better than companions of demons.²²⁴ In Letter IX, however, we learn that there is a reason for the monstrous appearance of divine symbols, of which the ecclesiastical hierarchy is an example. The various symbols of God protect those who are not initiated, the profane, or those whose contemplation of God remain unpurified from confusing God with that which is created. Demophilus must enter into the symbol of the ecclesiastical hierarchy by purifying his soul of the passions. By submitting to the sacred symbol of hierarchical order, Demophilus can reciprocate the self-emptying love of God for humanity. The love of God extends to humanity through the mediation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and human beings can return this love by conforming to the strictures of the ecclesiastical

²²³ Denys, *Letters*, VIII.2.1092C.

²²⁴ Denys, *Letters*, VIII.5.1097A.

hierarchy. Thus there is also a cosmic aspect to this purification of even a single human soul.

The sacred symbols purify our theology of the passions. And the sacred symbols illuminate our capacity to theologize. The symbols safeguard the profane from contemplating God in a confused, impassioned way. As Denys explains in Letter IX, there is the passionless part and there is the impassioned part in every human soul. The impassioned part of the soul is that part which is moved by what is external to it. The sacred symbols of scripture instruct this part of the soul in an affirmative way. Simultaneously, the sacred symbols instruct the passionless part of the soul in a negative way. “[T]he teaching, handed down by the Theologians is two-fold – one, secret and mystical – the other, open and better known – one, symbolical and initiative – the other, philosophic and demonstrative; – and the unspoken is intertwined with the spoken.”²²⁵ Symbolic theology involves both strands of positive and negative theology. On the one hand, apophatic theology contemplates God by making denials about God, that he is perceived in anything whatsoever, not due to any deficiency in God but because God so exceeds everything that can be perceived by sense or intellect. On the other hand, Denys conceives of everything in the created order according to a kataphatic way of theology, as manifestations of God.²²⁶ Here, in Denys’ ninth letter on symbolic theology, he explains how the two ways are related.

More than explaining the interrelation of affirmative and negative theology, Denys shows how symbolic theology actually illuminates the shape of the human soul.

²²⁵ Denys, *Letters*, IX.2.1108B-C.

²²⁶ Denys, DN, I.8.597B.

For, it was seemly, not only that the Holy of holies should be preserved undefiled by the multitude, but also that the Divine knowledge should illuminate the human life, which is at once indivisible and divisible, in a manner suitable to itself; and to limit the passionless part of the soul to the simple, and most inward visions of the most godlike images; but its impassioned part should wait upon, and, at the same time, strive after, the most Divine coverings, through the pre-arranged representations of the typical symbols, as such (coverings) as are congenial to it.²²⁷

The symbols do not exist for their own sake, as though the more exalted symbols would be somehow diminished were they to be mixed or confused with more humble symbols. (In a way, this was Demophilus' concern when he contravened hierarchical order in a wrong-headed attempt to preserve the sanctuary from defilement.) The symbols exist in order to illuminate both the impassioned and the passionless parts of the soul. They provide the passionless part of the soul with that by which God may be denied and thus known most philosophically and truly. They also provide the impassioned part of the soul with sanctioned objects of perception which, Denys says, have the potential to move the soul to "strive after the most Divine coverings, through the prearranged representations of the typical symbols, as such (coverings) are, by nature, congenial to it."

It is this last point which highlights potential for the soul in seeking to know God – affirmatively and negatively, which is to say, symbolically – to be illumined, both in terms of knowing itself and in terms of knowing the cosmos. Denys' second chapter of CH and his introductory chapter to DN are helpful in following the interplay of the

²²⁷ "Μη γὰρ οἰώμεθα τὰ φαινόμενα τῶν συνθημάτων ὑπὲρ ἑαυτῶν ἀνα πεπλάσθαι, προβεβληθῆσθαι δὲ τῆς ἀπορρήτου καὶ ἀθεάτου τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐπιστήμης, ὡς μὴ τοῖς βεβήλοις εὐχείρωτα εἶναι τὰ πανίερα· μόνοις δὲ ἀνακαλύπτεσθαι τοῖς τῆς θεότητος γνησίοις ἐρασταῖς, ὡς πᾶσαν τὴν παιδαριώδη φαντασίαν ἐπὶ τῶν ἱερῶν συμβόλων ἀποσκευαζομένοις καὶ ἱκανοῖς διαβαίνειν ἀπλότητι νοῦ καὶ θεωρητικῆς δυνάμεως ἐπιτηδειότητι πρὸς τὴν ἀπλὴν καὶ ὑπερφυῆ καὶ ὑπεριδρυμένην τῶν συμβόλων ἀλήθειαν." Denys, *Letter*, IX.1.1108A.

identity between thought and being as it is operative in Letter IX. Those treatises, CH and DN, are chiefly concerned with intelligible “symbols” of God (the divine names and the Trinitarian imitations of the celestial hierarchy), whereas Letter IX is chiefly concerned with the sensible symbols of God from the scriptures. Nevertheless, the fundamental division in Denys’ theology is not between the intelligible and the sensible creation but between God and the creation. Therefore, certain principles from these treatises will still pertain to our discussion of Letter IX, and in some cases Denys explicitly states in these treatises that his reasoning applies equally to the sensible symbols.

The philosophical underpinnings of Denys’ symbolic theology form the basis of his anthropology, and the capacity of human nature will determine humanity’s capacity for active union or friendship with God. These principles are not absent from other parts of the CD, but Denys incorporates them in Letter IX in a way that draws together his theory of *θέωσις* – the way in which humans become one with God.

For example, everything in Denys’ symbolic theology depends upon a God who is fundamentally different from the entirety of the created world. Intelligible perceptions (or the divine names) no less than sensible perceptions (or the sacred symbols) are completely incapable of representing God. Plato’s *Republic* is the locus classicus for this philosophical principle which so shaped the Neoplatonic tradition that followed him, together with Dionysius, in positing that God is beyond thought and being. Plato writes: “Therefore, you should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being,

but superior to it in rank and power.”²²⁸ That which is beyond knowing and being known is nevertheless the cause of that which is known and being known, for Plato and Denys alike. As Denys says in Letter IX:

[T]he Author of the being, and of the well being, of all things, is both an all-perfect providence and advances to all, and comes into being in everything, and embraces them all; and on the other hand, He, the same, in the same, *par excellence*, is nothing in anything at all, but overtops the whole, Himself being in Himself, identically and always.²²⁹

Denys, follows a development in the Neoplatonic tradition, according to which God should be contemplated beyond the Good, as well as beyond thought and being. Creation is absolutely different from God, but Denys also makes explicit here that God is in no way absent to creation. They are all sacred symbols: God makes even the sensible creatures to be what they are, fills them with that which they are, and is not contained by them but overflows them, without admitting any change or movement to the divine nature.²³⁰

In Letter IX we see that symbolic theology is decidedly non-dualistic. The whole of the cosmos has its creation, redemption, and sustenance in the good providence of God, and the symbols must be interpreted according to this teleological framework.²³¹ In DN Denys employs a similar philosophical principle as that of Proclus’, “Every effect

²²⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 509.b.5-7.

²²⁹ “καὶ πρόνοια παντελής ἐστὶν ὁ τοῦ εἶναι καὶ τοῦ εὖ εἶναι τὰ πάντα αἴτιος καὶ ἐπὶ πάντα πρόεισι καὶ ἐν τῷ παντὶ γίγνεται καὶ περιέχει τὰ πάντα καὶ αἰθὶς ὁ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν οὐδὲν ἐν οὐδενὶ κατ’ οὐδὲν ἐστὶν· ἀλλ’ ἐξήρηται τῶν ὄλων αὐτὸς ἐν ἑαυτῷ ταύτως καὶ αἰδίω”. Denys, *Letters*, IX.3.1109C.

²³⁰ “For thus contemplating [the expressions concerning the Divine Mysteries], we should reverence a fountain of Life flowing into Itself – viewing It even standing by Itself, and a kind of single power, simple, self-moved, and self-worked, not abandoning Itself, but a knowledge surpassing every kind of knowledge, and always contemplating Itself, through Itself.” Denys, *Letter*, IX.4.1112A, B.

²³¹ “For the whole statement lying before them, and all its details, does not contain a bare history, but a vivifying perfection... And never must we confuse the sacred symbols hap-hazard, but we must unfold them suitably to the causes, or the origins, or the powers, or the orders, or the dignities of which they are explanatory tokens.” Denys, *Letters*, IX.2.1109A.

remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it.”²³² Denys renders the same principle as follows:

The Good indeed is not entirely uncommunicated to any single created being, but benignly sheds forth its super-essential ray, persistently fixing in Itself, by illuminations analogous to each several being, and elevates to Its permitted contemplation and communion and likeness, those holy minds, who, as far as is lawful and reverent, strive after it...²³³

This teaching of symbolic theology illuminates the sensible universe whereas it does not admit that anything in creation is entirely removed from participation in the Good.

Rather, both parts of the human soul make profitable use of every sensible symbol of the Oracles.

Denys’ model of the soul has been described above as consisting of both impassioned and passionless parts, and as knowing things according to the mode of the knower. Denys uses this to reiterate our incapacity to conceive of God, and thus he establishes our dependence on the Oracles in order to conceive of God according to our capacity: “things intelligible cannot be comprehended and contemplated by things of sense, and things uncompounded and unformed by things compounded and formed”.²³⁴

The various symbols of scripture are significant to different beings variously.²³⁵ Denys

²³² Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 35.

²³³ “Ὁὐ μὴν ἀκοινωνητόν ἐστι καθόλου τάγαθόν οὐδενὶ τῶν ὄντων, ἀλλ’ ἐφ’ ἑαυτοῦ μονίμως τὴν ὑπερούσιον ἰδρῦσαν ἀκτῖνα ταῖς ἐκάστου τῶν ὄντων ἀναλόγοις ἐλλάμψεσιν ἀγαθοπρεπῶς ἐπιφαίνεται καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐφικτὴν αὐτοῦ θεωρίαν καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ ὁμοίωσιν ἀνατείνει τοὺς ἱεροὺς νόας τοὺς ὡς θεμιτὸν αὐτῷ καὶ ἱεροπρεπῶς ἐπιβάλλοντας”. Denys, DN, I.2.588D. Again, this quotation from Denys refers specifically to the function of the intelligible, divine names of scripture in the pattern of remaining in, proceeding from, and returning to the One, to use the Neoplatonic formulation. The function of the sensible symbols of symbolic theology is fundamentally the same as that of the divine names. Although, in reference to both the intelligible and the sensible creation, Denys’ pattern would align best with the nuances of the Christian formulation: creating, redeeming and sustaining.

²³⁴ Denys, DN, I.1.588B.

²³⁵ “And differently must we take the same likeness of fire, when spoken with regard to the inconceivable God; and differently with regard to his intelligible providences or words, and differently respecting the Angels.” Denys, *Letters*, IX.2.1108D.

explains in CH II that a base passion such as lust, if it is applied symbolically to an animal or a plant, which does not have a reasoning soul, then the symbol would be applied as a detraction. But if the same passion of lust were applied to an angel then the symbol, on account of its dissimilar similitude, would be applied in a way that embellished the term, for instance as “Divine love.” Symbolic theology, then, is a gathering together and an illumination of every mode of being and knowing. The various kinds of soul approach the symbols in their various ways, but the symbols are illuminating to each one.

In Denys’ symbolic theology everything in creation is different from God but given by God as symbols or tokens, *συνθήματα*. Everything in creation presses upon and moves the impassioned part of the human soul while the passionless part of the soul remains untouched and unmoved, reserved for the true contemplation of very God, beyond thought and being. In that union, God and humanity are perfectly united according to their respective substances, even while they remain perfectly distinct. Nevertheless, in so far as the impassioned part of the soul moves and is moved in the created world, it too engages with God, only by means of tokens.

5.4 Letter X: The Disciple whom Jesus Loved

In Letter VIII we saw that in spite of Demophilus’ perfection among the hierarchical orders of the laity (that is, the arrangement of sensible things whereby human beings are conducted to intellectual contemplations of God) Demophilus nevertheless only realizes his hierarchical place imperfectly. In fact, Denys says the monk’s error is so grievous that it threatens to exclude Demophilus from the hierarchy and from the created order which it encompasses. Demophilus’ capitulation of the passionless part of

the soul to the impassioned part is a rejection of the tokens of divine friendship. What is more, he uses the very tokens, or symbols, of divine friendship – the ecclesiastical hierarchy and his place within it – against divine friendship: to withhold divine love from a penitent man, which Carpus’ dream shows to be equivalent with ‘striking against’ Christ himself. Thus Demophilus returns divine friendship with enmity against God. Letter VIII, then, is about Denys confronting Demophilus with the state of enmity which he occupies vis-à-vis God. And Denys seeks to persuade Demophilus to enter into friendship precisely by recognizing his own enmity toward God and the divine love which extends to enemies. Letter VIII establishes the scope of the last three letters (VIII-X) by introducing the substance of divine friendship.

Letter IX illuminates the capacity of divine friendship – friendship between God and human beings. It consists in the perfect union and distinction between God and the human soul which contemplates God beyond thought and being. But this friendship is also born out in the entirety of the sensible and intelligible creation and in the sensual and intellectual faculties of the human soul, which are symbols of this friendship. In Letter IX we see how a philosophical analysis of the created order sheds light on the potential of everything in the cosmos to become tokens of love, given and received between divine and human friends.

John realizes his human potential to be a friend of God by means of the senses and by means of the intellect, with the impassioned part of the soul and with the passionless part. The trajectory of the *Letters* brings us to John as a human being who fully participates in the complete self-emptying of God, confirming the ordering of the *Letters* as an inversion of the ordering of the treatises.

It is significant that the recipient of this letter is John – the apostle and divine evangelist. His life is a demonstration of psychic activity in the midst of corporeal suffering. Although Polycarp, Titus, and Denys himself are actual martyrs whereas John was the only of the disciples to die of natural causes, nonetheless, tradition remembers his “white martyrdom” for giving his life to God by his obedient will and contemplative love.

Denys writes to John as though the moment of communion with Christ and the other disciples at the Last Supper were the lens through which he experiences everything. The visions which John sees and records in his exile become the oracles whence the divine names and the sacred symbols are derived. In CH I.3 Denys explains how our human mind depends upon material representations of God in order to be conducted to immaterial representations of God, and he explains there the way in which the scriptures employ sensible things to this effect. The scriptures are written “in order that It might lead us through the sensible to the intelligible, and from the inspired symbols to the simple sublimities of the Heavenly Hierarchies.”²³⁶ As an apostle (and thus one of the first hierarchs) John is capable of the intelligible contemplations that are reserved for the hierarch at the culmination of the sacrament of Communion. By the same token, however, John is also a writer of sacred scripture, under which form he represents intelligible contemplations under sensible symbols.

With Letter X we come to the culmination of Denys’ series of *Letters*, but it is also the culmination of the CD as a whole. The logic which governs the sequence of the

²³⁶ Denys, CH I.3.121C.

Letters proceeds in parallel to the logic which governs the sequence of Denys' four treatises, according to the ordering in the manuscript tradition, although the *Letters* follow the inverse ordering relative to the treatises. Louth argues persuasively that the treatises follow a liturgical logic:

The *Celestial Hierarchy* expounds the order and function of the angelic ranks: there we can see in an unconfused way the principles that govern hierarchical order. These principles are then applied in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* to the structure and liturgy of the Church on earth... the *Divine Names* then looks to the One who has brought all this about and whose praises we sing in the liturgy, and the *Mystical Theology* looks at the culminating significance of the liturgy and draws the whole together.²³⁷

Just as the treatises are arranged according to the gathering up of the created order in a liturgical ascent to union with God, the arrangement of the *Letters* follows the theurgical condensation of God, even to the minutiae of the created order and human experience. Letter I corresponds with MT whereas it is a simple, pure contemplation of God through unknowing. Letters II-IV correspond with the contemplation of God according to the common and the distinct names of the Thearchy which are also treated in DN. Letters V-VII correspond with EH because they explain the intellectual imitations of God which are in turn imitated in a sensible way by the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Finally, Letters VIII-X are about the purification, illumination and perfection of the human soul – both its impassioned part and its passionless part – by which it contemplates God through the sacred symbols of scripture. And the symbols which pertain to God by greater dissimilarity are the more exalted. The logic of these letters is shared with that of CH: “it is most agreeable to the revealing Oracles to conceal, through mystical and sacred enigmas, and to keep the holy and secret truth respecting the supermundane minds

²³⁷ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 31.

inaccessible to the multitude. For it is not everyone that is holy, nor, as the Oracles affirm, does knowledge belong to all.”²³⁸ Thus, the *Letters* follow a descending trajectory by which God is contemplated according to revelations ranging from greater similarity to greater dissimilarity.

The prisoner in Plato’s famous allegory of the cave turns away from the shadows which attend his place of confinement and he gradually ascends until he finally sees the light by which the world is illuminated: the sun which represents the Good beyond thought and being. The *Letters* follow the opposite course in that they begin with the unknowing contemplation of God beyond thought and being²³⁹ and they proceed in an orderly way toward the visions of a prisoner in confinement.

5.5 Divine and Human Suffering

John, the Apostle and Evangelist, who is the recipient of Denys’ tenth letter, ought to be distinguished from the nameless prisoner of Plato’s cave. Letter X is the culminating letter of the collection because John demonstrates in his sufferings and activities the perfect union and distinction of divine and human natures. On the one hand, John is entirely powerless according to what we have been calling the impassioned part of the soul. On the other hand, Denys begins his letter with regal veneration: “I salute thee, the holy soul! O beloved one... Hail! Why should it be a marvel, if Christ speaks truly, and the unjust banish His disciples from their cities, themselves bringing upon themselves their due, and the accursed severing themselves, and departing from the

²³⁸ Denys, CH, II.1.136D-137B.

²³⁹ “the all-perfect Agnosia, in its superior sense [which] is a knowledge of Him, Who is above all known things” Denys, *Letters*, I.

holy.”²⁴⁰ Just as we have seen in Letter VIII that Demophilus excludes himself from the ecclesiastical hierarchy by withholding the rites of the Church from a penitent man, so those who imprison John only separate themselves from friendship with God.

Denys continues, “Truly, things seen are manifest images of things unseen.”²⁴¹ He and John share a vision of reality which integrates everything in the created order. The hardship which John suffers as a result of his witness to this religious worldview does not contradict his friendship with God or the sovereignty of God over the cosmos. On the contrary, Denys says, “I would never be so crazy as to imagine that you feel any suffering; but I am persuaded that you are sensible of the bodily sufferings merely to appraise them.”²⁴² It is simply the logical extension of the philosophical and theological principles we have already considered that everything perceptible by sense and intellect are symbols of divine love for the world, tokens of the friendship between God and human beings. These principles do not distinguish between things that are favourable or unfavourable for the human subject, because that which is good or bad for the friend of God is determined by God’s providential will. Only the human soul can separate itself from experiencing the love of God. This is the same logic by which the late mediaeval poet Dante finds that the gates of hell are created by divine love, whereas they remain open for the human soul to enter into or depart from. Denys says as much in Letter X: “For, neither in the ages which are approaching, will Almighty God be Cause of the just

²⁴⁰ Denys, *Letters*, X.1117A.

²⁴¹ Denys, *Letters*, X.1117B.

²⁴² Denys, *Letters*, X.1117C.

separations from Himself, but they by having separated themselves entirely from Almighty God.”²⁴³

The incarnation and the hierarchical orders which stem from this enable John to orient his life, in the body and in the mind, in reference to stable objects of sensible and intelligible perception. John is traditionally understood to be the only one of the apostles to have died by natural causes, while all the others were martyred. Denys seems to be comparing John’s way of witnessing to divine love in the course of his life with their mortal witness to the same:

even as we observe the others, becoming here already with Almighty God, since being lovers of truth, they depart from the proclivities of things material, and love peace in a complete freedom from all things evil, and a Divine love of all things good; and start their purification, even from the present life, by living, in the midst of mankind, the life which is to come, in a manner suitable to angels, with complete cessation of passion, and deification and goodness, and the other good attributes.²⁴⁴

In contrast to the accursed souls which actively will what is opposed to divine will, bending reality to make it conform to their own passions, John and the other Apostles make use of their sufferings in order to detach themselves from material things and purify the passions.

Everything in heaven and earth is unequal to God but is a manifestation and a symbol – revealing and concealing God to created beings. This means that the capacity for human beings to act upon God and to be acted upon by God – the field of sympathy

²⁴³ Ibid. 1117C.

²⁴⁴ “Ὡςπερ καὶ θατέρους ὁρῶμεν ἐντεῦθεν ἤδη μετὰ τοῦ θεοῦ γιγνομένους, ἐπειδὴ ἀληθείας ὄντες ἐρασταί, τῆς προσπαθείας μὲν ἀναχωροῦσι τῶν ὑλικῶν, ἐν πάσῃ δὲ πάντων κακῶν ἐλευθερία καὶ ἔρωτι θεῷ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἀπάντων εἰρήνην ἀγαπῶσι καὶ τὸν ἀγιασμὸν καὶ τῆς παρουσίας ζωῆς ἀπάρχονται τῆς μελλούσης ἀγγελοπρεπῶς ἐν μέσῳ ἀνθρώπων ἐμπολιτευόμενοι ζῆν ἀπαθεία πάσῃ καὶ θεωνυμία καὶ ἀγιότητι καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀγαθοῖς.” Ibid.

between God and humanity – is inclusive of everything in creation. We have seen that this sympathy is established by the incarnation, and that the sacraments make it possible for every soul to be conducted to a unifying contemplation of God. The consequence of this is real union between God and the human soul which means that everything the soul perceives by sense and intellect may become a token and a sign of that friendship.

The hierarchical orders, which make the union with God possible, collapse at the point of this union between God and humanity. The hierarchical arrangements, by which sensible and intelligible things are purified, illuminated, and perfected, no longer differentiate between one thing that is unified with God and another. Nevertheless, it is crucially important for Denys that these hierarchical structures not be despised because these hierarchies frame the pattern for imitating the condescension of God and for giving thanks.

The sacrament of Communion has a central place in each of Letters VIII-X. It is in the context of Communion that Demophilus' self-exclusion from friendship with God is made evident by interfering in the penitent's approach to the sacrament. In Letter IX, the symbolism of the Last Supper is a kind of archetypal symbol on which the other symbols converge and from which they derive their meaning. John, the recipient of Letter X, figures poignantly in the drama of the Last Supper, reclining beside Jesus at the feast. Scripture calls him the disciple whom Jesus loved, and in the opening sentences of Letter X Denys refers to him three times as beloved.²⁴⁵ The intimacy of the friendship between Christ and John, as captured in the Last Supper, is very much at the heart of the

²⁴⁵ "I salute thee, the holy soul! O beloved one! and this for me is more appropriate than for most. Hail! O truly beloved! And to the truly Loveable and Desired, very beloved!" Denys, *Letters*, X.1117A.

overall trajectory of Denys' theology program, as we have traced it in the *Letters* and in the treatises alike.

In Letter X Denys speaks of John's experience of imprisonment in a way that is analogous to his description of the sacrament of Communion as it is experienced by the bishop. Just as every member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is gathered together for Communion, so too every sensible and intelligible perception is a revelation of God for a bishop. The patterns of hierarchical order bring human beings to become one with God. They also give human beings the means by which to actively participate in harmony with God, who initiates this sympathy with human beings through the incarnation and through the sacraments. All of humanity's activity in response to this gesture of divine love, which is the whole hierarchical system, can be summed up in the word 'thanksgiving.' In EH Denys describes the holy thanksgiving (εὐχαριστίαν ἱερὰν) as the crowning point of the Communion liturgy:

When [the Hierarch] has received and distributed the supremely Divine Communion, he terminates with a holy thanksgiving; whilst the multitude have merely glanced at the Divine symbols alone, he is ever conducted by the Divine Spirit, as becomes a Hierarch, in the purity of a Godlike condition, to the holy sources of the things performed, in blessed and intelligible visions.²⁴⁶

Here we have the bishop in the culminating moment of the sacrament in which each member of the community is gathered into a unity in the contemplation of God, as God is known beyond knowing in the soul of every participant. At the conclusion of the celebration of Communion, the bishop perceives God to be symbolized in everything.

²⁴⁶ “Μετασχὼν δὲ καὶ μεταδοὺς τῆς θεαρχικῆς κοινωνίας εἰς εὐχαριστίαν ἱερὰν καταλήγει τῶν πολλῶν μὲν εἰς μόνα τὰ θεῖα σύμβολα παρακυνῶντων, αὐτοῦ δὲ ἀεὶ τῷ θεαρχικῷ πνεύματι πρὸς τὰς ἀγίας τῶν τελουμένων ἀρχὰς ἐν μακαρίοις καὶ νοητοῖς θεάμασιν ἱεραρχικῶς ἐν καθαρότητι τῆς θεοειδοῦς ἕξεως ἀναγομένου.” Denys, EH, III.2.165C.

However, he responds to this all-encompassing vision of God in thanksgiving to God and for the sake of the multitude by honouring the integrity of the hierarchical orders which bring him to this vision.

The hierarchy collapses, by which union with God is achieved. But what more suitable response can one make to the love by which God reconciles humanity than to cooperate in that activity of reconciliation? As we have seen in reference to the perfecting sacrament of the Anointing, bishops, in accordance with the perfecting characteristic of their order, contemplate God in every created thing, and they demonstrate the theophanic capacity of every created thing by the use of the sacrament of Anointing in each of their consecrations. This is expressed again in the ordination of bishops whereas the action which distinguishes that ordination from other ordinations to holy orders is the moment when the oracles are placed on the bishop's head.²⁴⁷ The action represents the power of the bishop, who "will not only be illuminated, in the true and God-transmitted science of all the sacred words and works committed to the Hierarchy, but will also transmit them to others in Hierarchical proportions".²⁴⁸ These examples from the ecclesiastical hierarchy show that the perfect union with God that is achieved by means of hierarchy. Nevertheless, hierarchical order provides the pattern by which that union with God finds expression.

This is the perfect union which John experiences as he suffers imprisonment on Patmos. However, Denys insists that John is not only a passive recipient in this

²⁴⁷ Denys, EH, V.2.509B, C, V.3.vii.513C, D.

²⁴⁸ Denys, EH, V.3.vii.513D.

experience of union with God. He is also actively engaged in the human and divine work of conducting the whole created order into union with God. Denys writes:

But as for those who are unjustly treating you, and fancying to imprison, not correctly, the sun of the Gospel, whilst fairly blaming them, I pray that by separating themselves from those things which they are bringing upon themselves they may be turned to the good, and may draw you to themselves, and may participate in the light.²⁴⁹

The first thing to notice is that Denys in no way admits John to be, in fact, held against his will. And elsewhere in this letter we have seen Denys speak of John's imprisonment, like the martyrdom of the other apostles, as demonstrations of complete freedom. But, more than that, Denys makes a prayer that John's physical acquiescence to the imprisonment which his enemies wish to inflict on him will instead become the instruments of his enemies' conversion. The scenario is reminiscent of Carpus' dream in which Jesus directs Carpus, who is attempting to separate himself from two unbelievers by pushing them into a place of torment, that Carpus should instead strike against him because Jesus is willing to suffer again on their behalf.²⁵⁰

There is still a further way in which John is an active participant in his relationship of perfect union and distinction – his friendship – with God. The visions which attend this union with God on Patmos, where John is supposed to be separated from the ecclesiastical community, are in fact the inspired texts – the scriptures or the oracles – from which the divine names and the sacred symbols are derived. To import images which Denys uses in Letter IX, John is actually nourishing and furnishing the

²⁴⁹ “Τοὺς δὲ ἀδικοῦντας ὑμᾶς καὶ περιορίζειν οἰομένους οὐκ ὀρθῶς τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου τὸν ἥλιον ἐνδίκως αἰτιώμενος εὐχομαι τούτων ἀφεμένους, ὧν ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦς δρῶσιν, ἐπὶ τὰ γαθὸν τραπέσθαι καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτοῦς ὑμᾶς ἐφελκύσασθαι καὶ μεταλαβεῖν τοῦ φωτός.” Denys, *Letters*, X.1117C.

²⁵⁰ Denys, *Letters*, VIII.6.1100C, D.

Church in a most profound way, with the solid food of the divine names and the liquid drink of the sacred symbols, even as he is meant to be in exile. Far from being marginalized from the life of the Church, John remains at its very heart, even as he rested on Jesus breast at the Last Supper, when the body of Christ was given to the disciples and the Church was instituted.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Hathaway's study of the *Letters* was an unprecedented attempt to interpret the *Letters* in sequence and as a whole. His examination takes into account the increasing hierarchical rank of the recipients of the *Letters*, the increasing length of the *Letters* in connection with Denys' statement ("the Cause of all is both of much utterance, and at the same time of briefest utterance and without utterance"),²⁵¹ and he observed certain suggestive correspondences between Denys' ten *Letters* and the nine hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides*. Hathaway points to a parallelism between the *Letters* and the treatises, as does Rorem, who uses the *Letters* as a precis of the treatises. Scholarly interpretations which do read the *Letters* as a whole nevertheless take them to be a sort of appendix to the CD rather than as developing and completing a progression that is integral to the corpus as a whole. In this essay we have seen that the *Letters* take as their point of departure the moment of mystical union with God, which is the culmination of the treatises. As Louth has argued, the treatises proceed according to a mounting liturgical ascent: from the intelligible imitations of angelic imitations of the Thearchy (CH); involving the sensible orders of the ecclesiastical imitations of the same Godhead (EH); hymning the God according to the common and the distinctive names of the Trinitarian Persons (DN); and finally arriving at the mystical union with the One beyond thought and being by ἀγνωσία (unknowing) contemplation (MT).

It is evident in this culminating union with God by unknowing that the treatises, as they are received in the ordering of the manuscript tradition, approach union with God according to the apophatic way of theology. The *Letters*, conversely, take this union

²⁵¹ Denys, MT, I.3.1000C.

with God by unknowing contemplation as their point of departure. This study has shown that the logic of the *Letters* unfolds according to the way of kataphatic theology. Each of the *Letters* shows how the transcendent God becomes immanent to human beings by manifestations increasingly dissimilar to the divine nature. Whereas the treatises ascend to the contemplation of God beyond knowing, the *Letters* trace the steps of God's philanthropic descent by which every experience of human life is understood to be assumed in the life of God.

In Letters II-IV we find that it is implied in God's fundamental difference from and God's absolute superiority to every thought and being, that God is "super-source of every source of Divinity and every source of Goodness."²⁵² This expresses the logical necessity that everything must ultimately have its cause in God, without suggesting that God is under any constraint or necessity to become the source of anything. Letter II's repeated reference to the Thearchy gives shape to the generative character of God, which is described only abstractly as the divine paternity of the Father, the first Person of the Trinity. What is oblique in Letter II becomes a matter of fact in Letter III, which treats the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity. The Incarnation is the self-revelation of God which makes possible every subsequent revelation of God that follows in the *Letters*. Even so, there is as yet no actual revelation of God until we come to Denys' treatment of the union between human and divine activity in Letter IV, which is at once the human realization of Jesus' divinity and the activity of the Holy Spirit in

²⁵² Denys, *Letters*, II.1065B.

human beings. The perfect union and distinction of these two activities is evident in that both activities represent semantically different ways of articulating the same reality.

Denys' reference in Letter IV to καινήν τινα τὴν θεανδρικήν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῶν πεπολιτευμένος ("exercising for us a certain new God-incarnate energy of God having become man" or "by the fact of being God-made-man he accomplished something new in our midst – the activity of the God-man") is generally interpreted as his treatment of the Incarnation. Some proceed to the conclusion that Denys subscribes to monenergism and a monophysite Christology.²⁵³ However, these interpretations err in reading Letter IV as a description of the union of divine and human natures in Christ, failing to see that the matter of the Incarnation is treated in Letter III. A better translation of this phrase would be: "conducting a certain new human and divine activity in us," where the dative is in reference to "us," in a spatial sense rather than a sense of interest and without supplying "in our midst" The human and divine energy is the activity of the Holy Spirit in human beings who realize Jesus' divinity in his miraculous works, "through which, he who looks with a divine vision, will know beyond mind, even the things affirmed respecting the love towards man, of (the Lord) Jesus, – things which possess a force of superlative negation."²⁵⁴ Maximus rightly perceives that the drama in the argument of this letter is between God and the entirety of the human race. The fact of the Incarnation enables human beings to join their activities with God's by imitating Jesus, and this Maximus'

²⁵³ Dillon and Wear provide a recent example of this interpretation. In contrast, Perczel reads Denys' Chalcedonian orthodoxy to be so pervasive in the CD that he interprets the discussion of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to be a cryptic way in which the Areopagite refers to the Council of Chalcedon itself. Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the Pseudo-dormition."

²⁵⁴ Denys, *Letters*, IV.1072C.

exegesis of Letter IV concludes logically: “Since He has taken shape in your speech and life, O sanctified ones, imitate His *long-suffering*”.²⁵⁵

The ecclesiastical hierarchy consists of sensible imitations of Jesus’ human and divine activities which are arranged in order to conduct human beings toward intelligible imitations of God. Thus the first triad of Letters II-IV is followed by Letters V-VII are written to a deacon, a priest, and a bishop. These recipients represent the three consecrated orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: the purifying, the illuminating, and the perfecting. Accordingly, Denys’ argument in each of these letters corresponds with their hierarchically apportioned activities. He instructs the deacon Dorotheus in his purifying, initiating activity that it is precisely by discerning God as that which is beyond all sense and intellect that one really enters into God. He instructs the priest Sopatros in his illuminating activity to always attend to the truth “which is One and hidden”²⁵⁶ in his every occupation “in many things that are false and apparent.”²⁵⁷ That is, Denys teaches Sopatros to acknowledge the way in which everything participates in the Good in so far as it is, and every idea participates in the True in so far as it can be thought. In the last of this triad of letters, Denys instructs the bishop Polycarp in his perfecting, unifying activity, to bring to the contemplation of God his philosophical adversary Apollophanes and any interlocutor who is willing “to meekly learn the truth, which is above wisdom, of own religion.”²⁵⁸ In Letter VII he shows the bishop that every sensible thing in creation is properly understood when it is perceived to be a manifestation of God, who is beyond

²⁵⁵ Maximus, *Ambigua*, V.27.

²⁵⁶ “ἐν ὄν καὶ κρύφτον”. Denys, *Letters*, VI.1077A.

²⁵⁷ “ἐν πολλοῖς τοῖς ψεύδεσι καὶ φαινομένοις”. Ibid.

²⁵⁸ πρᾶξως μαθεῖν τὴν ὑπέροσον τῆς θρησκείας ἡμῶν ἀλήθειαν. Denys, *Letters*, VII.3.1081C.

understanding. Denys teaches Polycarp to persuade Apollonides that the supernatural power of God is evident in his formation of the natural world and by God's transformation of the natural world in the Incarnation. While God's creatures can be known through philosophy, or the "Wisdom of God," Denys says that God himself is properly contemplated above wisdom in the Divine Worship. In this way, Letter VII brings us to a vision of reality in which everything is perfectly united with God and perfectly distinct from God: everything is truly comprehended as pointing to God as a theophany, and God is comprehended in none of these things even as he is manifest in them. Letters V-VII give the logic whereby the sensible imitations of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are conducive to intelligible imitations of our initiation, illumination and union in the divine life.

The scope of Letters V-VII has been defined by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Denys describes the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a symbol: "our Hierarchy is, as I said, a kind of symbol adapted to our condition, which needs things sensible, for our more Divine elevation from these to things intelligible."²⁵⁹ Furthermore, the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a symbol of symbols: "but let us view our Hierarchy, conformably to ourselves, abounding in the variety of the sensible symbols, by which, in proportion to our capacity, we are conducted, hierarchically according to our measure, to the uniform deification – God and Divine virtue".²⁶⁰ Denys says that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a symbol, and Letters V-VII show how the human community of the ecclesiastical

²⁵⁹ Denys, EH, I.5.377A.

²⁶⁰ "but let us view our Hierarchy, conformably to ourselves, abounding in the variety of the sensible symbols, by which, in proportion to our capacity, we are conducted, hierarchically according to our measure, to the uniform deification – God and Divine virtue." Denys, EH, I.2.372D.

hierarchy is fashioned into a sensible imitation of God – descended as we are entirely into temporal process²⁶¹ – which conducts human beings to intellectual imitations of the inimitable God.

The scope of the last triad of letters (VIII-X) transitions from that of Letters V-VII. While Letters V-VII show how human community can be a symbol of divine life, Letters VIII-X show how sacred symbols supply the content for friendship between God and human beings. Denys says that the whole of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is but one of the countless ‘sacred symbols,’ a category which includes all of the scriptural references to sensible things. (Denys’ catalogue in Letter IX, while abridged, nevertheless illustrates the wide-ranging breadth of sacred symbols.)²⁶² Each one symbolizes God, however profane or incongruous the symbol might seem. As Denys explains in Letter IX, “if any one were able to see their inner hidden beauty, he will find every one of them mystical and Godlike, and filled with abundant theological light.”²⁶³ Every symbol, regardless of how dissimilarly it represents God, can aid the human soul in her unifying contemplation of God’s transcendence (beyond every perception) and of God’s immanence (as manifest in the perceptible symbol at hand). Denys describes the task of the human soul, in symbolic theology: “We must then, in opposition to the vulgar conception concerning them, reverently enter within the sacred symbols, and not dishonour them, being as they are, products and moulds of the Divine characteristics, and manifest images of the unutterable and supernatural visions.”²⁶⁴ According to Denys, it

²⁶¹ “Every particular soul, when it descends into temporal process, descends entire: there is not a part of it which remains above and a part which descends.” Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 211.

²⁶² Denys, *Letters*, IX.1.1104C-1105B.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Denys, *Letters*, IX.2.1108C.

is possible for the human soul to enter into the sacred symbols as a way of living in the image of God. This is another way of saying that, because of the Incarnation of God and the imitation of God which is the life of the church (the church itself being a symbol into which humans are initiated), that it is possible for human beings to become friends of God.

Demophilus, the monk and addressee of Letter VIII, provides a negative example of what it means to enter into the sacred symbols and into friendship with God. Demophilus' manifest imperfection in living in the symbol of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and in entering into friendship with God is by no means an imperfection of his hierarchical ranking as such, whereas he belongs to the perfected rank of the laity. Neither is his hierarchical imperfection in any way a deficiency of intellectual capacity or philosophical erudition, whereas the ecclesiastical hierarchy is accommodated to every capability.²⁶⁵ Rather, Demophilus' breach of hierarchical order shows his failure to 'interpret' the symbol of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a symbol of friendship. Denys' prevailing instruction to Demophilus is that his soul must be purified of the passions by entering into the hidden, inner beauty of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the exterior of which appears to him an unholy and incongruous symbol of God. Demophilus is scandalized by the reconciliation of a sinful man and the admittance of the same to the sacrament of Communion, but this is because of the impurity of his own impassioned soul in which reason is obscured.

²⁶⁵ "... our Hierarchy is, as I said, a kind of symbol adapted to our condition..." Denys, EH, I.5.377A.

It is in Letter IX that Denys introduces the method of symbolic theology by which the sensible – even monstrous – appearances of sacred symbols are understood to be adapted for the purification, illumination and perfection of human souls. The impassioned part of the soul is purified as it is rebuffed by the monstrous appearance of the sacred symbols, while the passionless part of the soul is drawn in to the symbolic contemplation of God beyond every sensible and intelligible perception. Each part of the soul, then, contemplates God according to its capacity.

The Apostle John, recipient of Denys' tenth letter, practices symbolic theology in every experience and activity of his daily life. Letter I began at the summit of mystical theology, the point at which Denys' apophatic way of theology finally arrives after an erotic, philosophical approach to the God beyond knowing. This is the moment concerning which Louth says "the soul in ecstasy meets God's ecstatic love for herself."²⁶⁶ Over the course of the *Letters* we are introduced to the symbolic theology, tracing the kataphatic way of theology according to which the soul's every experience is interpreted as a symbol of divine friendship toward her, and her every reciprocating activity of friendship with God is an imitation of and a participation in divine philanthropy.

²⁶⁶ Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 170.

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