

Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic: Eriugena and  
Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion

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Part I: From Eriugena to Nicholas of Cusa

The *Corpus Areopagiticum* in Greek—or at least a part of it—circulated in Rome, probably from the time of Gregory the Great’s Homily XXIV (592 or 593), but certainly from the middle of the seventh up to the second half of the ninth century.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there was no profound encounter by the Latins with the philosophical and mystical content of the *corpus*, until the translations by Hilduin and Eriugena consequent on its arrival at the Frankish court in 827.<sup>2</sup> John the Scot’s grasp and development of what the Areopagite passed on from his sources has only rarely been equalled. After Boethius, he was the first to draw together the Greek and Latin Platonists. Among the Latins, Augustine and Boethius, together with Ambrose, because, as Eriugena wrote, he so often followed the Greeks, were pre-eminent.<sup>3</sup> He learned most from the Greek texts he translated—the Dionysian *corpus*, the *Ambigua* and *Scoliae* of Maximus the Confessor, and the *De hominis officio* of Gregory of Nyssa—; what he took from the Latins was generally assimilated to their logic.<sup>4</sup> His sources were so nearly exclusively Christian, and the texts so predominantly theological and mystical—despite such “secular” and pagan authorities as the *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* of Martianus Capella from his Irish education<sup>5</sup>—that no real confrontation between Hellenic and Christian Neoplatonisms occurs for him. He has little interest in its history, and philosophy is for him neither pagan nor opposed to theology, mystical interpretation and union.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of Dionysius and Boethius, Christian polemics like Augustine’s against the errors and limits of pagan philosophy were replaced by the sense that Christian theology belonged within a continuous tradition reaching back to the inspired Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Plato, and that keeping this priceless heritage alive belonged to the one thing needful.<sup>7</sup> Augustine had spoken of Christianity as “true philosophy.”<sup>8</sup> Following him, identifying philosophy with *intellectus* or wisdom, and giving *fides* the same content but in a form inadequate to reason, Eriugena arrived at the conviction that true philosophy, by which the highest and first principles are investigated, is true religion. Conversely true religion is

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Lilla, “Brief Notes on the Greek *Corpus Areopagiticum* in Rome during the Early Middle Ages,” *Dionysius* 19 (2001): 201-14.

<sup>2</sup> On those translations, especially that made by Eriugena and its fate, see *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris. The Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite in Eriugena’s Latin Translation with the Scholia translated by Anastasius the Librarian and Excerpts from Eriugena’s Periphyseon*, ed. L.M. Harrington (Paris/Leuven/Dudley: Peeters, 2004) and P. Rorem, *Eriugena’s Commentary on the Dionysian Celestial Hierarchy* (Toronto: PIMS, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On the Latins generally, see the essays reprinted in G. Madec, *Jean Scot et ses auteurs: Annotationes Érigéniennes* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1988); on Ambrose, see therein “Jean Scot et les Pères Latin,” 61-62.

<sup>4</sup> É. Jeuneau, “Jean Scot Érigène et le grec,” [1979] reprinted in idem, *Études Érigéniennes* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> See M. Herren, “The Commentary on Martianus attributed to John Scottus: Its Hiberno-Latin Background,” *Jean Scot Écrivain*, ed. G.-H. Allard (Montréal/ Paris: Bellarmin/Vrin, 1986), 265-86.

<sup>6</sup> Madec, “Jean Scot et ses auteurs,” [1986], in idem, *Jean Scot et ses auteurs*, 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> See R.D. Crouse, “*Semina Rationum*: St. Augustine and Boethius,” *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 75-85, W. Beierwaltes, “Eriugena’s Platonism,” *Hermathena* 149 (1990): 53-7, and I. Perczel, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*. A Preliminary Study,” *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne*, ed. A.Ph. Segonds and C. Steel (Leuven / Paris: Leuven University Press / Les Belles Lettres, 2000), 492-530

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *Contra Julianum* 4.14.72; see *De Vera Religione* 5.8.

true philosophy.<sup>9</sup> So in his *Annotationes in Marcianum*, we find: “*Nemo intrat in celum nisi per philosophiam, semel splendoribus.*”<sup>10</sup> The context of this *dictum*, as well as his early *De Predestinatione*, which interprets Augustinian predestination through the concluding book of the *Consolation of Philosophy*,<sup>11</sup> make clear that the one who would open the door of heaven is none other than Lady Philosophy herself, and that she could do so in virtue of her ambiguity, her capacity to be earthly and heavenly, and even to pierce through the heavens.

Eriugena’s elevation of philosophy, so that she does the work of grace, and, what goes implicitly with this, namely, the assimilation of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius to the Christian Fathers who act for him as their medium, come into question in the thirteenth century. Then, both via the Arabs, and directly from Greek manuscripts, the Latins begin to acquire the Neoplatonic texts themselves as works of non-Christian philosophers. A sophisticated encounter between Proclus and Dionysius commenced when Proclus was translated into Latin. The first stage of this meeting opened after William of Moerbeke completed his hugely influential translation of the *Elements of Theology* on the 18th of May, 1268. Soon it was employed by such consequential figures as Thomas Aquinas, his teacher, Albert the Great, and their opponent in the Faculty of Arts, Siger of Brabant. The Latin medieval meeting of Proclus and Dionysius reached a glorious culmination with Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa.

In his works from the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), to the *Tetralogus de Li Non Aliud* (1461) and the *De Venatione sapientiae* (1463), Cusanus unites Proclus and Dionysius as the highest of negative or mystical theologians. He could not have failed to notice their concord since the conclusions of the *Mystical Theology* in Latin and of Moerbeke’s translation of the first book of Proclus’ *Commentary on the Parmenides* on the first hypothesis, which the Cardinal annotated, have a nearly verbal identity.<sup>12</sup> The identity of the texts provided evidence for a similarity of doctrine and, perhaps, according to the surmise of Cusanus, who with some questioning continued to accept the Apostolic priority of Dionysius to Proclus, the dependence of both upon Plato. The Flemish Dominican finished his translation in Corinth, just before his death in 1286. The conclusion is missing from the Greek manuscripts which survived him and our present text of this part of the *Commentary* is reconstructed from his Latin.<sup>13</sup> William had finished translating the *Tria Opuscula* of Proclus in 1280. The Greek mss of the *Opuscula* have disappeared, except for fragments, and have been reconstructed almost entirely from Moerbeke’s literal Latin rendition. Reconstituting the Greek of *On the Existence of Evils* has been greatly assisted by the fact that Dionysius lifted a large part of the Chapter of the *Divine Names* concerning Good from Proclus.<sup>14</sup> Our ability to reconstruct the text of Proclus by using Dionysius is an objective proof of the dependence of Dionysius on him.

<sup>9</sup> Eriugena, *De divina predestinatione* I, PL 357-358; see Beierwaltes, “Eriugena’s Platonism”: 69-70.

<sup>10</sup> Iohannes Scottus, *Annotationes in Marcianum*, ed. C.E. Lutz (Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America, 1939), 57, 15 at p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> R.D. Crouse, “St. Augustine, Semi-Pelagianism and the *Consolation* of Boethius,” *Dionysius* 22 (2004): 108-9.

<sup>12</sup> R. Klibansky, *Plato’s Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* [1943], reprinted with idem, *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages* [1939] (Munich: Kraus, 1981), 4-9 and 24-32.

<sup>13</sup> See C. Steel (ed.), Proclus, *Commentaire sur le Parménide de Platon. Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke. Tome II: Livres V à VII et Notes marginales de Nicolas de Cues* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), lemmes 141 E7-142 A9 (pp. 489-521). The annotations are at 529-557.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Opsomer and C. Steel (trans.), *Proclus, On the Existence of Evils* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1-10, which include a judgement about what Dionysius may not have comprehended in Proclus.

The way from 1268 to Cardinal Nicholas' uniting of Dionysius and Proclus is complex. Besides the texts of Proclus translated by Moerbeke already mentioned, before his efforts, the *Elements of Physics* had already been rendered into Latin in 1160,<sup>15</sup> and this, like the Moerbeke translations of the *Tria Opuscula*,<sup>16</sup> Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*, and a fragment on prayer of Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*,<sup>17</sup> were known to a few but not all of the figures we meet along this road.<sup>18</sup> After William had passed to his reward, a translation of the *Platonic Theology* was commissioned by Nicholas of Cusa; he was used it, along with contemporaries and successors like Bessarion, Marsilio Ficino, and Pico della Mirandola.<sup>19</sup> There was much else: a great deal of Aristotle in various translations, lots of his commentators and followers, Greek, Arabic, and Latin, Peripatetic and Neoplatonic; little Plato, but a great many of his middle and neo Platonic followers. Crucially the *Corpus Areopagiticum* as it was used in Paris and elsewhere in the thirteenth century and later was filled with glosses taken from Eriugena, although not identified as his, presumably, at least in part, because his writings had been condemned as heretical.<sup>20</sup> There were other sources of Eriugena's doctrine, above all the *Clavis physicae* of Honorius Augustodunensis from the first half of the twelfth century reproduces and disseminates a "bowdlerization" of Eriugena without identifying the source.<sup>21</sup> Meister Eckhart knew Eriugena's teaching this way. Cusanus had the *Clavis* and Book One of the *Periphyseon* in his library and annotated them in his own hand. Eriugena's doctrines were fundamental to his own teachings and Nicholas refers to him by name.<sup>22</sup> Finally, and most importantly at the beginning, as well as other translations of Arabic compilations of texts from Plotinus and Proclus, there is a gathering of modified, reorganised, and explained propositions from the *Elements of Theology*, together with some material from Plotinus. Among the mountain of translations Gerard of Cremona, working indefatigably in Toledo from 1167, left to the world was the *Liber aristotelis de expositione bonitatis purae*, which became known as the *Liber de causis*.<sup>23</sup>

In 1272, two years before his death, Aquinas produced his *Super Librum de causis Expositio* which was part his series of commentaries on the works of Aristotle—normally not the work theologians but of the Faculty of Arts. Almost all of the twelve Aristotelian "expositions" were undertaken in the last six years of Thomas' writing, and five were left unfinished.<sup>24</sup> His expositions were based the new translations of Aristotle produced by

<sup>15</sup> A. de Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, 3rd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1998), 357 and S. Gersh, "Berthold von Moosburg on the Content and Method of Platonic Philosophy," [2001] reprinted in idem, *Reading Plato, Tracing Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate / Variorum, 2005), 493.

<sup>16</sup> Proclus Diadochus, *Tria Opuscula (De Providentia, Libertate, Malo) Latine Guilelmo de Moerbeka Vertente et Graece ex Isaaci Sebastocratoris aliorumque scriptis collecta*, ed. H. Boese (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960).

<sup>17</sup> Printed in Steel (ed.), Proclus, *Commentaire sur le Parménide de Platon*, Tome II, 571-587.

<sup>18</sup> See C. Steel (ed.), Proclus, *Commentaire sur le Parménide de Platon. Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke. Tome I: Livres I à IV* (Leuven/ Leiden: Leuven University Press/ Brill, 1982), 34\*-42\*, A. de Libera, *La Mystique rhénane d'Albert le Grand à Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 30, Gersh, "Berthold," 493-94.

<sup>19</sup> H.-D. Saffrey, "Pietro Balbi et la première traduction latine de la Théologie platonicienne de Proclus," [1979] reprinted in idem, *L'Héritage des anciens au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance* (Paris: Vrin, 2002), 189-192.

<sup>20</sup> See *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook* and W.J. Hankey, "Aquinas and the Platonists," *The Platonic Tradition in the Middle Ages: A Doxographic Approach*, ed. S. Gersh et al. (Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 295.

<sup>21</sup> S. Gersh, "Honorius Augustodunensis and Eriugena. Remarks on the Method and Content of the *Clavis Physicae*," [1987] reprinted in idem, *Reading Plato, Tracing Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate / Variorum, 2005), 172

<sup>22</sup> D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 278-281.

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, ed. H.-D. Saffrey, 2<sup>nd</sup> (Paris: Vrin, 2002), xv-xxv and De Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, 346-47.

<sup>24</sup> M.D. Jordan, *The Alleged Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto: PIMS, 1992), 9-10.

Moerbeke and, even more importantly for their character, on his translations of Greek commentaries and treatises from late antiquity.<sup>25</sup> Aquinas is now self-consciously able to reach back beyond the Arabic philosophers and commentators who gave him his Aristotelian formation. His new closeness *ad fontes* freed him from his temporally nearer predecessors in the Peripatetic tradition.

Because of Moerbeke's translation of the *Elements*, Thomas rejects the supposed Aristotelian authorship of the *Liber*; he is convinced that someone from among the Arabic philosophers had excerpted it from the *Elements* of Proclus, "especially since everything contained in this book is found more fully and diffusely in that of Proclus."<sup>26</sup> Throughout his *Exposition*, Aquinas rearranges his understanding of the history of philosophy. Just as he now has a different view of Aristotle—because the *Liber* had been supposed to be the cap of the Peripatetic system, supplying its otherwise lacking treatise on the emanation from the First Principle to the separate intelligences—, he also has new information about Platonism, and thus about the works of Dionysius. Noting the similarities of the *Liber* and Dionysius in respect to the monotheistic modifications of Proclus in both, he even suggests that the author of the *Liber* is following Dionysius<sup>27</sup>—a supposition which corresponds to the hypothesis of Cristina D'Ancona-Costa, recently given more credibility by Alexander Treiger's work on translations of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* from Greek to Arabic, as well as by the continuing scholarship on the Syriac versions of the *Corpus*.<sup>28</sup> In his last years, Aquinas moved from his early judgment that "everywhere Dionysius follows Aristotle,"<sup>29</sup> past the statement in his *Exposition of the Divine Names* (circa 1265), that Dionysius used the style and way of speaking of the *Platonici*,<sup>30</sup> to the position that "in most things he was a *sectator* of Platonic opinions."<sup>31</sup>

Loris Sturlese maintains that Aquinas established one of the two patterns for dealing with Proclus in the Latin Middle Ages, while Siger of Brabant, in the Faculty of Arts, whom he polemically opposed, established the other. Aquinas uses Proclus to typify the *via Platoniorum* and to set it in shifting ways against Aristotle, Dionysius, the *Liber*, and Christian truth—with which, in the *Exposition of the Liber de Causis*, Aristotle and Dionysius are in accord. Siger, in contrast, continues the old concordist tradition in respect to Plato and Aristotle inherited from Late Antiquity and adds to it the very Arabs, from whom Aquinas is now more and more distinguishing himself, so that Proclus, Aristotle, and Avicenna are

<sup>25</sup> R.-A. Gauthier in Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Posteriorum*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, Editio altera retractata, Commissio Leonina: vol. 1,2 (Rome, 1989), 55\*.

<sup>26</sup> Aquinas, *Super De Causis*, proemium, p. 3, lines 7-10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, prop. 4, p. 33, lines 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> See, on the hypothesis, Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire du Livre des causes*, trans. B. & J. Decossas (Paris: Vrin, 2005), introduction, 12-15 & T.-D. Humbrecht, *Théologie négative et noms divins chez saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 707-8; on the translations from Greek to Arabic (too late to have influenced the *Liber* but showing the presence of Dionysius in the Arabic world) see A. Treiger, "New Evidence on the Arabic Versions of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*," *Le Muséon*, 118 (2005): 219-240, *idem*, "The Arabic Version of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*, Chapter 1: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Translation," *Le Muséon*, 120 (2007), forthcoming. Both of Treiger's articles give abundant bibliographic information on the Syriac translations which start in the sixth and seventh centuries and could have influenced the author(s) of the *Liber*.

<sup>29</sup> Aquinas, *In Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*, lib. 2, dist. 14, quest. 1, art. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, proemium, § 2, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Malo*, 16.1 ad 3 (Leonina p. 283, lines 389-390).

brought into agreement.<sup>32</sup> I think Sturlese is generally correct, but in the following brief summary of Aquinas' position I introduce qualifications.<sup>33</sup>

1) For Aquinas the *via Platoniorum* is the way of abstractions, and at some levels this overpopulates and mischaracterises the world of separate substances so as to lead to polytheism. So, even if the *via Aristotelica* has too few kinds and numbers of separate substances, Aristotle, Dionysius, the *Liber*, and the Christian faith agree against Proclus. However, where Aristotle is too parsimonious, Proclus, Dionysius, and the *Liber* are right to agree against him.

2) The polytheist tendency only concerns intermediate spiritual entities and Thomas recognises that, as a Platonist, Dionysius also tends to make hypostases of abstractions. In his *Exposition*, having looked at Plato through Proclus, Thomas finally comes to the view that for Platonists, as well as for Aristotelians, all is derived from one exalted First Principle. Thus he tells us that even if the Platonists “posited many gods ordered under one” rather than, as we do, “positing one only having all things in itself,” everyone agrees “universality of causality is proper to God.”<sup>34</sup> In his *Treatise on Separate Substances*, composed in the same period, Plato and Aristotle are brought into accord with each other and with the Catholic faith on the creation of all things by a single First Principle: “According to the opinion of Plato and Aristotle...it is necessary...to presuppose another origin of things, according as *esse* is bestowed on the whole universe of things by a first being which is its own being.”<sup>35</sup> Here the common doctrine is stated in a form which is more Platonic than Aristotelian: the First Principle is *simplicissimum*, and Thomas argues that “because subsistent being must be one...it is necessary that all other things which are under it exist in the way they do as participants in *esse*.”<sup>36</sup>

3) In the *Expositio*, the other fundamental error of Proclus against which Aquinas set his other authorities is the unknowability of God and the reason for it. Aquinas is clear that for Proclus both all intellectual intuition and all reasoning is about being, and his first cause, “the essence of goodness and unity, exceeds even separated being itself.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore the Proclean First Principle cannot be understood. Aquinas not only condemns Proclus for this but also gets Aristotle, the author of the *Liber*, and crucially Dionysius to join him: “According to the truth of the matter, the first cause is above being inasmuch as it is itself the infinite ‘to be’.”<sup>38</sup> In consequence, the negative theology of Dionysius is only a criticism of regarding God as a being. The superessential God is in fact *esse infinitum*. Proclus can be separated from Dionysius only by placing Dionysius with Aristotle, Augustine, the author of the *Liber*, and those who name God from his first effect, being. There must be real doubt as to whether this is a right view and a correct location of Dionysius. If it is not, then Dionysius must be united with Proclus instead of with Aristotle. Nicholas of Cusa, and several of those between Aquinas and him, reached this conclusion, and I join myself with Jean Trouillard, Eric Perl, and other twentieth-century Neoplatonists, in agreeing with them.

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<sup>32</sup> L. Sturlese, “Il dibattito sul Proclo latino nel medioevo fra l’università Parigi e lo studium di Colonia,” in *Proclus et son influence*, ed. G. Boss and G. Seel (Zurich: Grand Midi, 1987), 267.

<sup>33</sup> For a more complete account, see W.J. Hankey, “Thomas’ Neoplatonic Histories: His following of Simplicius,” *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153-178.

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *Super De causis*, prop. 19, p. 106, lines 13-17.

<sup>35</sup> Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, 9 (Leonina p. D 57, lines 103-118).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (Leonina p. D 57, lines 103-110).

<sup>37</sup> Aquinas, *Super De causis*, prop. 6, p. 47, lines 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

4) Thomas thus sets Proclus against his greatest authorities, but a qualification must be noted. If Aquinas were simply an antiPlatonic Aristotelian, his *Exposition* ought to be filled with trauma, because it deals with his forced recognition that the summit of the Peripatetic system was, in fact, distilled from the most extreme of Platonists. In fact the *Exposition* exhibits Thomas' customary calm. In the preface, the *Liber* is placed relative to Aristotle and the Gospel as if the change in authorship made no real difference. They are cited to reassert that happiness is attained through contemplation by our highest faculty of the first causes. From them, Aquinas passes to the *Liber* as belonging to the ultimate human study both in terms of when and why we ought to take up the consideration of separate substances. For Aquinas, the Proclean *Liber* still belongs at the top and to the purpose of the philosophical system. This is also where his great teacher Albert, at whose feet Aquinas had studied Dionysius in Cologne, and who is the father of the Rhineland Dominican Proclean mystics, placed it.<sup>39</sup> We shall use the tradition he founded, culminating in Cusanus, to represent the concordism Sturlese attributes to Siger of Brabant.

Ulrich of Strasburg (d.1277), Dietrich of Freiburg (d.1328/1320), Tauler (d. 1346), and Meister Eckhart (d.1328) all take up Albert's continuation of Greek-Arabic Peripateticism but draw in Proclus as well.<sup>40</sup> Although he ignored Proclus, Albert's determined continuation of the Arabic Peripatetic tradition with its old embrace of Proclus, when unified with the Christian encompassing of him in the Dionysian *Corpus*, made him welcome in a way other contexts did not. The general late medieval embrace was not wide, and, except for the translation of the *Elements of Theology*, even along the Rhine, Moerbeke's other translations were sparsely disseminated and rarely read.<sup>41</sup>

Eckhart may not have read more Proclus than the *Elements*.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, he puts together Proclus, Dionysius, the *Liber*, Eriugenian doctrines, Avicenna and Moses Maimonides in a mystical and negative theology, paradoxically giving a Proclean /Dionysian exegesis of the "I am who I am."<sup>43</sup> For that reason, among others, Eckhart explicitly identifies his treatment of the divine names with Moses Maimonides, whom Aquinas rejected on this matter as too negative, and explicitly draws together the Maimonidian and Dionysian negative theologies.<sup>44</sup> We leave him for Berthold of Moosburg, who used Moerbeke's translation of Proclus' *In Parmenidiam* when he produced his *Expositio super Elementationem theologicam Procli*.

Berthold's life is mostly hidden to us, but we can locate him in several German Dominican convents in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> As with all those we have mentioned who have a sympathy for the doctrine of Proclus, in his *Expositio* Berthold is powerfully under the influence of Dionysius. Eriugena, conveyed by way of the *Clavis Physicae* of Honorius, enables his integration of Augustine and the Latins into a concordist

<sup>39</sup> On Albert, see W.J. Hankey, "Ab uno simplici non est nisi unum: The Place of Natural and Necessary Emanation in Aquinas' Doctrine of Creation," in *Divine Creation in Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Thought: Essays Presented to the Rev'd Dr Robert D. Crouse*, edited M. Treschow, W. Otten, & W. Hannam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 312–321.

<sup>40</sup> On Tauler, see A. de Libera, *Eckhart, Suso, Tauler et la divinisation de l'homme* (Paris: Bayard, 1996), 74–87; on the others, see his *La Mystique*. É. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 391, 431–446 is useful on the role of Proclus.

<sup>41</sup> Gersh, "Berthold," 493–94.

<sup>42</sup> For the debate, see Sturlese, "Il dibattito," 276; De Libera *La Mystique*, 278–279.

<sup>43</sup> W. Beierwaltes, *Platonisme et idéalisme*, trans. M.-C. Challiol-Gillet et al. (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 43–72.

<sup>44</sup> K. Ruh, *Initiation à Maître Eckhart: Théologien, prédicateur, mystique* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 132–33.

<sup>45</sup> De Libera, *La Mystique*, 316–17.

Proclean picture.<sup>46</sup> Berthold anticipates Cusanus (who possessed his *Expositio*) by the way he sets up a confrontation between Platonism and Aristotelianism described by Stephen Gersh:

It is in the sphere of methodology that the two great philosophers seem particularly at odds, and Berthold explains that there are disagreements regarding the object of the highest intellectual activity—*ens in eo quod ens* for Aristotle and the One or Good for Plato—, concerning the psychic faculty to be employed in this activity—*intellectus* for Aristotle and *cognitio supra intellectum* for Plato—, concerning the name of the process—*metaphysica* or *prima philosophia* for Aristotle and *divinalis supersapientia* for Plato.<sup>47</sup>

Gersh remarks on the relation of Dionysius and Proclus in Berthold:

The role of Pseudo-Dionysius is extremely important here. From its introductory section onwards, Berthold’s commentary establishes a special relation between two texts: the “Elementatio” itself and the “Corpus Dionysiacum,” the latter’s agreement with the former representing the justification for a Christian exegete of this immense exploration of Neoplatonism....Berthold can be found on the one hand deviating from Proclus’ philosophical position, and—in cases where the transmission has been incomplete—on the other hand restoring Proclus’ more comprehensive teaching through the judicious invocation of Pseudo-Dionysian texts.<sup>48</sup>

We conclude the medievals with Cusanus. The cataclysm of 1453 occurred in his lifetime, and moved him, especially because he had spent time in Constantinople trying to reconcile the Greek and Latin churches. Reactions to reports of atrocities associated with the Christian defeat stirred him to write *De pace fidei*, working out a way for religious peace, especially between Christians and Muslims. Proclean philosophical theology provided the logic of this reconciling religion.

With the Chapter entitled *De theologia negativa* of his *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440) Nicholas became the first Latin to employ the term as a usual designation—Vladimir Lossky, to whom we will come shortly, in 1939 was the first to use “théologie négative” (versus “théologie mystique”) in French.<sup>49</sup> There Cusa applied it to “maximus Dionysius” whom “Rabbi Solomon and all the wise follow”—“Solomon” is Moses Maimonides about whom he knows through Eckhart.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, Aquinas had found the negative theologies of both Eriugena and Maimonides too extreme.<sup>51</sup> The *Apologia de Docta Ignorantia* of 1449 showed Nicholas belonged to the tradition descending from Albert, uniting Avicenna, “the divine Plato,” and Dionysius who “imitated Plato to such an extent that he is quite frequently found to have cited Plato’s words in series.”<sup>52</sup> Nine years later, in *De Beryllo*, we find his first

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<sup>46</sup> Gersh, “Berthold,” 496.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

<sup>49</sup> See Humbrecht, *Théologie négative*, 42-43.

<sup>50</sup> Ruh, *Initiation*, 105 on Cusa’s ms of Eckhart, and 132-33 on what he found in it; see also V. Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de dieu chez Maître Eckhart* (Paris: Vrin, 1960), 165.

<sup>51</sup> On Eriugena see Aquinas, *Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos Lectura*, § 85; on Maimonides, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.13.2, and Humbrecht, *Théologie négative*, 67, 554-56.

<sup>52</sup> Translation of the *Apologia*, 10, in J. Hopkins, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Arthur Banning, 2001), i, 466.

explicit mention of Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*. He brings Proclus into the discussion to support negative theology and, in this context, Cusanus makes clear that the One is neither numerical nor conceptual:

Rightly, then, as Proclus mentions in his commentary on the *Parmenides*, Plato rejects all [predication] apropos of the Beginning. Likewise, too, our Dionysius prefers negative theology to affirmative theology. However, the name "One" seems to befit God better than does any other name. This is what Parmenides calls Him—and so too Anaxagoras, who said: "the One is better than all other things together." Do not construe this as pertaining to the numerical one, which is called the monad or the singular, but construe it as pertaining to the One that is indivisible by any means of division—a One understood apart from any duality.<sup>53</sup>

Two works written in anticipation of his death, the *De Li Non Aliud* and the *De Venatione sapientiae*, give his mature doctrine. In the *Tetralogus de li non aliud*, Aristotle, Dionysius, and Proclus are brought into dialogue. One of the participants, Petrus Balbus, reports: "I especially admired what you cited from the books of the greatest theologian, Dionysius. For I recently have been translating Proclus the Platonist from Greek into Latin. [While translating] in the book on the theology of the divine Plato, I discovered these very [points], with virtually the same manner and tenor of expression."<sup>54</sup> In the subsequent discussion of Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, Nicholas says:

I think that Plato mentally viewed the substance, or the beginning, of things by way of revelation—in the manner in which the Apostle tells the Romans that God has revealed Himself to them. I understand this revelation by means of a likeness to light, which through itself presents itself to sight. It is not seen or known in any other way than it reveals itself, since it is invisible, because it is higher than, and antecedent to, everything visible. In his letters Plato very briefly declares that these matters are thus—saying that God eventually manifests Himself to one who seeks Him steadfastly and very vigilantly. (Proclus, too, repeats these [views] in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*.)<sup>55</sup>

The *De Li Non Aliud* concludes with what is most fundamental to the *Periphyseon* of Eriugena.

The *De Venatione sapientiae*, written after the *De Li Non Aliud*, records the Cardinal's pursuits of wisdom. Nicholas both corrects Proclus from the standpoint of the monotheism of Dionysius and exhibits their accord. I quote a statement of the agreement:

And Proclus...sums up [Plato's view] when he says: he-who-believes-Plato remains amidst negations. For an addition to the One contracts and diminishes the excellence of the One; and by means of an addition we are shown not-One rather than One. Dionysius, who imitates Plato, made a similar pursuit within the field of oneness; and he says that negations that are not privative assertions but are excellent and abundant are truer than are affirmations. Proclus, however, who cites Origen, comes after

<sup>53</sup> *De Beryllo*, 12-13; Hopkins, ii, 797.

<sup>54</sup> *De Li Non Aliud*, 20; Hopkins, ii, 1151.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Dionysius. Following Dionysius, he denies of the First, which is altogether ineffable, that it is one and good—although Plato called the First one and good. Since I think that these marvelous pursuers are to be followed and praised, I refer one-who is-studious to the careful considerations left behind for us in their writings.<sup>56</sup>

Although the history of Cusanus is skewed because he accepted Dionysius' self-representation, in principle he is ready for another account. Because he has detected that Dionysius reproduces Platonic texts, and because on a mixture of scriptural and philosophic principles, he regards Plato as also divinely inspired, he could have given up the derivation of the Dionysian doctrine from the mystical experience attributed to St Paul, without thereby depriving the doctrine of the *Corpus* of spiritual authority and truth. Equally, because Proclus is seen to borrow from both Dionysius and Plato, all three belong to a common hunting of God, a common theological tradition and enterprise. For Cusa, there is one sole source of being, truth, and good, beyond conceptual grasp, but giving, disclosing, indeed creating itself diversely. In fact, Cusanus has the evidence which moved modern scholars to place Proclus before Dionysius and which would allow Dionysius to have received his Platonism via Plotinus and Proclus, rather than from Plato directly. Because the fact that the Christian divine Dionysius was taught by the pagan divine Plato overturns none of his deepest convictions, reordering the history to place Proclus before Dionysius would be of no deep importance. In contrast, the interpenetration of philosophy and Scriptural revelation is of such heavnshaking consequence for the twentieth-century Christians to whom we now move that they are unwilling to recognise the obvious philological facts which Nicholas and those around him saw. What blinds them is a sectarian religious narrowness which belongs to their determination either to free their religion from Hellenic philosophy, or to have it generate its own metaphysics, or, stranger yet, to do both! At the very point when our historical researches make us endlessly aware of the inescapable interpenetration of religion and philosophy, our philosophy and theology fail us.

## PART II: Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion

Turning from the generous and inquisitive medieval spirits to the sectarian, ideological, and polemical attitudes of the twentieth-century is harsh and disappointing. With quasi-positivist Anglo-American philosophy, on one side, and Heidegger dominating the other, there has never been a century less equipped to understand the relation of philosophy and revelation. Still we should remain able to notice when one author cites the words of another in series.

Lossky's enormously influential *Essai sur la Théologie Mystique de L'Église d'Orient* was published in Paris in 1944.<sup>57</sup> For it the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius not only defines and epitomises the mystical theology of the Eastern Church, but it is also a "book the importance of which for the whole history of Christian thought cannot be exaggerated."<sup>58</sup> Its treatment of "The Divine Darkness," has a note on modern scholarship about the "Pseudo Dionysius" which lists theories placing him variously from the middle of the third to the sixth centuries. Proclus is not mentioned, and we are assured that this scholarly debate about the author "matters little" because "What is important is the Church's judgement of the

<sup>56</sup> *De Venatione Sapientiae* 22, 64; Hopkins, ii. 1318-19.

<sup>57</sup> An English translation, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, appeared in 1957; I quote from the St Vladimir's Seminar Press edition of 1976.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

contents of the work and the use which she has made of it.”<sup>59</sup> Aquinas’ reflections on the relation of positive and negative theology are introduced only to be rejected as a “very ingenious philosophical invention.” Why talk about positive theology when Dionysius says “time and time again that apophatic theology surpasses cataphatic” and “apophaticism... constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church.”?<sup>60</sup> By cutting off Aquinas because he is “philosophical”—and Western—Lossky has separated Dionysius from the tradition extending from the *Parmenides* of Plato to Proclus and Damascius, where the necessary relation of cataphatic to apophatic is central to the deepest dialectic. Crucially, for him, philosophy is apophatic and the worst of things. A moment’s reflection on its ancient and medieval history would have revealed that philosophy is no more cataphatic than apophatic. Crucially, Dionysius himself is explicit that the apophatic ascent to the Principle depends upon its cataphatic descent—following him Cusa noted their mutual implication when he first used the term negative theology—and that the result is beyond both methods.

Lossky deals with attempts “to make a neoplatonist of Dionysius” by comparing “Dionysian ecstasy with that which we find described at the close of the Sixth Ennead of Plotinus.”<sup>61</sup> He ignores that, as Cusanus knew and the nineteenth-century scholarship cited by Lossky re-established, the obvious textual connections are between Dionysius and Proclus, not Plotinus. He lists some resemblances between “Christian mysticism and the mystical philosophy of the neo-platonists.”<sup>62</sup> These categories Nicholas does not use, calling all three “theologians,” who are to be separated or united by their teaching, not by their religion. Quickly Lossky moves to the “line of demarcation” and here, stunningly, we discover that “The God of Plotinus is not incomprehensible by nature.” According to Lossky, the problem of “comprehension,” rational or intellectual, is not with the nature of the Principle but with our soul’s lack of unity. He writes: “What is discarded in the negative way of Plotinus is multiplicity, and we arrive at the perfect unity which is beyond being—since being is linked with multiplicity and is subsequent to the One.”<sup>63</sup> There is a little manipulation of a text or two to get this result, but the notion that the One is comprehensible by nature is so far from the obvious teaching of Plotinus that we will investigate why Lossky brought such a canard to the text. What follows falsifies Dionysius as much as it does Plotinus.

Lossky maintains that “The ecstasy of Dionysius is a going forth from being as such”—no text cited—and “That of Plotinus is rather a reduction of being to absolute simplicity.” Although, in fact, for Plotinus the spontaneous giving of the Good, not reduction, is central, Lossky restates the formula with a biblical reference, on one side, and a diminution of the One to comprehensible unity, on the other: “The God of Dionysius, incomprehensible by nature, the God of the Psalms: ‘who made darkness his secret place’, is not the primordial God-Unity of the neo-platonists.” The Dionysian assertion that God is “neither One, nor Unity” is characterised as an attack on “affirmative theology,” the “neo-platonist definitions.” In fact, no Neoplatonist calls the name “one” a positive definition of the Principle. It would have helped Lossky’s credibility if he had continued the quotation from Dionysius, which, among other denials, includes the trinitarian attributes: “It is neither

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>63</sup> Ibid..

one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness, nor is it spirit, as we know spirit, nor is it sonship or fatherhood.”<sup>64</sup> In the next paragraph, we come to what is moving Lossky:

If the God of revelation is not the God of the philosophers, it is this recognition of His fundamental unknowability which marks the boundary between the two conceptions. All that can be said in regard to the platonism of the Fathers, and especially in regard to the dependence of the author of the *Areopagitica* on the neo-platonist philosophers, is limited to outward resemblances which do not go to the root of their teaching, and relate only to a vocabulary which was common to the age. To a philosopher of the platonist tradition, even though he speak of the ecstatic union as the only way by which to attain to God, the divine nature is nevertheless an object, something which may be explicitly defined—the ‘ev—a nature whose unknowability lies above all in the fact of the weakness of our understanding...<sup>65</sup>

There are many problems here: Dionysius not only shares vocabulary with the Neoplatonists, he lifts long passages from them. Nothing is more foreign to the ancient and medievals than Pascal’s positing of two gods, one of revelation, another of the philosophers. If Lossky had read Proclus or Plotinus with an open mind, he could not have written that “the divine nature is... an object, something which may be explicitly defined.” They go to every length of paradoxical discourse to prevent presenting the Principle in this way. Did the opposition between the God of Christian revelation and the God of the philosophers prevent his seeing what was before his eyes? Proclus would not allow that he could speak or write about God except because he reveals himself, and, Dionysius is following the Successor of the inspired Plato when he begins his *Divine Names* with this idea.

Lossky’s essay multiplies the false contrasts. Dionysian ecstasy is set against the neoplatonic as “a mystical experience” is opposed to “a purely intellectual exercise.” Plotinus, who is accused by his successors of over intellectualising Platonism, devotes himself to showing that our ascent cannot stop with intellect and after intellect has done its work, the soul must wait for the Father-One to give himself; for his successors, the theurgy on which union depends is contrasted to the theoretical ascent philosophy accomplishes.<sup>66</sup> “Apophaticism,” Lossky maintains, “is above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God.”<sup>67</sup> The Neoplatonists tell us ceaselessly that God cannot be grasped conceptually, but they would agree with Dionysius, Eriugena, and Cusa that the negative way depends upon the positive. Nothing would come into being or be known, if God did not manifest himself conceptually and the *Divine Names* gives us what must be attributed to him conceptually. The false representation of Neoplatonism in the service of elevating an opposed *Corpus Areopagiticum* makes both of them incomprehensible.

One can go through Lossky’s writings without finding much better than this on the Dionysian negative theology. In introductory lectures on Orthodox theology he asserts the difference between a personal god and that of the Neoplatonists.<sup>68</sup> He is not frank about the problems ranging from anachronism to anthropomorphism involved in this language—problems which are especially acute for apophatic theology. In fact, Dionysius has removed

<sup>64</sup> Dionysius *Mystical Theology* 5, 1048A.

<sup>65</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 31-32.

<sup>66</sup> See W.J. Hankey, “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion, Virtue, and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59:2 (Juin 2003): 211-19.

<sup>67</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 38-39.

<sup>68</sup> V. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology. An Introduction* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 28-29

all the attributes of the Principle which would enable the I-Thou interaction Lossky demands. In an essay on “Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology,” Lossky admits that near the beginning of the *Divine Names* “Dionysius repeated almost literally the negative conclusion of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*... and ... asks himself how one can speak of divine names in the face of this radical unknowability.”<sup>69</sup> He answers by quoting Dionysius on the unattainability in word or thought of the “triadic Henad.” This response really deepens the problem by directing us to the unknowability of divine henads for Proclus. However, rather than honestly facing the historical and conceptual difficulties, Lossky resorts to the difference between Christian revelation and philosophy, as if that could solve a theological problem. He brings forward “This true transcendence, which Christians alone can confess”—no reason is given for this exclusive Christian privilege— and, a few sentences later, he exhorts us not to forget “that if the God of the philosophers is not the living God, the God of the theologians is such only by halves, as long as this last step has not been taken.”<sup>70</sup> There is nothing here except the continual reassertion of the difference between Christian religion and Hellenic philosophy, and, implicated in this, between East and West.

Cusanus, together with his medieval predecessors and Renaissance successors, engaged in exacting analysis of real textual connections which embraced an ever expanding literature. In contrast, so far as the relations between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists are concerned, I have not found a place where Lossky goes further than comparing one *Ennead* of Plotinus with the *Corpus*. Is he seeking to hide from historical truth? The *De Li Non Aliud* shows that Proclus and Dionysius were united in teaching that God cannot be an intellectual object, and founds every reality because he is its non other. In contrast, sectarian twentieth-century fideism works by polemical misrepresentation of the adversaries upon whom it depends. Lossky is not alone. Except for forsaking the description of Dionysius in terms of “negative theology,”<sup>71</sup> Jean-Luc Marion’s oppositions between Dionysius and Neoplatonism have many of the same characteristics as Lossky’s: 1) they involve generalized assertions about Hellenism and Neoplatonism without providing textual comparisons between Dionysius and Proclus or engagement with the deep and extensive Neoplatonic scholarship, 2) Neoplatonism is presented as if it had no other relation to the Principle than that of an intellectual quest for conceptual objects, 3) the positions of Damascius and Proclus are ascribed to Dionysius, and, what all three would in fact oppose, is hung round the neck of the Neoplatonists. Perhaps, when seeking an explanation for Lossky’s treatment of Neoplatonism, we will find one for Marion’s as well.<sup>72</sup>

The preface Étienne Gilson wrote for Lossky’s posthumously published *Théologie négative et connaissance de dieu chez Maître Eckhart* begins to answer our quest. It praised Lossky for not reducing Eckhart’s theology to a single fundamental notion. Gilson and Lossky agree that Eckhart is divided between allegiance to a Thomistic metaphysics of Being and a Dionysian metaphysics of the One: “Eckhart speaks the language of St Thomas without being a Thomist just as he speaks that of Denis without adhering to a strict theology of the One.”<sup>73</sup> Lossky’s Gilsonian framework determines this choice: either be a Thomist, regarding

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<sup>69</sup> V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. J.H. Erickson & T.E. Bird (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 27-28.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

<sup>71</sup> See his “Au nom. Comment ne pas parler de théologie négative,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 55:3 (octobre 1999): 339–363.

<sup>72</sup> See W.J. Hankey, *One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History* [published with J.-M. Narbonne, *Levinas and the Greek Heritage*] (Leuven/Paris/Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 201-209.

<sup>73</sup> Lossky, *Théologie négative*, 10.

God as *esse*, or a Neoplatonist, regarding God as the One. Elsewhere, Gilson turns this alternative into one between Christianity and paganism: any Christian metaphysics must be a metaphysics of Being and, thus, for Gilson, Dionysius is in a dilemma analogous to that of Eckhart; as a Christian Neoplatonist he is unable to choose, as he must, between Being and the One; Eriugena and all his other followers, including Eckhart, are in the same situation.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Jean-Marc Narbonne has shown that a Neoplatonism of pure Being is prevalent in the history of pagan and Christian philosophy, and he and I agree that Aquinas provides an exemplar.<sup>75</sup> In an article whose title says it all: “From Metaphysics to History, from Exodus to Neoplatonism, from Scholasticism to Pluralism: the fate of Gilsonian Thomism in English-speaking North America,”<sup>76</sup> I have shown that Gilson’s Thomism collapsed because the oppositions within which it attempted to fit medieval thought are too exclusively rigid. Lossky’s dissertation confirms that he is operating within these.

Gilson sets up two fundamental oppositions which will make trouble for Lossky trying to understand Eckhart. First, either a philosopher has a metaphysics of being, in which case, *esse* is the principle, and no more is to be said. The existential act of being is the final explanation. To ask for more is the original sin of philosophy. In the essentialist alternative, as with Parmenides, being is understood through, and reduced to, another category, which, in the case of Platonists like Dionysius (and Eckhart)<sup>77</sup>, is identity or unity. Yielding to the temptation of essentialism—understanding the act of being through something else—causes philosophy to fail. The second opposition is between philosophy and mysticism. Philosophy starts from the mysterious *esse* and makes the realm of finite being known. Mysticism has to do with union beyond knowledge but has nothing to do with philosophy and must be kept apart from it. Neoplatonism fatally mixes them.<sup>78</sup> Eckhart and Dionysius are caught in its paradoxes, which are doubly deadly for Dionysius because he tried impossibly to be a Neoplatonist and a Christian, and are triply deadly for Eckhart, because in addition he speaks the language of Aquinas.

Lossky tried to understand Eckhart through these Gilsonian oppositions. To them he also brought his own conviction that Dionysius is not really a Plotinian essentialist—Gilson’s way of presenting him—, has a genuinely unknowable God, and not the Neoplatonic false substitute.<sup>79</sup> His problems working within the Gilsonian framework start, when near the beginning of his dissertation, Lossky asks whether Eckhart is trying to transform the “natural theology” of Aquinas into a mysticism.<sup>80</sup> Eckhart refuses to fit himself within the available alternatives. Instead of choosing between the true Christian and Thomist metaphysics, which makes *esse* God’s proper name, and Plotinus, Eckhart does neither and both. He gives the divine *esse* the character of the Plotinian One and the “Déité-Être” is unknowable and ineffable after the manner of the first Parmenidean hypothesis.<sup>81</sup> To understand Eckhart’s treatment of names, a deeper grasp of Dionysius by way of Proclus and the sense in which the one is named and not named would have been required. Cusanus could have helped. However, Lossky does not attempt looking at Proclus, or Dionysius

<sup>74</sup> See É. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> (Toronto: PIMS, 1952), 30 & 34, and on Eckhart, 38-40.

<sup>75</sup> J.-M. Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> *Dionysius* 16 (1998): 157-188.

<sup>77</sup> Who has an essentialist account of being (Lossky, *Théologie négative* 308). For the full Gilsonian account of the existential (Thomist) and the essentialist treatments of being, see 308-309.

<sup>78</sup> Gilson, *Being*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> See Lossky, *Théologie négative*, 62-64.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

through Proclus, and, in his history, Gilson does not mention Proclus when treating Aquinas or Nicholas.<sup>82</sup>

The Avant-Propos of *Théologie négative* begins: “Vladimir Lossky literally died at the job, leaving unfinished the great work which he ought to have presented to the Sorbonne as the principal thesis for the Doctor of Letters.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, as Gilson wrote, Lossky was not able to fit Eckhart within to a reductive scheme, the one Gilson, his supervisor, had created. The doctrine of Aquinas which Gilson sets against what he calls essentialism generally, and Neoplatonism particularly, derives in fact from one side of the Neoplatonic tradition, the metaphysics of pure being, which probably had its origin with Porphyry and came to Aquinas through Boethius and others. This is the doctrine which Thomas ascribes to Dionysius and sets against Proclus in the *Exposition of the Liber de causis*. Narbonne has traced its history in his *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis*.<sup>84</sup>

Jean-Luc Marion has had a long engagement with the work of Gilson. In part he took up his studies of Descartes from within the questions Gilson’s early work raised and he subscribed to the basic outlines of Gilson’s history of late medieval and modern philosophy, supposing that the ontotheological structure of its metaphysics derived from Scotus and Suárez. Ironically, as long as Marion held that Aquinas’ so-called metaphysics of Exodus, naming God as *esse*, belonged to that condemned structure, he could have no truck or trade with Gilson’s Aquinas. Ten years ago, however, Marion began negotiations with Gilson’s account of Thomas’ metaphysics. This happened because of a move with a Neoplatonic shape, although Marion certainly did not call it that any more than he placed his similar account of Dionysius within that pattern. In effect, Marion situated divinity above being so that God could be said to give being to himself; thus being has a transcendence which puts it beyond comprehension.<sup>85</sup> The net result *vis-à-vis* Gilson is that both have a kind of Neoplatonic account of being in Aquinas which both deny to be such. Moreover, because Neoplatonism is falsely identified by Marion as an intellectualism wrapped up in affirming and denying concepts, Marion repeats Lossky’s opposition of Neoplatonism and Dionysius. Mystical theology is set against Neoplatonic theorising. Marion writes:

Ascent coincides with the negation of attributes. It is necessary to note that the denials bear just as easily on the names taken from the sensible (corporeal, figurable, measurable, variable, etc.), as on the intelligible names themselves, including the most conventional within Neoplatonism: “neither One, nor Unity, nor Divinity, nor Goodness.” The most appropriate name is found, therefore, no more in the Plotinian One than in the grossest sensible idol.<sup>86</sup>

Marion puts the apophatic “distance” he finds in Dionysius against the objectifications of ontological metaphysics and representational subjectivity. Dionysius’ requirement that “divine things be understood divinely” demands: “radically prohibiting that one hold God as

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<sup>82</sup> Gilson, *History*, 361-383 & 534-40.

<sup>83</sup> M. de Gandillac, in Lossky, *Théologie négative*, 7.

<sup>84</sup> See also W.J. Hankey, *God in Himself, Aquinas’ Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-6; idem, “Aquinas and the Platonists,” 319.

<sup>85</sup> For accounts of Marion relation to Gilson and his shift, see W.J. Hankey, “Denys and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold and Postmodern Hot,” *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. L. Ayres et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 141-161.

<sup>86</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance, Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 146.

an object, or as a supreme being, distance escapes the ultimate avatar of the language of an object—the closure of discourse, and the disappearance of the referent.”<sup>87</sup>

For him, Neoplatonism belongs to metaphysics and the rejected “Greek horizon.” It is no more than a form of philosophical *theoria*, and its First Principle consists in a mere substitution of the One or of the Good for Being. Having pointed to the priority of Good over Being for Dionysius, Marion opposes him to the Neoplatonists:

It is not enough simply to declare the horizon of Being to be overstepped by goodness if one wants to think this transgression. What must be understood by goodness? In contrast to the Neo-platonists who overcome Being only for the sake of coming unto the One and would pass beyond the One only in order to retrieve it, Dionysius not only does not privilege the one which he paradoxically places in the last position of the divine names; he also does not accord any essential privilege to goodness—while nonetheless still granting it the title “most revered of names.”<sup>88</sup>

There is some chicanery here: “One” is the last of the divine names in the *Divine Names*, along with Perfect, because to these all returns in a Proclean *epistrophe*. This is a cosmic anticipation of the *benosis* to which the *Mystical Theology* is devoted.

It is not hard to set Proclus and contemporary Neoplatonic scholarship against Marion’s account and, because I have done that elsewhere, I shall not repeat it here.<sup>89</sup> We can use the medieval encounter with Proclus from Aquinas to Nicholas of Cusa to correct Marion, and, when we do so, the real moving difference appears. As opposed to Gilson, Lossky, and Marion, for that encounter, the fact that a position is Christian does not establish its truth in such a way that philosophy becomes false, insubstantial, or already fixed. Gilson sets the alternative pattern: Exodus reveals the true metaphysics; other philosophies have their origin in man’s natural tendency to error.<sup>90</sup> Unnecessary for Gilson is the *Tetralogus* staged by Nicholas which worked by ever deepening the philosophical question. Not needed by Gilson is the perpetual *Hunt for Wisdom* sought everywhere in philosophy and religion. Cusanus would not agree with Lossky that there is something about Christianity enabling it alone to confess a true transcendence so that philosophy is unnecessary and, when undertaken, produces false religion. Nor for him does Christianity alone give the “saturated phenomenon” “where mystical theology is accomplished” in an “excess of intuition” overcoming, submerging, exceeding the measure of each and every concept,<sup>91</sup> while Neoplatonic negative theology ends only in atheism.<sup>92</sup>

This is, however, mere polemical misrepresentation. Marion certainly knows that Jean Trouillard, Stanislas Breton, and other twentieth-century French Neoplatonists, who belong within the tradition which includes Eriugena and Cusanus, showed the Neoplatonic One is nothingness by excess and that coming to it is a mystagogy ending neither in denial or

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>88</sup> J.-L. Marion, “In the Name. How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology,’” in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. J. D. Caputo et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 31–32; see *idem*, *The Idol and Distance*, 146 & 173.

<sup>89</sup> Hankey, *One Hundred*, and *idem*, “Neoplatonism and Contemporary French Philosophy,” *Dionysius* 23 (2005): 168–181.

<sup>90</sup> See Hankey, “From Metaphysics”: 188.

<sup>91</sup> Marion, “In the Name”, 40.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, note 8.

affirmation but silence.<sup>93</sup> What distinguishes these and our medievals from Gilson, Marion, and Lossky and others like them—for example the Radically Orthodox—is the refusal to divide religion from philosophy so that they each turn into exclusive totalities. Among the costs, as Nicholas knew well and tried to prevent in his *De pace fidei*, is inter religious war as sects, whose irrationality belongs to their nature, take up the form of interaction natural. This retreat of religion into itself derives from a sense of its weakness. As its power now returns terribly in our time, we may hope that it will cease to fear intellect and the *cognitio supra intellectum*.

Thursday, March 13, 2008

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<sup>93</sup> See Hankey, *One Hundred*, 189-215.