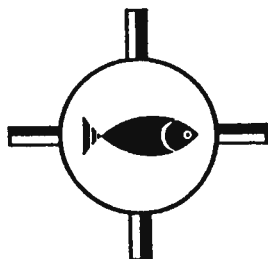


LIBERAL CATHOLIC INSTITUTE OF STUDIES



Unit 13

THEOLOGY

SOURCE MATERIAL

I

DIONYSIUS "THE AREOPAGITE"

by the Right Reverend E.J. Burton



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Printed in Australia

The Work of Dionysius (Denys) "The Areopagite"

by

The Right Reverend E. J. Burton, M.A.

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CHAPTER 1

I N T R O D U C T I O N

A quite coherent and distinct collection of writings attributed to a certain Dionysius emerge into prominence in the eastern churches somewhere about the beginning of the sixth century. Severus, Patriarch of Antioch, referred to the writer in 513 A.D., and by others they were attributed to the Dionysius the Areopagite who met St. Paul during his mission in Athens. This identification has been largely refuted, although in the Eastern Churches the writer is still revered as St. Dionysius. For many centuries in the West theologians and philosophers referred to the works as authoritative. Three points may be noted which perhaps have some significance: the Areopagus was the resort of all philosophers, and the Dionysian writings have platonic affinities, a kind of Christian-Neoplatonic synthesis; their overall presentation of christian experience and spirituality is valid and acceptable in terms of Eastern Christian practice and belief; and today in the Christian Community (with its Rudolf Steiner associations) the writings are given especial significance, regarding the Areopagite himself (with Paul) as the real author.

Whatever the immediate authorship of the works, they themselves are their own best authority. Their influence has been incalculable; they cross-fertilized many approaches; they have much in them of basic perennial philosophy; they are a standard framework for the mystical path; they have unique apprehensions of the angelic kingdoms, the hierarchies. Produced probably in Syria, they represent the developing thoughts of a long cultural and religious tradition; they put into relationship and perspective earlier (and later) initiatives; in fact, they harmonize the speculations and spiritual explorations of many who wrote centuries later and knew nothing or little of Dionysius, or Denys, now commonly called the "Pseudo-Areopagite". One must immediately stress that "pseudo" has no suggestion of falsity, or reflection upon the quality of the writings. It is simply the best way of indicating that the Dionysius who was the eloquent writer of these works was associated by many with that Dionysius who met Paul in the Aeropagus, and whose philosophy met Paul's faith.

The main works of Dionysius (or Denys) are: *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*.

CHAPTER 2

THE CELESTIAL HIERARCHY

The Celestial Hierarchy shows how nine orders of Angels mediate God to man. This mediation is an important element in the teaching of John Scotus Erigena, who translated Dionysius from the Greek into Latin. Through him the works of Dionysius became the basis for much later thinking in the West. In the East Dionysius was regarded almost as a complete theological system.

In barbarian times, the Dark Ages, the continuing contact of the Celtic Churches with the East (the Irish almost alone preserved the knowledge of Greek in the West) maintained the effective flow and development of christian thought and practice. Today the Orthodox Eastern Church still infers that the Celtic Churches and saints were and are "orthodox", representing the thought and practice of the undivided Church and purer tradition.

The ministry of angels, leading man within his divine origin and being, is endemic to this tradition, and is a not unimportant part of Liberal Catholic work and liturgy. An examination of the Canon of our Mass will illustrate this clearly. Whether or not one accepts the minutiae of Dionysius' angelic system is not a matter of ultimate importance.

The Celestial Hierarchy brings together the long process of study, stemming from the enumerations of St. Paul in Ephesians 1:21 and Colossians 1:16; these in turn represent a long and universal tradition in various forms and aspects of human experience, the *fravashi* of the Zoroastrian and the *deva* of the Indian. Dionysius arranged them in three hierarchies, three choirs in each: Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones; Dominations, Virtues and Powers; Principalities, Archangels and Angels. The last two orders (only) have a special mission to, and share work with, men. Examine the Preface in the Canon of the Liberal Catholic Mass. All share in the worship, but the immediate co-workers are the angels and archangels: "Therefore with Angels and Archangels, with Thrones, Dominations, etc., etc."

Later schoolmen and philosophers concurred in using Dionysius' scheme as a basis for further investigation. "Ideas" of St. Thomas Aquinas should be especially

noted. One feels that in so far as these matters can be expressed in speech or writing, Dionysius collated from evidence in an effective way, acknowledging and conceptualizing this part of living human experience.

The relations between God and Man are ordered and maintained by this divine hierarchy. On the earthly plane, the three great Orders are represented by bishops, priests, and deacons. By the sacraments, through the material worlds, the life of God is communicated to mankind, for the cosmos is a manifestation of God. This was developed strongly in the thought of John Scotus Erigena, for whom all nature is the mirror of God. The celestial hierarchy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the hierarchy of nature, culminating in the sacraments, all work together in the "deification" of man.

CHAPTER 3

THE ECCLESIASTICAL HIERARCHY

In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* this cosmic theme is presented: the celestial hierarchy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in which bishops, priests and deacons correspond on earth to the three great celestial Orders; and the sacraments, by which on the earth the divine life is shared with, and communicated to, mankind. The celestial hierarchy, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the hierarchy of nature, culminating in the sacraments, all work together for the deification of man. That progress towards *theosis* is attained by hierarchical, or increasing, spirituality, within the being of each, through the stages of purgation, illumination and union.

Through these stages human nature becomes deified. The many partake of the One, in that Unity on which Dionysius so strongly insists, in common with the pervasive influence of neo-platonic thought.

The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is a comprehensive and skillful work in which many questions, still asked today, are put into helpful relationship. Here the sacraments (and the sacramental nature of all life) are brought into context with the "ways" of spiritual life, by which man is divinized gradually but inevitably. There is no conflict between the so-called sacramentalist and the mystic. As is so often shown by the great mystics of mediaeval times, e.g., the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Richard Rolle, both of whom drew upon the work of Dionysius.

We are shown the process of purgation, illumination, and union. Through the purgative way (evidenced by later mystics, such as St. John of the Cross) past faults are overcome, and the spirit is prepared by "detachment". In the following, illuminative, way, "unattachment" proceeds further; to quote the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: "Also called the way of the Proficients... the soul is therein cleansed from attachment to creatures and 'enlightened' (illuminated) concerning the things of the spirit". The reader will note that various bodies have referred to themselves as "Illuminati" such as the Rosicrucians, or the "masonic" group founded by Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830). Although

such have no probable intent to suggest immediate association with Dionysian or later mystical thought, the basic relationship in thought is unavoidable. Just as "proficients" suggests "adepts", in line for the "unitive" way.

via unitiva is the "third and last stage of the spiritual life" (ibid.). Of that, with contemplation of the divine, complete freedom (unattachment) from all other things, fulfilment, Dionysius writes more extensively, as we shall see. The union of humanity with the divine is apprehended more nearly (though in itself beyond expression) when we come to "accept" more fully the essence of the divine. Moreover, the Way is not the abandonment of aspects of being, but rather the assumption of the incomplete within the more complete. Unattachment, detachment, is rather the gathering up of fragments (ceasing to rely upon them as significant) within a greater integrity or wholeness.

Of course, to attempt ever to make sharp distinctions between stages is absurd; further, the variant and gradual approach may (as in all process) be further divided or otherwise described. Nonetheless it was Dionysius who established the groundwork for subsequent writers who sought to present the way of the spiritual life towards *theosis*.

CHAPTER 4

T H E M Y S T I C A L T H E O L O G Y

The Mystical Theology harmonizes the previous works, presenting us with an approach towards the whole cosmic process. Much of this work has been enshrined in Christian thought, especially in the Eastern Church, and is now in this age of renaissance permeating the philosophy and theology of the West.

The Mystical Theology examines, in immediate experience, the ascent of the soul to God, and in so doing establishes a structure of statement and process which was utilized by later mystics and teachers. It may be cross-referenced to the practice and experience of spiritual *illuminati* in other cultures and faiths, not omitting buddhist attitudes, even though members of that path might wish to qualify such a statement.

Basic is the process of *unknowing*, the shedding of the partial, physical, "facts" which obtrude constantly upon us, moving to unattachment. So, too, sense perceptions must gradually be superseded; likewise the "reasoning" of the intellect must be transcended. When the essential "soul", the inner divine is at last freed from such burdens and from obsession with, and attention to, the partial and the non-essential, it will enter upon a seeming darkness and obscurity, having abandoned all those "props" and contacts with the "world" on which it relied. It is now ready to pass through this gateway of seeming death for rebirth; the "ray of divine darkness" will illuminate it, free to rise into the knowledge of ineffable Being.

Many well known writers expand and elaborate on this from their own experience in later times. Perhaps the best known is *The Cloud of Unknowing* (attributed to Walter Hilton, probably erroneously), an English mystical treatise of the thirteenth century. Deeply influenced by the "negative mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite", the writer insists that God cannot be known by the human reason. The "cloud of unknowing" which lies between God and man is pierced not by intellect but by a "sharp dart of love". This was part of a number of such studies written during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, associated with Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich, a whole spiritual renaissance.

But the work of Dionysius echoed down further through the centuries. St. John of the Cross (1542-91), perhaps the most famed of all Christian mystics, gave in *The Ascent of the Soul* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* as well as in *The Living Flame* definitive expression to the insights of earlier writers and in particular of Dionysius. All rest upon his own unitive experience. Many contemporary studies stem from, or are built upon, St. John of the Cross, as well as the work of creative writers (e.g., T.S. Eliot) or such specific examinations as E.A. Peers, *Spirit of Flame: a Study of St. John of the Cross* (1943). There is no question as to the innate authority of Dionysius' perceptions, however reached, and by whomever written down. Imitative treatises put forth in the present century on meditation, hierarchy and mystical experience add little of consequence although often pretending originality!

CHAPTER 5

T H E D I V I N E N A M E S

For the theologian *The Divine Names* is the most important and most often quoted work. *The Divine Names* concerns itself with the Being and attributes of the divine. Here we find that "negative" theology, which (strange to say) is actually more satisfying and positive for many present day theologians.

So we come to "the tradition concerning the Divine Names. To my fellow presbyter Timothy: Dionysius the Presbyter":

"We should set forth the things that are spoken of God, not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but by making evident the power inspired by the spirit in the theologians, whereby, in a manner ineffable and unknown, we are united to the Ineffable and Unknown in that union which is far beyond our powers and energies whether rational or intellectual". The Superessentiality is above all reason, intellect and essence. "Divine things revealed and contemplated are adapted to the capacity of each mind". "The goodness of the Supreme God...divinely tempers to finite powers the Infinitude that passes understanding".

So the basic approach is laid down:

"Just as that which is intelligible cannot be known and contemplated by means of that which is sensible, nor that which is simply formless and imageless by means of that which has type and form, not the incorporeal and intangible by means of that which has bodily form, so, clearly by the same word of truth, above the essential is the super-essential infinity and above intellect the super-essential unity; and that One which is beyond thought is inconceivable by all thought; that Good beyond all words is an unutterable Mystery; unific cause of all unities, super-essential Essence, super-essential Intellect, ineffable Word, beyond word, intellect and name; in the likeness of no being; the Cause of all Being: yet itself not being; as That which abides above all things that are, alone having power to make with full knowledge a revelation of Itself".

This is surely axiomatic: yet the majority of thinkers and scholars in all fields act as if they were unaware of the simple truth—that the finite cannot express that which is less finite. It has no terms with which to do so. This applies to all phenomena and all process: few can be perfectly expressed; we may approach (as, e.g., in theories concerning the origin of speech and language) but no one approach will completely state and present what happens. The

terrible abiding error in western thought is the constant illusion that any aspect can be so verbally stated and absolutely conceived. Whereas—as a great theologian has said—whenever you seek to encapsulate "within a concept", something of the whole is lost.

Nearly all western thinking, even "working structures" we draw up and achieve, is vitiated by unwillingness to accept further possibilities or subtleties. In various areas a "model" is justifiably envisaged. But then the student proceeds as though this scheme (which contains certain salient and relevant factors) were an absolute into which all phenomena in the area concerned must be fitted and straitjacketed. I have noted in academic work again and again that a working hypothesis becomes, in effect, absolute. Ultimately, its falsity in some respect is noted. A further scheme is established, which again has to be destroyed. A "working" hypothesis will yield valuable results. But this must always be seen as a relative or comparative "truth". Dogma can never be absolute.

This is so even in the realms of material affairs. How much more when we explore 'partially', according to our capabilities, into the further and deeper ranges of experience. So "you will find that many theologians have celebrated It not only as invisible and incomprehensible, but also as Inscrutable and past finding out and it is certain that there is no traveller who has penetrated to Its most hidden Infinitude".

But this Infinitude sheds its light upon us. All share Its fostering care, which draws all gradually within its Life.

"It lovingly tempers to all things Its superessential Ray, firmly rooted in Itself, by illuminations adapted to the particular nature of each, and thus draws up, into such contemplation, communion, and similitude as is fitting to them, the holy minds which strive after It with all their power...steadily with unwavering eyes gazing upon that Ray which shines upon them".

By "unknowing", mystical *agnosia*, we can get beyond the particular which hampers us from reaching the essential and real. But the mystical experience and truth cannot be wholly expressed; truths can be suggested, and we may enter into something of their nature, by analogy, by paradox (cf. some Zen approaches) from the scriptures, sacred poetry, from all relevant phenomena. So that by means of these glimpses and gleams, when we find the Godhead celebrated with

holy praise as "Monad and Unity...as from a unifying power, we (also) are unified and through the supermundain gathering together of our scattered and diverse power we are united into a Godlike monad and unity in the likeness of God."

He proceeds then to show why certain terms and names are applied to God; all of them seek to express some aspect of Being. He deals, too, with the Incarnation. The sacred veils in the scriptures and hierarchical traditions conceal (yet hold in readiness) spiritual things by sensible symbols. We use as best we may symbols appropriate to divine things and from these we strain upwards according to our power. "Stilling the activities of our minds we press on towards the superessential Ray...entirely beyond the power of the mind to conceive or words to express".

Even to say that "God is good" or "God is love" limits God (because by "goodness" and "love" we mean love and goodness as known on earth by us) yet God is called loving towards mankind because It truly and completely shares our human nature,

"recalling and uniting to Itself in one of Its persons the lowness of humanity from which in an ineffable manner...the Eternal took a temporal existence and He who superessentially transcends the whole order of the natural world came down into our nature, yet preserved His own essential nature wholly unmingled and unchanged".

The last quotation may suggest why Dionysius was quoted by the Monophysites in support of their views of the One nature of Jesus Christ; Monophysitism taught that in the Person of the Incarnate Christ there was a Single, a Divine nature, while in orthodox teaching there was a double nature, Divine and Human, after the Incarnation.* The possibility of Dionysius' support for Monophysite Christians gives us a useful dating for his work; it was in A.D. 533 at Constantinople that the Monophysite party appealed, during a colloquy, to his writings as supporting their ideas. They also ascribed the writings to Dionysius the Areopagite. Three great churches, the Coptic (with the Ethiopian) the Syrian Jacobite and the Armenian, today maintain a "monophysite" position, although their official statements differ little from the Orthodox when positively presented. Recently moves have been made towards further understanding with

*See relevant entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*

western churches and the more considered approaches of contemporary theology have necessarily obscured the earlier dichotomies.

When one recognizes that the inner reality of man's being is the divine life, and stresses the recognition and "realization" of this as man's fulfilment, one cannot ignore the attempted expression of this in any theory of the Incarnation. "When we have risen, incorruptible, immortal, and have attained the blessed Christlike state, we shall be...filled with the visible manifestation of God Himself..." (says Dionysius).

The second main section of *The Divine Names* is not easy to summarize. It deals with the undifferentiated and the differentiated in theology, the nature of the divine union and distinction, specifically within the Triadic Unity, as it is termed. There is the Lordship of the whole Godhead overall. And the whole Godhead is life. So we have the statements in Scripture; "As the Father raiseth the dead and quickeneth, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will" and "It is the Spirit that quickeneth". The name "Lord" is applied to all persons equally. So "I and my Father are One". Names given to God must be attributed to all the Godhead, "The Names which belong to the whole Deity, the Supreme Being, the God above gods, the Supreme Life, Supreme Wisdom and all other pre-eminent abstractions, etc., are given to the Cause of all..." But the differentiated names are the "superessential Name and property of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit", names which indicate their particular aspects.

Then there is the special subsistence of Christ within us, and the "mysteries of brotherly love". There is a distinct work of God by which

"the Superessential Word for our sake and from us takes upon Himself wholly and for our sake our humanity to do and to suffer whatever is set apart and chosen as befitting the action of His own Divine Humanity... In these things the Father and the Spirit do not participate in common with Him, except that they all share in the benevolent and loving will of God towards humanity..."

In our terminology, attempted comprehensions of phenomena, we must not think we are perceiving in reality the greater reaches of Being. Phenomena, effects, that impinge on us, possess only "according to their capacity" the images of the causes. The causes are elevated above them, by similitude to the primal

Word. We are, in the words of St. Paul, perceiving only dimly as reflections in a mirror (I Corinthians 13:12). The Incarnation itself is inexpressible in words and incomprehensible by any mind. But that does not suggest that our experience is misleading, only that it is partial. To us, the imperfect, the apprehension we have is Perfect, since it is the source of our idea of perfection. That is as far as we can grasp the perfect. "It is fulness to that which is deficient and Superplenitude to that which is full".*

There is always a further reach. Word or name is to be seen as an approach (but never attaining) to the Essential, at least in our present stage of apprehension. There are many memorable Dionysian statements; one can only point the student in our limited space to the works themselves.

"God is superessentially Being and gives being to all things and produces all that is, from Itself, while remaining in Itself; One in Its multiplication, united in Its emanations, full in Its distinctions, not only by being superessentially exempt from all things, but by the unitive production of the whole and the undiminished profusion of its incessant communications."

He concludes this section (as he would were he indeed the Areopagite) by quoting from Paul, whom he terms "that one great in the divine mysteries, that light of the world, that peaks by divine inspiration." The words he gives are those of I Corinthians, 8, vv. 5-6.

The next part is concerned with the power of prayer, and the remaining "chapters" with lengthy discussion of various groups of names. Chapter IV, for example, is "concerning Good, Light, Beauty, Love, Ecstasy, Jealousy," and "that evil is neither existent, nor does it arise from what exists, nor is it in being".

"Evil is a straying from the path. Evil is also deficiency, weakness, disproportion, failure, a lack of purpose of beauty, of life, of intelligence, unreasonable, imperfect, unstable, without cause, indefinite, unproductive, inactive, impotent, disordered, indeterminate, dark, unsubstantial, having in itself no kind of subsistence whatever."

He discusses with skill the hoary old non-question, "How can there be evil if there is Providence?" Ignore, he says, the saying of those who think that

*in our earthly sense of the word

Providence should lead us to virtue against our will. Providence provides for the needs of the "self-moved". Providence cannot destroy the abilities and qualities of the self-moved. "Evil...is weakness and impotence...Such weakness cannot be obscured or palliated. Power is bestowed for us all." We cannot commend deficiency or perversion or flight or falling away from the good which is proper to us..." (So brief a treatment is, however, hardly fair to Dionysius!)

Chapter VI is written "Concerning Life", almost poetic in eloquence. Chapter VII continues the treatment of specific names; Wisdom, Intellect, Reason, Truth, Faith. Chapter VIII: Power, Justice, Preservation, Redemption, and also concerning Inequality"; IX: Great, Small, Different, Similar, Rest, Motion, Equality; XI discusses Peace, and what is meant by "Being Itself" and similar terms; XII: what is signified by Holy or Holies, King of Kings, etc. and XIII: "Concerning Perfect and One." He concludes:

"Desiring to think and speak about Its ineffable nature, we have chosen to consecrate, as most highly appropriate to it, the most revered of Names...Theologians...have chosen the negative way since by this the soul is lifted above things akin to itself and travels through all the conceptions of God, which are transcended by that which is above all Names and knowledge...If therefore we have spoken rightly and so far as we are able have attained true conceptions in unfolding the Divine Names, this must be ascribed to the Cause of All who gives first the power of speech and then the power of speaking well...And let this, indeed, be the end of my discourse on the Divine Names. Now will I pass on to the Symbolic Theology with God for my guide".

CHAPTER 6

S U M M A R Y A N D F U R T H E R S T U D Y

The teaching of Dionysius must be considered with the Commentary of Maximus the Confessor (580-662 A.D.) on his works. He completed Dionysius' general outline, to present the world as a manifestation of God, with His Word as the source of His eternal essences. He also achieved a stronger Christology. Man, originally within possible contemplative union with God, had turned away, occupied by "things" instead. Christ reunites man with God. (See the words of Dionysius above). Man's broken affinity with God is restored. Return within God, deification, is man's fulfilment and indeed the fulfilment of the whole cosmos, assumed within the worlds of the spirit. Through mystical experience man can enjoy a foretaste of that final union and fulfilment. (Again my summary is inadequate).

Upon these works, later Christian thinking and apprehension drew constantly, largely through another great thinker, John Scotus Erigena, who translated Dionysius into Latin for the Western world. Dionysius re-established the central theme of Christianity: deification, still dynamic in Eastern Christianity and equally in sensitive western expositions. He presents a whole—and valid—cosmic model. Those centuries ago, he drew up an approach to which contemporary thinkers are turning. In detail he presents: (a) the mystic way, (b) the dark night of the soul, (c) the hierarchy (as used, e.g., in our own Liturgy), (d) the way of purgation, illumination and union, (e) the soul's ascent to its divine source. His world view aligns sacramental system with cosmic process. Above all, he is the begetter and stimulator of later thought. In his assessment of linguistic patterns and verbal potential he, as elsewhere, anticipated conclusions and studies which we in the West have had laboriously to re-discover.

That God is both immanent and transcendent accords with what we may call the "common-sense" of Dionysius. We may give God a name (say goodness)—affirmative theology; next we deny this name—negative theology—our idea of goodness is drawn from human experience—we may say he is "supergoodness." Such terms represent the most we can "say" about God.

Further Study

1. You will find a full working bibliography on any of the themes, authors or subjects mentioned above in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. You may, of course, consult *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*. In all serious study your main concern will be to see relationships, to find unity behind diversity, not in the sense that distinctions are obliterated but to recognize the manifold riches of human experience and discovery. This basic principle really stems from Dionysius. It may be termed "creative cross-referencing", the wonderful complexity of any "single" life pattern. To study thus is not simplification but fulfilment, which at every stage reveals deeper significances in our world and worlds.
2. Secure some book which treats in a more general way with the background and setting of a philosopher within human thought. Such, for example, as *Mediaeval Thought. St. Augustine to Ockham*, by Gordon Leff, A Pelican Original. Such a book will guide your studies towards outstanding figures such as Aquinas, Maimonides, Abelard, Anselm. It is better to appreciate one figure more fully, seeing his relationships with others, and his work within the general milieu than to study several figures. Dionysian studies form such a centre, from which much else may be considered and an organic pattern emerge. One philosopher studied fully will yield far more than several taken as "gobbets", detached "thumb-nail" accounts.
3. Another approach is to see how various thinkers have dealt with a particular problem. You may find conferences held on such matters. In England (at a Retreat Centre) we organized an Inter-religious Conference on "Perceiving the Infinite". At this papers were given by a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Humanist, a Jew, a Moslem and a Christian. Necessarily much that Dionysius had said was repeated (even without knowledge of his work). The Report of the Conference contained the summary of an address by a minister of the Christian Community (associated with Rudolf Steiner) and presented their view of Dionysius and the Hierarchy. Further, the distinguished Jewish Rabbi present took the approach of "negative theology". But all was spoken and said within the context of present day society and crises. (The full cyclostyled report may be obtained from the Liberal Catholic Church Headquarters Office.)

4. Actual texts are basic. C.E. Rolt published translations of *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* (S.P.C.K. London, 1920). For specialist studies (and other translations) (e.g., those of Erigena into Latin) see page 406 of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

5. Lastly, set yourself to study through questions, e.g.:

- a) "His writings combine Neo-platonism with Christianity". Do you think such a statement is justified? Support your answer by reference to his works.
- b) Compare your own reading and experience on the mystical path with the guide-lines given by Dionysius.
- c) What elements in the thought and practice of the Liberal Catholic Church accord with the teachings and suggestions of Dionysius?
- d) In *The Liberal Catholic* for March and June 1981 read the articles on Meister Eckhart. Which ideas there coincide with those of Dionysius? Which differ?

6. The question of authorship. Since the writings quote from who lived after Dionysius they must be (as they stand) of later date than the Areopagite, the friend of Paul. I feel, however, that there is a strong Pauline influence, and might surmise—this is purely surmise—that the body of writings and thought which the writings represent may well transmit (as the immediate writer insists) thoughts and teachings stemming from the first century. Dionysius constantly refers to a body of teaching and teachers, whom he calls collectively "the theologians". E.g., "The theologians celebrate It both as nameless and as having all names." There is a repetitive "They say..." He refers also to a collective tradition and wisdom: "certain divine visions which from time to time in temples and elsewhere enlightened the great mystics or the prophets". So we, "as the hierarchical law instructs us, must draw near to those Godlike contemplations with a mind rightly disposed."

This, however, is merely surmise and must be kept distinct from factual statements.

APPENDIX

W I D E R I S S U E S

Thinking on:

1. We have to free ourselves from the perverted attitudes of western industrial society, to extricate ourselves, to experience once more the ways of life. An excellent presentation of the human and restored perspective is given in *The Liberal Catholic* for March, 1981, Vol. XLX No. 1, in the article by William H. Quinn, Junior, on Meister Eckhart: Some Axial Theses. He refers to Guenon's view of the "mental disequilibrium of the times". So too, to Coomaraswamy on "the relative infirmity" of modern scholastic methodology. Thus, also, Kelley on the same "modernity". "We are so spiritually and mentally crippled that we are rendered almost incapable of understanding the essential teachings of Eckhart". We have to be assisted "to surmount difficulties that modern modes of education and thought have placed in the way of a true understanding..." (pp. 22, 23.) This matter is wider than the study of Dionysius or even of such thinkers as Eckhart. The flaw vitiates much contemporary scholarship. (For detailed references, and other books, see the article quoted.)

2. Meanwhile, despite the seeming absence of the unitive approach today (generally), there are (sometimes amusing) complementary movements at the lower, more physical level, e.g., in speculative physics, a search for a unitive basis or all-embracing initiative. Attempting to find the fundamental particles of the cosmos Gell-Mann and Zweig postulated the existence of the "quarks". Continuing research indicated that quarks could not be identified in isolation: "The current consensus is that this negative result is a positive law of Nature; quarks can never be observed directly". More, to account for phenomena, further types of quarks have been postulated. "So many up quarks and so many down quarks to make a proton". And further complications came with further experimentation. "Will the Ultimate Theory soon be celebrated to reduce the profligate multiplicity of Nature to the One...?" So John Ziman writes in a lengthy consideration of James S. Trefil, *From Atoms to Quarks: An Introduction to the Strange World of Particles Physics*, (Athlone Press), entitled, "The Many in pursuit of the One". "Shall we die happier knowing the answer than still regretting ignorance?" It is riches of expanding experience and perception which

we may term an equivalent of the illuminative way—that is the gradual fulfilment of mankind. "There is as much joy to be got from the search as from any solution we may find..." "In the philosophic domain, unfinished business is not an unwelcome legacy...Dr. Trefil could have offered us no more genuine gift than a clear path to the vantage point on which physics now stands."

So too, Horace Freeland Judson, *The Search for Solutions* (Hutchinson), in a parallel study, "could have performed no finer duty than telling truly and sympathetically what it means to follow such paths into unknown lands". Only at the "end" will we know even as we are known. As a buddhist bikkhu said to me, nirvana is for ever unknown; but it must be. His actual phrase was "it is a teleological necessity from our present (ever-deepening) awareness on the path".

3. So we are left with negative judgements on which to apprehend the greater beyond, paths "into unknown lands". Arrogance which declares we have already arrived (as we have seen) vitiates contemporary scholarship and study. All that is needed is recognition of the One beyond the partial and multiplicity of interacting phenomena. As an existentialist, one is constantly shocked by the imprisoning theories and would-be "complete" models of one's academic associates. Contrariwise one is immensely heartened when their thinking becomes "open-ended" once more.

Massimi Piatelli-Palmarini has edited brilliantly the reports of a Conference in 1975 when Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget (and a mingling of scientists) came together to discuss how children acquire language. Each had his own definite approach.* That Chomsky had rather the better of Piaget is not so much a confirmation of his side as an inevitable result of Piaget's weakness; the latter's ideas were taken up and plugged at every turn by theoretical educationists in the fifties and made the lives of those tutors engaged on the more active involvements with life an absolute misery. At least Chomsky has demolished behaviouristic ideas—though why these ideas have still similarly a stranglehold on some western thinkers is a mystery. (Even thus in remoter outposts

**Language and Learning: The Debate between Noam Chomsky and Jean Piaget.* Routledge and Kegan Paul. 409 pps.

Piaget may still be regarded with unfailing reverence!) Of course, both are men of genius, both have made a significant contribution to knowledge. Where we fail is by adapting their systems into a dogmatic framework often of our own contriving. All this work, life, is open ended. The many insights are not final. We move on. But lesser students accept these approaches virtually as absolutes. Result: failure. Dead-end. But truth will out. Chomsky in what a reviewer calls "an uncharacteristic access of nescience" (I would not venture on such frankness!) finally declared "I cannot believe that any detailed hypothesis that I can propose today or that anyone else can propose is likely to be true." There is the true negative once again.

Read again the extracts from Dionysius and you will see their relevance to these matters in general, beyond particular theological problems. "We know in part and we prophesy in part." We can progress only by "excluding" (at the critical "either/or"), by removing irrelevant clutter, and by accepting Existence as we emerge increasingly upon its riches and further "unkown areas".

Lastly, compare and contrast the approach of Dionysius to linguistic functions and statement with that of the "logical positivists". He alone among thinkers assesses "abstractions" satisfactorily.

