

Divine wisdom and human wisdom in *The Divine Names* by St. Dionysius the Areopagite

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Abstract: In the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, where the right faith in God is reflected by Christian philosophy with the greatest clarity, we will fully understand the abyssal difference between divine wisdom and human wisdom. As it was revealed to St. Paul the Apostle, for every Christian believer, this difference is normative for the configuration of the relationship between Greek philosophy and true faith in God. Therefore, having the "demonstration of the Spirit and power" (I Cor. 2:4) - the only source of the preaching of the Truth "in weakness and fear and in much trembling" (I Cor. 2:3) – through the image of the divine names, we will understand how we can acquire godly wisdom through the "third way" of the working of our reason and mind.

Keywords: St. Dionysius the Areopagite, divine wisdom, human wisdom, faith, knowledge

Specifying that the interpretation of *The Divine Names* follows the work of the *Theological Teachings*, St. Dionysius emphasizes that we cannot say or think anything about the hidden and over and above being divinity apart from what has been spoken in a divine way in the Holy Scriptures, because <<not in the plausible words of human wisdom but in demonstrations of the power granted by the Spirit>> to the scripture writers, a power by which, in a manner surpassing speech and knowledge, we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or intellect.² Therefore, the

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² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, foreword, notes and translation collaborations by Paul Rorem, preface by Rene Roques, introductions by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean Leclercq, and Karlfried Froehlich (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

difference between divine and human wisdom is one by nature. At the same time, however, it must be emphasized that the rational and understanding work of reason and mind is of man: body and soul, not merely body and soul. The difference between the two wisdoms can be understood only through faith in Christ, in whom the divine and human natures are united mysteriously, which makes possible the union of man with God by grace.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the knowledge of Him who is God Himself, which is only possible through the silent union of our rational and understanding power and work with the power and work of God. Christian faith is life in Christ. The knowledge of God is a living knowledge, a living in Christ: "(...) it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God (...)" (Gal. 2, 20).³ The writings of St. Dionysius cannot be understood in any other way! First, his constant reference to the writings of the "theologians of God" excludes philosophizing "according to the world's ways." Then, we can notice that St. Dionysius refers to the *Theological Teachings*, or to *On the Angelic Endowments and Steps*, as elements without which the construction of the discourse on the divine names would not have been possible. We do not, then, have a "mechanism of explanation" of the divine names that would set up a direct interrogation of their relation to those they designate, but rather a "forward movement" into earlier writings that are anchored in the Scriptures in which the divine names are praised as the unions and distinctions that give rise to an understanding of God's work in us. Then, we can notice that St. Dionysius refers to the *Theological Teachings*, or to *On the Angelic Endowments and Steps*, as elements without which the construction of the discourse on the divine names would not have been possible. We do not, then, have a "mechanism of explanation" of the divine names that would set up a direct interrogation of their relation to those they designate, but rather a "forward movement" into earlier writings that are anchored in the Scriptures in which the divine names are praised as the unions and distinctions that give rise to an understanding of God's work in us. The "praises" are a product of how the human mind works by co-

Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapter One, 585 B.

³ All quotations from New Testament are according to E. Nestle, K. Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece, Greek-English New Testament*, 28th Revised Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013).

laboring with God through the "according to Christ" philosophy; they are spiritual proofs by faith. Only by uniting rational and understanding power and working with Spirit-breathed power can the believer genuinely understand, for example, that One beyond understanding is incomprehensible to all understanding. No word negates his good beyond words (reason). This is philosophy "according to Christ" or godly wisdom! Only by uniting rational and understanding power and working with Spirit-breathed power can the believer truly understand; for example, One beyond understanding is incomprehensible to all understanding, and no word negates his good beyond word (reason). This is philosophy "according to Christ" or godly wisdom!⁴

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This is a personal reading of the relationship between godly wisdom and human wisdom by "reading" the unions and distinctions involved in knowing God, as St. Dionysius explains them to us, to highlight the "third way"⁵ of the workings of our mind and reason as the way of acquiring godly wisdom. This "third way" is man's participation in the work of God, a work possible only "in Christ." It is not a question of a third kind of wisdom resulting from the combination of the other two but of specifying how man's return to God can be understood. This "third way" of the work of reason and mind is preaching faith in Christ.

Only in this way can spiritual things be spoken to spiritual people, those which fleshly people cannot understand. „Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no else's scrutiny" (I Cor. 2:14-15). Receiving not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit of God, who "searches everything, even the depths of God" (I Cor. 2:10), the spiritually minded, having the "mind of Christ," also have the "mind

⁴ The philosophical language of St. Dionysius is a touchstone for all philosophers, Christian or not. Fortunately, even today, meeting him in the "Areopagus" of his writings leads many to convert to Christianity. It is not the place and time of the encounter that we should be concerned with, but the type of encounter.

⁵ Not coincidentally, in the Platonic language of the Parmenides dialog, the "third way" is the mind's way of demanding the "overcoming" of the One-plural aporia. In pointing the way to the 'third way', Plato asserted the necessity of overcoming human logic.

of God," but only through the intercession of the Son of Man. "For what human beings know what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God" (I Cor. 2:11). Then we know that "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John I, 18). Still, we also know that "no one can say <<Jesus is Lord>>, except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3). Therefore, neither purely humanly, nor purely divinely, but spiritually, through the work of the Holy Spirit, "in a third way," that is, only "in Christ," Who is God and Man, will the believer be able to know "the mind of God".

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I will look at the relationship between divine wisdom and human wisdom in the light of the relationship between spiritual experience and philosophical knowledge, bearing in mind that in the knowledge of God it is always a question of the transfiguration of human reason and the human mind (becoming "seers" of God)⁶ and of the transfiguration of the senses, which become "echoes of wisdom".⁷ I will assume that ontologically there is no opposition between reason and faith, and that man's natural logic is not exhausted by the contradiction between the rational and the irrational (as it exists in human limits), and therefore that it is possible to understand the inconceivable,⁸ but which are expressible by linguistic terms/constructions such as "understanding as not understanding," "seeing as not seeing," "speaking as not speaking,"... In other words, a spiritual experience, as actual/real knowledge, does not presuppose the exclusion of reason,⁹ but it is overcome mysteriously, by faith, in a way that can be learned, directly or indirectly, only from Christ, the Son of God and Son of

⁶ The mind and reason have distinct works in the "fallen man", but not in the spiritual, where they have the same work, being transparent to each other.

⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, Chapter Seven, 868 C.

⁸ That is to say, realities that our fallen reason cannot understand by itself alone.

⁹ After the Fall from Heaven, to cover our "nakedness" - the turning of the mind away from God - we were given "skin clothing"; therefore, we were given the chance to be able to strip off our "old man" to become the "new man" - the turning to God. It is not reason "in itself" that is an obstacle to knowing God, but the inadequate use of reason in disobedience to God.

Man. Moreover, remember that He told us: "apart from my you can do nothing" (John 15:5)!

My thesis is that *The Divine Names* is about the spiritual judgment of human wisdom. This judgment is the divine illumination by the grace of human reasoning: the passage of reason and mind¹⁰ from the mode of human-logical work to that of divine-mystical work. This is not a "condemnation" but a transfiguration of reason through man's working together with God, a way in which it functions free from the fallen nature of the old man.¹¹

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The spiritual "judgment" of human wisdom is realized indirectly by St. Dionysius by the very way in which he transmits to us that he has learned from the divine Scriptures and the divine teachers, known now to our measure through the holy curtains of love of man shown in the Scriptures and the divine teachings. The "judgment" is one of Love! In this sense, St. Dionysius reminds us that we will reach a Christ-like state. Then we will share with the unfearing and immaterial mind in the gift of His spiritual light and union beyond the mind because "we shall be <<equal to angels and son of God being sons of the resurrection>>. That it was the truth of scripture affirms.¹² In the Transfiguration, we have to do with the revelation of the transfiguration of the Son of Man, the uncreated Light, through which we have presentified the union of man with God beyond the mind. St. Dionysius emphasizes that only minds of divine image, united with divine works, through the imitation of angelic minds, know in a way beyond knowledge the Good they desire. Of course, humanly, we know the intelligible and rational (νοερά καὶ λογικά) knowingly, and those subordinate to them in a sensuous (sensible) way;¹³ but we know that transfigured by spiritual knowledge,¹⁴ i.e., "in spirit and truth," reason, mind,

¹⁰ When reason becomes pure, the mind sees pure. Between the work of reason and the work of the mind, there is no distinction.

¹¹ The "praises" are nothing other than this "judgment", as a process, of human wisdom, a process in which the "surpassing" are modes of the "third way" of functioning of the human reason and mind. I have not insisted on the "process", but on its result, because my aim is only to emphasize the difference by nature of God's wisdom from man's.

¹² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, Chapter One, 591 D.

¹³ Ibid., 593 D.

¹⁴ Spiritual knowledge is not "produced" by man's reason, but it is only received, being enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the mystery

and senses are no longer distinguished according to their natural workings but, illumined by the ineffable Light, become one by the same, working in the light of spiritual knowledge.

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Paul's overruling understanding of God's wisdom, considered in radical opposition to human wisdom, is grounded in the conviction that "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom" (I Cor. 1:25). The "God's foolishness" placed in such opposition to human wisdom, being characterized as "wiser" than the latter, is implied by the idea that wisdom "after the flesh" is not wisdom because from the beginning "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (I Cor. 1:27). It must be emphasized, moreover, that St. Dionysius' reliance on the sayings of the Apostle Paul follows the latter's reliance on the sayings of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:14), that is, ultimately, on the sayings of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul reminds us: "For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?'" (I Cor. 1:19-20). It must be emphasized, moreover, that St. Dionysius' reliance on the sayings of the Apostle Paul follows the latter's reliance on the sayings of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:14) and, ultimately, on the sayings of the Holy Spirit. Referring to the admonition of St. Paul the Apostle - "See to it no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2, 8) -, keeping this admonition in mind, we understand, therefore, why St. Dionysius addresses his co-presbyter Timothy, in *On the Appointments of God*, thus: "And so, my friend, after the *Theological Representations*, I come now to an explication of the divine names, as far as is possible."¹⁵ St. Paul the Apostle's necessary warning of the possible robbery of the believer's mind by vain human wisdom was put into action by St. Dionysius. His writings can be considered as implementing the Pauline warning, the concretization of how to practice philosophy "according

of man's communion with God, through faith, which is the gift and true knowledge of Him. Let us never forget the words of the Savior: "Your faith has saved you!"....

¹⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, Chapter One, 585 B.

to Christ." As a philosopher before his conversion, St. Dionysius knew how to eliminate the dangers of philosophical thinking, and the kind of rationality involved in expressing certain truths of faith. So, it was with this in mind that he would address Timothy, who even though he was a man who philosophized "according to Christ," might also have been a philosopher converted to Christianity; there was, therefore, a danger of falling into heresy because his mind had been exercised in "bodily" philosophy (the use of Platonic philosophical language is a plausible explanation). By comparison with the crowds to whom St. Paul addresses himself, here we are dealing with the highest rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy; a rank from which another "crowd", a learned one, that of the bishops, the one who should teach not only the crowds of believers, but also of unbelievers, about the philosophy "according to Christ", as St. Dionysius says: "And we shall incline sanctified ears to the explanation of the holy divine appointments, strengthening in the saints the holy ones, according to the divine tradition, and defending them from the derision and mockery of those uninitiated in them; moreover, those themselves, if there are such everywhere, by delivering them from such a struggle against them."¹⁶ *The Divine Names* it is about the way of teaching the true teaching, that is, of "walking in Him"; it is about being rooted and strengthened in the faith, as he was taught (cf. Col. II, 2). It is, therefore, the preservation and preaching of right Christian teaching, a teaching of philosophy "according to Christ" by which the believer is guarded from the possible robbery of his mind by "vain philosophy"; it is a "judgment" of human wisdom by "lovingly" transcending the human power of understanding Who God is. The avowed purpose of *On the Names of God* is to strengthen the holy in the holy, avoiding the danger of the stealing of the mind through "vain philosophy"; this is also visible in all his writings. St. Dionysius was always careful to distance himself from philosophical thinking "according to the ways of the world", but not by rejecting it directly, but indirectly, by preaching the Truth. We have clear proof of this in *Letter Seven*, where he says: "As far I am concerned I have never spoken against Greeks or any other. In my view, good man are satisfied to know and to proclaim as well as they can the truth itself as it really is (...). It is therefore superfluous for someone expounding the truth to enter into dispute with this one or that one for each says that his

¹⁶ Ibid.

own bit of money is the real thing when in fact what he has by a counterfeit copy of some part of the truth."¹⁷ Referring to the sophist Sophist Apophanes, who accused him of "parricide," as one who did not use in a godly way "things Greeks to attack the Greeks",¹⁸ the Saint says that it is more just for us to say to him that the Hellenes do not use godly things honestly for godly things, trying to drive away the worship of God through the wisdom of God; on the contrary, true philosophers ought to exalt themselves by the knowledge of the existences (created things), well called also by the godly Paul, the wisdom of God (cf. I Cor. 2:7), to the Creator of both existence and knowledge.

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It must be stated again that, after all, what can be said about the true knowledge of God cannot be told without faith in God. Thus, St. Paul's warning about Greek philosophy cannot be adequately understood outside that context. The writings of St. Dionysius can be understood only in that context, which is considered historical and spiritual. A complete understanding of the Areopagite's purpose depends, in the first place, on a proper understanding of the spiritual nature of St. Paul's warning concerning the care to be exercised by the educated believer in "those things which are without". Therefore, to avoid the theft of the believer's mind through Greek philosophy, it is necessary to convert the philosopher in us from Greek philosophy to philosophy "according to Christ"! Therefore, the philosopher Dionysius had to be Dionysius the Areopagite, and Dionysius the Areopagite could only be Dionysius, the philosopher present at the "judgment" in Areopagus. His writing must, first of all, be read as confessions of faith! Therefore, the meeting at the Areopagus judgment of St. Paul the Apostle with the philosopher Dionysius can be considered typological, a "rectifier " of the understanding of the opposition between divine and human wisdom and the relationship between Christianity and Greek philosophy.

Let's look at the problem of *The Divine Names* from the perspective of the relation between the One and the manifold. We realize that this problem was not a speculation of the mind of the philosopher Plato, but a problem of the things to which the human mind applies itself. Remembering what he said in his Theological

¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Letter Seven, To Polycarp, the Hierarch*, I.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II.

Teachings, St. Dionysius says of God that He is what He is, the One, the One, the unknowable, the super-being, the Good by itself, the triune unity, of a deity, of a goodness that can neither be said nor understood. The use of Platonic language was not necessary so much to express a truth of faith within the limits of humans as to distinguish clearly between the two types of wisdom: divine and human. Platonic philosophical language is the image of a human thought turned in on itself, which must be purified spiritually. Making use of what could be recovered by explaining the meanings of the names,¹⁹ which are naturally only specific indications of the truth of being by our soul; St. Dionysius shows that the divine names have spiritual meanings that can be understood only by reason and mind transfigured by man's co-workings with God, that is, by the philosophy "according to Christ." Only "according to Christ" can we philosophize about divine things!

St. Dionysius the Areopagite is the disciple in the direct spiritual line of St. Paul, who will be developed in writing the message of the Apostle Paul on the danger of the autonomization of thought represented by Greek philosophy, especially by Platonism.²⁰ The correction that he makes to the thinking of the philosopher Clement²¹ on how to understand "models" as the beginning of existence, that is, not in the Platonic philosophical sense, but according to the Scripture. I have not shown you that you

¹⁹ Plato philosophized on naming, on the human "right correspondence of names", indicating the aporia into which the human mind enters in the attempt to know the essence of things. Moreover, Plato will not give any chance to a possible human knowledge of the "in-self", considering that it is not man but "God who is the measure of all things". The Platonic hypothesis, or "theoria of ideas", was strongly criticized by Aristotle because what for Plato was essential to the way in which he believed true knowledge was possible, namely the "participation" of the soul in the *ideai* (which were the true "being") was for the Stagirit an "empty metaphor". The fact that Plato intuited that only a "participation" of the soul/man (which for him is "immortal", but of course with a different meaning than in Christianity) in the *ideai* (which had being through something beyond them, through the Good, also nicknamed "the *Idea* of *ideas*", which was unknown, but which could not, paradoxically, "not be") could bring true knowledge in man should not be ignored! In fact, only Neoplatonists would identify the Platonic One and the Platonic Good with the God!

²⁰ What we call "Neoplatonism" is nothing other than what has flourished as a result of disregarding St. Paul's warning about the role of human reason in the knowledge of God.

²¹ Perhaps even Clement, the future bishop of Rome.

should walk after them, but that by a like knowledge of them, you may go up to the cause of all, just as we are, says St. Dionysius; that is revealing in this sense. In his writings, St. Dionysius the Areopagite abolishes the historical distance by the spiritual one. They become canonical for all those who will have tried to "pass"/transform Platonic philosophy into theology: "Now it may well be that Clement, the philosopher, use the term <<exemplar>> in relation with the most important things among being but his discourse does not proceed according to the proper, perfect, and simple naming."²² This statement signifies that St. Dionysius tells us that "patterns" are not to be understood in the Platonic philosophical sense, but as reasons of being that are unitively pre-existent in God, which theology calls predestination and divine and good wills, which distinguish and produce existences. Here is a clear exemplification of how to purify a mind that could be "robbed" of human wisdom by "vain philosophy." So, between godly and human wisdom, there is an abyssal difference. "Let no one deceive himself. If any man among you thinks he is wise in this age, let him be foolish so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this foolish world is foolishness in the sight of God" (I Cor. 3:19), says the Apostle Paul, for "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Cor. 1:25). The glorifying of the divine names is the call that had to be heard by the "sanctified ears" of those who needed to distinguish between holy and human wisdom, between the philosophy "according to Christ" and that "according to the world's wisdom." In order not to go astray in understanding the divine and ungodly word as the things which are seen, it was necessary to praise the foolishness of God by exalting what is shown in it contrary to reason and absurd; this is the only way to overcome the imprisonment of mind and reason in the bodily senses, which results from the likeness of the divine to the human. In *The Divine Names*, we have to do with this experience of the depths of the mystery of the knowledge of God through Christian wisdom, which is the "third way" of working our reason and mind. For "not in the persuasive words of man's wisdom, but in the proving of the power of the Spirit (I Cor. 2:4) shall we truly know praising „to the good and eternal Life for being wise, for being

²² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, Chapter Fife, 824 D.

principle of wisdom, the subsistence of all wisdom, for transcending all wisdom and all understanding."²³

In conclusion, knowing where "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (Col. 2:3), "this is the sort of language we must use about God, for he is praised for all things according with their proportion to him as their Cause. But again, the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when the mind turns away all of the things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being there and there, enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom."²⁴

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²³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, Chapter Seven, 865 B.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 872 A - 872 B.