

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract. The tradition of negative theology has very deep roots which go back to the Late Greek Antiquity and the Early Christian period. Although Dionysius is usually regarded as “the Father” of negative theology, yet he has not initiated a revolution in the religious philosophy, but rather brought together various elements of thinking regarding the knowledge of God and built a system which is a synthesis of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Christian ideas. The aim of this article is to illustrate the views of some more modern theologians on the nature, types and levels of apophaticism in the Greek Patristic tradition, trying to establish the role that negation can play in facilitating man’s attaining to the knowledge of God.

I. INTRODUCTION

Negation can rightly be considered one of the most remarkable themes on the philosophical and theological scene of Late Antiquity, Greek and Christian. The purpose of our inquiry is to discover the roots of apophatic tradition and to identify the definitions that have been placed under the concept of negative theology starting from the Dionysian Corpus through more recent accents that the term has been given in contemporary interpretations. Our incursion also takes into account the views of some recent theologians on the nature, types and levels of apophaticism in the Greek Patristic tradition, trying to establish the role that negation can play as an instrument that can facilitate man attaining to the knowledge of God.

The intention to recover the whole of such a vast journey is all the more justified, as negative theology today designates a vague formula that has been emptied of its original theological content, amid the recent trends of “privatization of religious sentiment”, through which the religious experience has been reduced to an indifferent attitude toward traditional spiritual practices. Under the increasingly frequent tendencies of decoupling negative theology from the transcendent horizon, this study draws attention to the need to recover the mystical tradition of Christian apophatic authors, which can be converted into an effective solution to the spiritual crisis of the secularized contemporary world.

Even though rounding as a technical formula is due to modernists — after the various stages of its evolution in the realm of Greek philosophy and Patristic theology — yet negative theology is not just a simple expression that has been refined over two thousand years, but hides a fertile tradition that captures the experiential dimension of the knowledge of God. Embracing the theological sense of negation — which has been diverted throughout the history of thought from its original purpose —, sets today negative theology with its imperative mission of becoming a bridge between “postmodern man” and God, which makes possible its access to this transcendent territory and gives meaning to its existence.

II. THE TRADITION OF NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

The debate regarding the existence of God has awakened, throughout the centuries, various reactions among thinkers, with them choosing one of four options: 1) The Proposition “There is a God” is meaningless and neither true nor false: *Positivism*. 2) The proposition is meaningful and false: *Atheism*. 3) The

proposition is meaningful and may be true or false: *Agnosticism*. 4) The proposition is meaningful and true: *Theism*. The positivists based their position on the verifiability criterion of meaning: a statement has factual meaning, if and only if it is empirically verifiable. But statements about God cannot meet such a condition and therefore they lack factual meaning. Some theists proposed as a counterargument religious experience as evidence for God's existence. Others rejected the verifiability principle itself, as irrelevant in the religious context. However, a strong religious tradition has asserted for centuries through its theologians that God was *ineffable* and, indeed, utterly inconceivable. We humans, the latter claimed, cannot talk appropriately about God, nor can we even conceive Him or think about Him coherently. In a very strict sense, it is impossible to use words about God, with Him not being something that can be captured within the horizon of human language.¹

This tradition of negative theology has very deep roots,² which go back to the Late Greek Antiquity and the Early Christian period. It reaches its first climax in Neoplatonic philosophy and theology, which was the keynote of Greek thought of the 3rd century A.D. and long after.³

Even if negative theology was associated with the speculative philosophy of Late Hellenistic Platonism, yet it can reclaim its origins also in the line of Christian Biblical Tradition as revealed religion.⁴ Its beginnings can be found in Greek thought, in that tendency of distancing from the pluralist and anthropomorphic conception of gods. This criticism, coupled with the development of philosophical monism, converge with the biblical notion of God to provide the systematic representation of negative theology in the works of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.⁵

Generally speaking, one can distinguish two great moments in the early historical development of negative theology. The first is the fusion of Platonic and Hebraic ideas in the works of Philo of Alexandria, in the 1st century B.C., with this philosophical version being adopted and expanded by Early Greek Fathers. The second one — and, perhaps, the most important moment — stands under the sign of Neoplatonic language meeting Christian principles in the Dionysian Corpus, five centuries later.⁶ Although Dionysius is usually regarded as “the Father of negative theology” — and if someone were seeking a methodological approach, then, indeed, they should refer to him —, yet he has not initiated a revolution in religious philosophy, but rather brought together various elements of thinking regarding the knowledge of God and built a system which — although bearing the imprint of his originality — is “a synthesis of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Christian ideas.”⁷

Along with Dionysius, the sacred science of theology witnessed two distinct methods of talking about God: the positive and the negative. “Affirmative theology” strives to discover the attributes of the divinity. To that end, the most significant attributes of beings are chosen and applied to the divinity, con-

1 See Anthony Kenny, “Worshipping an Unknown God”, *Ratio* 19, no. 4 (2006).

2 The notion of understanding the Absolute in a negative way is said to have first appeared in Egypt. Centuries before the Psalms of David we hear the supplication of an anonymous Egyptian poet who addresses God not as friend or savior, nor as to something conceived after human likeness or symbol enshrined in stone: “He is not seen; He hath neither minister nor offerings; He is not worshipped in temples; His dwelling is not known. No shrine of His hath painted images. There is no habitation which may hold Him. Unknown is His name in heaven, and His form is not manifested, for every image of Him is in vain. His home is in the universe, not in any dwelling made by human hands.” Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion* (Allen & Unwin, 1933), 51–52.

3 See, e.g., Ilse Bulhof and Laurens t. Kate, “Negative Theology — An Introduction”, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, ed. Ilse Bulhof and Laurens t. Kate (Fordham Univ. Press, 2000); Wildman, Wesley, J., “Introduction to Negative Theology”, in *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities*, ed. Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher (Springer, 2013).

4 The biblical foundations of negative theology are rather explicit. “But as the heaven is distant from the earth, so is my way distant from your ways, and your thoughts from my mind.” — ἀλλ’ ὡς ἀπέχει ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς, οὕτως ἀπέχει ἡ ὁδὸς μου ἀπὸ τῶν ὁδῶν ὑμῶν καὶ τὰ διανοήματα ὑμῶν ἀπὸ τῆς διανοίας μου, says Isaiah's Lord (cf. Isaiah 55, 9). The divine is *invisible*, *ineffable*, *incomprehensible*; these are all negations resulting from the recognition of divine transcendence. See Paul Rorem, “Negative Theologies and the Cross”, *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 3–4 (2008): 451.

5 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (Greek: Διονύσιος ὁ Ἀρεοπαγίτης), also known as Pseudo-Denys, was a Christian theologian and philosopher of the late 5th to early 6th century.

6 On the sources of negative theology, see, e.g., Charles Wackenheim, “Actualité de la théologie négative”, *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 59, no. 2 (1985): 148f.

7 Cf. Deirdre Carabine, “Apophysis East and West”, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 55 (1988): 5–6.

sidering them *superlative*.⁸ But it was immediately found that an attribute is not the same when applied to beings and then related to God. On the contrary, the distance between beings and divinity is so great, the abyss that separates them is so profound, that the same attribute applied both to beings and divinity is likely to mislead us, in that it reduces the sublime character of the divine essence, which it can neither comprehend nor express. So that, if it is said that man is *bonus*, all the more so it must be stated that God *non est bonus*, and if man is said to be *potens*, it is preferable to state that God *non est potens*, etc. We are here at the origin of negative theology.⁹

If these two types of theology could be compared to the fine arts, then *theologia affirmativa* would correspond to painting, and *theologia negativa* — to sculpture. In the first case, a sketch is made and then colours are added to set up a two-dimensional portrait; while, in the second case, the fragments are carved out of raw materials and, this way, a tridimensional image takes shape.¹⁰

It has often been proven that the term “negative theology” can easily be perceived erroneously. It has come to be considered less in terms of a religious current and more “in terms of a tradition of reflection on Being, God, humanity, and religion”. This theology took into account a certain desire for insight and inquiry “into an ultimate, final Reality: the divine ‘Stuff’, Cause, or Source” — of which all existences originate and from which they derive their meaning and significance. Hence the name of “theology” for a thinking that encloses some areas of philosophy — traditionally known as *ontology* and *metaphysics* —, and also the domain that is now called *theology* — in which we reflect on God. Thus, in a general sense, “negative theology can be considered philosophical theology.”¹¹

The emphasis placed by negative theology on unknowability, ineffability and “darkness” of transcendent Being¹² supports the idea that transcendence is best approached *via negativa*, i.e. “on the way”¹³ of what — according to mundane concepts — “is not”;¹⁴ hence the name “negative theology”.¹⁵

III. MODERN DEFINITIONS OF NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

At the moment, negative theology has again become popular, and not only among theologians, but also among philosophers.¹⁶ Unfortunately, reference to negative theology “is often an excuse for confused

8 E.g., if man is *bonus*, then God is *optimus*. Or if man is *potens* — and power is considered of great value —, then divinity is *omnipotens* etc.

9 Aram M. Frenkian, “Les origines de la théologie négative de Parménide Plotin”, *Revista Clasica Orpheus Favonius*, no. 15 (1943): 11–12.

10 Cf. Marios P. Begzos, “Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church: The Modern Critical Function of a Traditional Theory”, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 41, no. 4 (1996): 327.

11 Cf. Bulhof and ten Kate, “Negative Theology — An Introduction”, 4.

12 Cf. also Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence: Vol. 2: The Way of Negation* (Hanstein, 1986), 13: “Negative theology is that branch of epistemology which speculates on the value of negating the given as a means of grasping transcendent or hidden entities”.

13 Negation thus, as a major and essential part of any important religion, pretended to outline a specific *model of knowledge* or at least prepare the way for a certain type of knowledge — that is, ultimately and convincingly, above any other. Cf. Winston L. King, “Negation as a Religious Category”, *The Journal of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1957): 105.

14 Cf. also Charles M. Stang, “Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm (Blackwell, 2013), 161: “Negative Theology is a name given to a tradition within Christianity that confesses God to be so utterly transcendent, so beyond our concepts and names for God, that we must in fact negate them in order to free God from such cramped categories”.

15 Cf. Bulhof and ten Kate, “Negative Theology — An Introduction”, 4–5.

16 Along with the “return to religion” of recent French philosophy, negative theology has become one of the key elements of this commitment. The commitment to this tradition ended up being refined in a debate on the various readings of negative theology in Dionysius in relation to the different understandings of deconstruction in Jacques Derrida. Is deconstruction the latest embodiment of negative theology, and Dionysius — a “Derridean” of the 6th century? Or does a clear line of demarcation have to be drawn between the two to save the originality of postmodern language? For possible answers to these questions, see the dialogue between Jacques Derrida (“Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations”, in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Galilée, 1987), 535–95; *Sauf le nom [Post Scriptum]* (Galilée, 1993) and Jean-Luc Marion (Jean-Luc Marion, “Au nom: Comment ne pas parler de « théologie négative »”, *Laval théologique et philosophique* 55, no. 3 (1999); “Ce qui ne se dit pas — l’apophase du discours amoureux”, in *Le visible et le révélé* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005). See also the articles contained in the volumes: John D. Caputo

and incoherent thinking. The term ‘negative theology’ has become a somehow vague designation for a speculation about the divine lacking both dogmatic rigor and logical consistency.”¹⁷ The phrase “negative theology” came to be used “not as a precise expression specifying the negative way of approaching the *first cause* which is contrasted with an affirmative way, but rather as a formal notation pointing to the entire discursive context surrounding the negative and affirmative ways of reaching the supreme”. This use of the expression “negative theology” tends to prevail in less specialized literature and also in the writings of contemporary authors who have delved into this theme.¹⁸

In Derrida’s view, for instance, “negative theology” has come to designate “a certain typical attitude toward language, and within it, in the act of definition or attribution, an attitude toward semantic or conceptual determination.”¹⁹ By conceiving negative theology mainly as an attitude towards language and relegating to the background its theological message, by laying the emphasis rather on *logos* than on *theos*, it becomes easy to understand why the postmodern philosopher so easily disengage negative theology traditions from their religious context:²⁰

We must learn to ‘translate’ negative theology, even if we are not Christian, even if we do not belong to the tradition ... of any of the great monotheistic filiations ... Even if the constancy that the name of God supplies goes under other names for us, even then, especially then, we must learn to translate negative theology.²¹

In the case of Derrida, it seems that this “translation” was not observant enough of source texts. Derrida seems fascinated by Dionysius, but eventually his apophaticism becomes insufficiently radical for him. Derrida’s intention is to make use of negative theology only as long as it fulfils the same function as *deconstruction* regarding God-language. However, when he has the idea that Dionysius allows the *union* with a “presence” that could also be the subject of deconstruction, Derrida accuses this kind of Dionysian approach as “insufficiently apophatic.”²² One possible explanation could be that of Denys Turner: “What in Denys fascinated Derrida and his followers was entirely dictated by the theoretical agendas of their deconstructionist strategies.”²³

The formula “negative theology” — covering a tradition that has been refined over 1000 years — seems to suffer from a certain lack of precision and determination.²⁴

and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Indiana Univ. Press, 2010); Harold G. Coward, Toby Foshay, and Jacques Derrida, eds., *Derrida and Negative Theology* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1992). On the same problem, see Luke Fetterter, “How to Avoid Speaking of the Other: Derrida, Dionysius and the Problematic of Negative Theology”, *Paragraph* 24, no. 1 (2001); Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology”, *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003).

17 Carlos Steel, “Beyond the Principle of Contradiction? Proclus’ Parmenides and the Origin of Negative Theology”, in *Die Logik des Transzendentalen: Festschrift für Jan A. Aertsen zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Martin Pickavé (Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 585.

18 Stephen Gersh, *Neoplatonism after Derrida: Parallelograms* (Brill, 2006), 52, n. 85.

19 Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials”, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 64.

20 Conor McDonough, “Grounding Speech and Silence: Cataphaticism and Apophaticism in Denys and Aquinas”, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2011).

21 John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Indiana Univ. Press, 1997), 41.

22 Cf. McDonough, “Grounding Speech and Silence”, 59–60.

23 Denys Turner, “How to Read the Pseudo-Denys Today?”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (2005): 428.

24 Cf. Marion, “Au nom”, 340: “*la formule de «théologie négative» souffre elle aussi d’une semblable indétermination.*” Cf. also Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself”, 394, who considers that the term “negative theology” is “a rather indeterminate concept” and should not be used irresponsibly, as if the term designated “a static — or, at the very least, stable — set of theological practices, unified under a common negative rubric”.

Firstly, because, as A. Solignac²⁵ acknowledges: “strictly speaking, Dionysius the Areopagite uses only once the formula ‘negative theology’: namely in the title of the third chapter of the *Mystical Theology*.”²⁶

In addition, as noticed by J.-L. Marion,²⁷ “this sole testimony only appears in a chapter title that comes probably from a scholiast”; then, and particularly because this is not about defining a theology or the negative theology, but to know “which are the affirmative theologies [the words about God] and which [are] the negative ones” — τίνες αἰ καταφατικαὶ θεολογίαι, τίνες αἰ ἀποφατικαὶ; the plural has to be restored here, Marion claims, as well as the ancient sense of the noun to avoid breaking the parallelism with affirmative theologies.

Complying with a tendency towards “approximation”, many commentators persisted in invoking the formula “negative theology” even in authors who seem to ignore it; for neither the Alexandrian or Cappadocian Fathers, nor Irenaeus or Augustine, nor Bonaventura or Thomas Aquinas and others — that all resort to negation to define God and make the theory of this *apophasis* — use the expression “negative theology.”²⁸ Even when François Bourgoïn²⁹ determines the modern definition of theology, he does not consider negative theology at all nor fits it — with the other two ways — in the area of mystical theology.³⁰ In these circumstances, Marion’s conclusion that this formula “seems to contain something from the very modern ones”³¹ seems plausible.

We know that Greek vocabulary allowed more species of negation, with the revealing dissociation between the two types of negation: abstraction and negation itself. Raoul Mortley is the one who insisted that, although in the Middle Platonic period there were clear differences between abstraction (*aphairesis*) and negation (*apophasis*), yet the two terms were treated interchangeably,³² designating “systematic removing procedures”. Subsequently, the two forms of negation have become expressions of some distinct schools of thought in Neoplatonism, emphasizing significantly different ways of understanding negative theology. What remains relevant is the requisition of both ramifications of negative theology (aphoretic and apophatic) in line with Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. The two have developed in separate ways and, of them, apophatic negative theology will subsequently prove to be philosophically more robust.³³

25 Aimé Solignac, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique; doctrine et histoire*, ed. André Derville and Marcel Viller (Beauchesne, 1991).

26 Cf. *De mystica theologia* III, 1032C. *Apophasis* appears only five more times in the Dionysian Corpus; cf. Albertus Van den Daele, *Indices pseudo-dionysiani* (Bibliothèque de l’Université de Louvain, 1941), 31. This title of *De mystica theologia* III is not found in the critical edition of German researchers Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter (cf. *Corpus Dionysiacum* II: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De coelesti hierarchia*, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, *De mystica theologia*, *Epistulae* (De Gruyter, 1991), 146). This must be the reason for which Carlos Steel mentions only the term θεολογία καταφατική — which would have been used for the first time in Dionysius (*De mystica theologia* III.1, 146.1–2 Heil/Ritter: καταφατικῆς θεολογίας), while the negative pair (θεολογία ἀποφατικῆ), he argues, is only latter attested. Although Proclus never uses the expressions “negative theology” or “positive theology”, yet we encounter a similar expression in this author; cf. Proclus, *In Platonis Parmenidem* VII, 1191.34–35 Cousin; *Proclus Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 539: “a single theological hymn by means of all these negations” — ὕμνον διὰ τῶν ἀποφάσεων τούτων ἕνα θεολογικόν. Cf. Carlos Steel, “Beyond the Principle of Contradiction?”, 586, n. 23.

27 See Marion, “Au nom”, 340.

28 It should be however noted that the formula appears in its Latin versions (*theologia negativa* and *theologia negationis*), in Nicolaus Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia*, in the 14th century.

29 Joseph François Bourgoïn defines only three types of theology: positive, scholastic and mystical. Cf. “Preface”, in *Oeuvres Complètes du Cardinal de Bérulle*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Petit-Montrouge, 1856), 83.

30 Mystical theology has come to designate in the early modern era that “specialized” genre of theology — dealing with the intimate union of the soul with God — which was usually contrasted with the scholastic theology of universities. See Michel de Certeau, “Mystique au XVII^e siècle. Le problème du langage mystique”, in *L’homme devant Dieu, Mélanges Henri de Lubac*, tome 2, coll. Théologie (Aubier, 1964), 267–91; Kent Emery, JR., “Mysticism and the Coincidence of Opposites in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 1 (1984).

31 Cf. Marion, “Au nom”, 341.

32 Cf. also Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2000), 176: “*Apharesis*, meaning ‘abstraction’, was used interchangeably with *apophasis* in the early development of negative theology; and negative theology was itself called *analysis*, meaning ‘the way of successive abstractions.’”

33 See Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, 19–20.

Abstraction has limited its scope only to connote the “removal of qualities”, while negation could be extended to the whole *via negativa*, to the entire system of negation. Following the footsteps of Paul Rorem, Mark W. Flory³⁴ examines the role of negation in the process of “ascent” of the soul towards God. Thus, the first type of negation appears in the initial phase of the ascent, from the use of sensible objects as symbols of the divine to the “conceptual meaning” of those objects.³⁵ Here, negation performs the task of transcending the sensible. The second type of negation denies the conceptual meaning of these objects “as the mind and all knowledge give away to the *unknowing* beyond the mind and to silent union with God.”³⁶ The third type of negation — corresponding to the prefix “*hyper-*”, *viz.* “the negation of negation” — “transcends the entire ‘system’ of affirmations and negations”. “If the deceptive phrase ‘negative theology’ means anything”, Flory concludes, “it means this stage of ‘the negation of negation.’”³⁷

This verdict brings us to another key point, *viz.* that negation remains in the horizon of predication. Both *kataphasis* (positive predication) and *apophasis* (negative predication) attempt to come with a definition of God. Moreover, they indicate two aspects of a single system or sciences:

affirmation and negation are not separate enterprises applied to separate lists of characterizations, but the two complementary facets of the same interpretive process for all depictions, names, and symbols.³⁸

Consequently, “apophatic theology” cannot equate *mere* negation, since negative theology tradition establishes a predicative and a non-predicative use of negation. The predicative use would simply *reverse* the (previous) statements concerning God. Beyond that, as Flory explains, negation of the entire system of predication — corresponding, in the Dionysian Corpus, to the prefix “*hyper-*” — resignifies predication.³⁹

In Denys Turner,⁴⁰ the entire (positive or negative) predication system stands under the sign of “negative theology” and “the negation of negation” (*i.e.* the *hyper*) is assimilated to the term “apophatic”. To Mark W. Flory, however, the use of the terms “negative theology” and “apophatic theology” as *synonyms* — connoting the predicative stage — appears less confusing and, at the same time, more consistent “with the system of spiritual practices of negative theology”, while the subsequent, *non-predicative*, stage has as its mark the expression “*hyper-*” and “negation of negation.”⁴¹

The ambiguous nature of the phrase “negative theology” — that can refer to both the system of predication, and to what undermines it — has caused Martin Laird to introduce into the equation — along *apophasis* and *kataphasis* — a third element: *logophasis*. He will make a clear separation between λογόφασις and καταφασις: while “kataphatic speech is grounded in knowledge of God in his *energeiai*” — a knowledge of God deduced through his created effects⁴² —, “logophatic speech is founded upon and proceeds from apophatic union beyond thought and speech.”⁴³

If we consider the distinction made in classical theology between “knowing God as He is in himself (*theologia*)” and “knowing Him from his manifestation in creation (*oikonomia*)”, then apophatic theol-

34 See Mark W. Flory, *Transforming Practices: Hesychastic Correctives to Postmodern Apophatic Theology* (PhD diss., The Univ. of Denver, 2005), 9–10.

35 Cf. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A commentary on the texts and an introduction to their influence* (OUP, 1993), 150 and 210ff.

36 Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 210.

37 Flory, *Transforming practices*, 10.

38 Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 203.

39 Flory, *Transforming practices*, 10.

40 See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (CUP, 1995), 34–35.

41 Flory, *Transforming practices*, 11.

42 Cf. Deirdre Carabine, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God”, in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Thomas Finan, Vincent Twomey and John J. O’Meara (Four Courts Press, 1992).

43 Cf. Martin Laird, “Apophasis and Logophasis in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum*”, *Studia Patristica* 37, 2001: 132.

ogy's task is to deal with the first aspect, *theologia*. As a consequence, it will almost always go hand in hand “with the mystical concern for union with God.”⁴⁴

In this respect, Dumitru Stăniloae,⁴⁵ the most important Romanian Orthodox theologian of the 20th century, shall determine the difference between “negative theology” — which is bounded only at the philosophical-theological level — and “apophatic theology” — which assumes the *mystical experience*.

Aligning the terms “apophatic” and “negative” would lead us, almost inevitably, to error, John Zizioulas⁴⁶ also opines. In fact, by the expressions οὐ κατ’ ἔλλειψιν⁴⁷ and μὴ κατὰ στέρησιν,⁴⁸ etc., Dionysius does nothing but express “the *positive* content of theology, which is theology καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν.”⁴⁹ It is a theology that transcends the opposition “positive *versus* negative” or “knowledge *versus* ignorance”, etc.

In contemporary exegesis of negative theology, as pointed out by Mary-Jane Rubenstein, the separation between negative theology — “a set of discursive / philosophical / linguistic strategies” — and the *via negativa*, “a lived / experienced / practiced ‘mystical’ ascent toward the divine”⁵⁰ became common practice. The acknowledgement of such a dissociation comes from Kevin Hart:

we may distinguish between the *via negativa*, a religious programme of practices by which the soul progressively denies all that is not God in order to become one with God, and negative theology, the discourse which reflects upon positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God. ... Whereas the aim of the *via negativa* is union with God, the critical object of negative theology is the concept of God.⁵¹

Mary-Jane Rubenstein denounces such a forced cleavage as if “negative theology” would designate a way of “thinking” that is in opposition to “experience.”⁵² It is true that negative theology is aimed at undermining any “concept” claiming to encompass the divine, but, far from operating only on the purely horizontal axis, it *ascends* in accordance with the celestial hierarchy. In addition, the linguistic / conceptual tactics of negative theology act only as a means toward “mystical union” that, in turn, is impossible without conceptual destabilization. In other words, the un-saying of negative theology is actually the one performing the *via negativa* — “the way ‘out’ is the way ‘up’, and the way up is *at once* discursive and experienced.”⁵³

Furthermore, for Mary-Jane Rubenstein, the arbitrarily instituted distance between the “unknowing” of negative theology and the “knowing” of positive theology is not satisfactory. As it appears from Denys Turner’s depiction, Thomas Gallus and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* believed that halfway up the mystical mountain, “the intellect ceases, and love completes the journey”. To the invoked authors, the apophatic abandonment of the intellect would mean simultaneously “its destruction and its consummation.”⁵⁴ To Dionysius and Eckhart, however, unknowing does not work “in place of, but *within* intellect”: in the Dionysian terms, “the most divine knowledge of God is one which *knows through unknowing* in the unity beyond intellect” — ἡ θειοτάτη θεοῦ γνῶσις ἢ δι’ ἀγνωσίας γινωσκομένη κατὰ τὴν ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἔνωσις.⁵⁵ The ineffable union of man with God, the mystical experience of unknowing is

44 Daniel Bulzan, “Apophaticism, Postmodernism and Language: Two Similar Cases of Theological Imbalance”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no. 3 (1997): 263.

45 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality. Ascetics and Mystics* (EIBMBOR, 1992), 194f.

46 See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 92, n. 76.

47 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus* III.2, 869A.

48 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistulae* I, 1065A (156.5 Heil / Ritter).

49 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus* III.12.

50 Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself”, 394.

51 Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 175–76.

52 Negative theology consists of a set of specific techniques that emerge during the spiritual progress in the stages of spiritual ascent. The “common” distinction between negative theology and the spiritual progress system misses precisely the intrinsic unity of these ways. Cf. Flory, *Transforming Practices*, 11 and 11, n. 14.

53 Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself”, 394–95.

54 See Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 46–47.

55 *De divinis nominibus* VII.3, 872A–B; Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Marquette Univ. Press, 1980), 179. See also *De mystica theologia* II, 1025A; *De divinis nominibus* I.1, 588A; I.6, 596A;

a completely *noetic*⁵⁶ one; in conclusion, we can assert that negative theology is not pure *ignorantia*, but *docta ignorantia*.⁵⁷

IV. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN PATRISTIC TRADITION

The most appropriate name for the apophaticism of the Orthodox Church is not *theologia negativa* (denying theology), but *theologia superlativa* (transcending theology). Apophatic theology cannot be identified with negative theology. Negative theology confines itself only to the negative, with negation being only a *factor* of apophatic theology: therefore, the latter may be designated as *theologia superlativa*.⁵⁸ For this reason, apophatic theologians prefer the prefix ὑπέρ⁵⁹ — “beyond”, “above”.⁶⁰ We could fundamentally define apophaticism, in the footsteps of Christos Yannaras, “as the abandonment of all claims to an ‘objective’ assessment of truth, or the denial that we can exhaust the truth in its formulations.”⁶¹

While negative theology attempts to define God “through *denials / negations*”, apophatic theology gives up every definition of God. The basic feature of *apophaticism* in the Eastern Church is the radical renunciation to every definition of God — whether positive or negative.⁶²

According to the Patristic tradition, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae⁶³ wrote, there is a knowledge of God that is rational or cataphatic and one that is apophatic or unspeakable. The latter is superior to the former, complementing it. By none of them is God known in His Being. By the first one, we know God only as the creating and world supporting Cause, whereas by the second one we have access to some kind of direct experience of His mystic presence. The latter is called apophatic knowledge⁶⁴ because the hidden presence of God — experienced by this type of knowledge — overrides the possibility to define in words. Although apophatic theology is superior to cataphatic, however one cannot waive rational knowledge. Even if what it records about God is not entirely appropriate, it does not say something contrary to God.⁶⁵

For Stăniloae, apophatic and cataphatic are two inseparable and complementary ways of knowing.⁶⁶

Epistulae I, 1065A; V, 1073A, etc. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *Lidole et la distance* (Bernard Grasset, 1977), 195 and 245.

56 Don Cupitt, *Mysticism after modernity* (Wiley Blackwell, 1998), 25. Cf. Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself”, 395.

57 Cf. Nikolaus von Kues, *De docta ignorantia* (1440), eds. Paul Wilpert and Hans Gerhard Senger (Felix Meiner Verlag, 1970).

58 Cf. Begzos, “Apophaticism in the Theology of the Eastern Church”, 328–29.

59 Apophaticism is usually expressed in four different ways: 1. through direct negation, *i.e.*, using terms with the prefixes ἀ-, ἄν- (non-, un-, in-, -less); 2. using the superlative degree, especially terms with the prefix ὑπερ-; 3. using oxymorons — statements in which one word contradicts another (“super-bright darkness”, “super-existing existence”); 4. using paradoxical assertions, the meaning of which would be the opposite of what is actually said (“being pronounced remains inexpressible, and being comprehended remains unknown”, or “to see and comprehend through invisibility and incomprehensibility”). See Hilarion Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (OUP, 2000), 166–69.

60 See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 89f.

61 Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, ed. Andrew Louth (T & T Clark International, 2005), 59–60.

62 See Chrēstos Giannaras and Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 214f. However, the *apophasis* of the Patristic East, the *theologia negativa* of the Roman Catholic tradition and the *Deus absconditus* of Protestant theology meet each other in many ways. Cf. Giorgos Vlantis, “The Apophatic Understanding of the Church and Ecumenical Dialogue”, *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 3 (2010): 297, n. 5.

63 For the view of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae on *apophaticism*, see his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. I, 3rd edn. (EIBMBOR, 2003) and *The Ascetics and Mystics of the Orthodox Church* (EIBMBOR, 2003). For discussions on this view, see Silviu Eugen Rogobete, *Subject and Supreme Personal Reality in the Theological Thought of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. An Ontology of Love*, (PhD diss., London Bible College, 1998); Kevin M. Berger, *Towards a Theological Gnoseology: The Synthesis of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae*, (PhD diss., The Catholic Univ. of America, Washington, D.C., 2003); Eveque Joachim Giosanu, *La Déification de l’homme d’après la pensée du pere Dumitru Stăniloae* (Trinitas, 2003).

64 To separate the mere negation of God’s cognoscibility from the direct experience of God — acquired not by the powers of human nature, but by the Holy Spirit — Stăniloae shall call the first one “intellectual negative theology” (equivalent to the *via negativa* of the Western theology), and the second one — “apophatic theology”. Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The Experience of God*, vol. 1. *Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, trans. and ed. Ioan Ioniță, and Robert Barringer (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), 96.

65 Cf. Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 95.

66 On the dynamics between the apophatic and cataphatic in Stăniloae, see Rogobete, *Subject and Supreme Personal Reality in the Theological Thought of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. An Ontology of Love*, 86ff.; Idem, “Mystical Existentialism or Communitarian

In our opinion these two kinds of knowledge are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive, rather they complete each other.⁶⁷

The basis of this complementarity is extracted precisely from the Areopagite's writings⁶⁸: if we read carefully his writings, we find that everywhere he *combines* apophatic knowledge with cataphatic.

The fact that both intellectual affirmations and negations have a basis in the experience of God's operations in the world diminishes ... the too rigid distinction between the intellectual and the apophatic knowledge of God. The intellectual knowledge of the Logos is participation in His activity which gives and sustains reason.⁶⁹

If cataphaticism is overwhelmed by apophaticism, this does not necessarily force the exclusion altogether of the former.⁷⁰ Stăniloae wants to avoid thereby the impression that apophatic theology would be limited exclusively to God's absolute incognoscibility,⁷¹ demonstrating through the Fathers' writings that the experience on the higher levels "shall not be called knowledge, for it is considerably *beyond* all knowledge and the view of knowledge."⁷²

To express both the mystical union of the soul with God and God's total Otherness, Stăniloae introduces, on the one hand, the distinction between two types of apophaticism and, on the other hand, specifies three levels of apophaticism. Thus, there are two types of apophaticism:

[T]he apophaticism of what is experienced, but cannot be defined; and the apophaticism of that which cannot even be experienced. These two are simultaneous. What is experienced has an intelligible character, as it is expressed in affirmative and negative intellectual terms. But this intelligibility is always insufficient.⁷³

"Intellectual negative theology" — the *first* form of apophaticism⁷⁴ — is still a mental operation, the last mental operation, mixed, however, as the prayer with a "feeling" of helplessness to comprehend God. It is interrelated with the contemplation of God through nature, history, the Holy Scripture, art, dogmas and, in general, through everything that is between us and God.⁷⁵

When we abandon all concepts drawn from nature, moreover, when we rise above any concern, even of denying them, "we enter into a state of silence produced by prayer" — the second level of apophaticism. This "experience in darkness"⁷⁶ of the divine energies" goes beyond intellectual negative theology and the apophatic experience that accompanied it. But, according to Stăniloae, neither this second level of apophaticism should be identified with the supreme level of spiritual ascent. As St Gregory Palamas demonstrates, the Areopagite texts refer to the divine darkness, i.e. "the darkness beyond light of the hidden mystical

Participation: Vladimir Lossky and Dumitru Stăniloae", in *Dumitru Stăniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, ed. Lucian Turcescu (The Center for Romanian Studies, 2002), 167–206; Emil Bartoș, "The Dynamics of deification in the Theology of Dumitru Stăniloae", in *Dumitru Stăniloae: Tradition and Modernity in Theology*, 206–48.

67 Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 96.

68 See Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus* I.5, 593.

69 Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

70 According to Stăniloae, negative terms are as insufficient as affirmative ones and, therefore, a *synthesis* between them is necessary. But the basis of this synthesis is an *experience* that goes beyond the affirmative terms, as well as the negative ones. God has in Himself what corresponds to affirmative terms, as well as what corresponds to negative terms, but in a way absolutely superior to these. This belongs to the horizon of experience, not to a mere speculation. Cf. Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 111. See also Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia* I.2, 1000B.

71 On Lossky's "total apophaticism" and the differences from Stăniloae's view, see Rogobete, *Subject and Supreme Personal Reality in the Theological Thought of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae. An Ontology of Love*, 43f.

72 St. Gregory Palamas, *The third word from the posterior ones. On the Holy Light*, chap. 17, in Γρηγορίου του Παλαμα απαντα τα εργα, Λογοι υπερ των ιερωοσ ησυχασοντων, ed. P. Hristou, coll. "ΕΠΕ" 54 (Thessaloniki, 1982), 446.4–7: Μη ὄτι οὖν γνώσιν ταύτην οὐχ ἡγεῖσθαι χρή, ἀλλά καί πάσης γνώσεως καί τῆς κατά γνώσιν θεωρίας διαφερόντων ὑπερέταν.

73 Cf. Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 103.

74 Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality. Ascetics and Mystics*, 269.

75 *Ibid.*, 278.

76 It has been much insisted that Dionysius calls God "darkness" — as being *the completely unknown One*. But Dionysius declares that *neither* the terms "darkness" or "light" are appropriate for God. He is beyond darkness and beyond light, not in a privative sense, but in the sense of exceeding: "The divine darkness is the inaccessible light in which God is said to dwell ..." — θεῖος γνόφος ἐστὶ τὸ «ἀπρόσιτον φῶς», ἐν ᾧ κατοικεῖν ὁ θεὸς λέγεται (*Epistulae* V, 1073D, 162.3–4 Heil/Ritter). See Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, 227. Cf. Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 1, 112.

silence”⁷⁷ “the inaccessible light in which God is said to dwell”⁷⁸ — that is different from the theology by negation and from that “experience of the darkness” of God. They are darkness not because there would be no light in them, but because they are a “too great abundance of light.”⁷⁹

Negative theology is different from the “view” of divine light — as a level inferior to that one. But, between it and the divine light vision stage there is, however, another form of *intermediate* apophaticism — “existentially” experienced by our entire being in a climactic state of prayer, as an “experience in the darkness” of God’s presence, and as “total silence of the mind”. Man can achieve the first two levels through natural powers — assisted by the grace received at Baptism. Through them, the mind is close to the “hiatus” that separates it from God, but is still “on this side” — in the realm of humanity. But, “enraptured by God”, the mind leaps “beyond” — toward the “view” of the light. Even if, in the case of the divine light “view”, we can speak of a certain apophaticism — which we might refer to as a *third degree* — yet it is no longer an apophaticism, in the sense of “void” — as the previous ones. It consists, on the one hand, in the conscience of the one who “sees” that light that it cannot be comprised in concepts or expressed in words and, on the other hand, that above it is the Divine Being, which remains completely inaccessible and that the accessible light itself remains an infinite reserve. However, it presents a positive content of “knowledge beyond knowledge”, of apophatic knowledge, of “experience beyond ordinary experience.”⁸⁰

The third — and last — step of the ascent illustrates the “uplifting” of the soul in the *absolute indefinite*, leaving even the simple and mystical comprehension of God through total *apophasis*. It coincides — in the theology of St Maximus the Confessor — with the transition from Christ’s human mind to His divinity. This denotes that St Maximus did not conceive *apophasis* as an “absolute void”, but “an entrance in God the Indefinite”, insight that is possible already during this earthly life — and not only in the “future life.”⁸¹

V. CONCLUSION

As we have seen during our research, the apophatic tradition has proven over time to be a very rich and fertile one, with roots that can be traced back to Classical Antiquity and Early Christianity. Considered the “father” of negative theology, the genius of Dionysius the Areopagite designed and implemented that unique synthesis of Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Christian elements that allowed him to deliver the most solid exposition of negative theology. The formulae of negative theology seem to suffer from a certain inaccuracy and seem to contain in their definition layers that can be considered as insertions by modernists. Among the contemporary authors who explored the theme of negative theology, there is an increasingly pronounced tendency to distinguish between the predicative and the non-predicative meaning of negation, which reflects a dual mission of negation: the suppression of all objects belonging to the sensible world and the ‘conceptual meaning’ of these objects to facilitate the ascent of the soul on its way to unity with God. Among the decisive contributions to the explanation of the apophatic tradition is the Romanian theologian, Dumitru Stăniloae. He introduces the distinction between ‘negative theology’, acting on the philosophical-theological level, and ‘apophatic theology’, which involves the mystical experience. Moreover, although apophatic theology is superior to cataphatic, the two ways do not become contradictory, but must be viewed as inseparable and complementary. Apophatic theology is not the exclusive expression of God’s incognoscibility, but it also implies ‘knowledge beyond knowledge’. The first form of apophaticism within the Patristic Tradition is the sign of intellectual negative theology, which is based on the experience of man’s inability to comprehend God. Once all the concepts from the sensible universe have been overcome, we enter into a state of contemplation of God in silence, which denotes a type of apophaticism that we can qualify as intermediate. The ultimate state of apophaticism will only

77 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia*, I, 998A.

78 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistulae* V, 1073.

79 Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality. Ascetics and Mystics*, 269–270.

80 *Ibid.*, 275–276.

81 Cf. Dumitru Stăniloae, “Commentaire des Ambigua”, 380, in Saint Maxime le Confesseur, *Ambigua*, trans. pr. Aurel Grigoraș (Les Éditions de l’Ancre, 1994), 513.

come to light when the soul penetrates the “darkness above the light in which God dwells”, which conceals another kind of view, superior to the natural view. This apophatic knowledge designates ‘knowing through unknowing’, a superior knowledge, beyond the ordinary human experience.

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