

Chapter Four

‘Supra-Substantial Good’

Dionysius the Areopagite and the Church Fathers on the Holy Trinity

‘Is it true, Prince, that you once said the world will be saved by beauty? Gentlemen,’ he cried loudly to them all, ‘the prince says that the world will be saved by beauty! But I say that he has such whimsical notions merely because he’s presently in love. Gentlemen, the prince is in love; earlier, as soon as he came in, I was convinced of that. Don’t blush, Prince, I shall feel sorry for you. What sort of beauty will save the world? Kolya told me about it. ... Are you a zealous Christian?’¹

However strange it might seem, this passage from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* lies at the heart of Orthodox theology. Prince Myshkin, himself one of the Orthodox East’s ‘fools for Christ’s sake’, seems to reveal in a unique and absolutely dynamic manner the essence of patristic teaching and self-understanding. Only a saint such as, for example, Dionysius the Areopagite,² whose theology was to be the basic guide in this project,

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. by D. McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), Pt 3, ch. 5, p. 446.

2. See, on this topic, Dionysius the Areopagite, *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 701CD). In the present work ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’ always refers to the mystical theologian of the fifth-sixth century who adopted the name

could have expressed the experience of the ecclesial body with the same clarity, an experience that recognises ‘the good which is above all light’ as ‘beauty’ and ‘goodness’, as ‘love’ and ‘beloved’ and, consequently, as the unique cause of the beauty, loveliness, harmony and radiance of all created beings. The Orthodox Church, and therefore its theology, are reflections of the ‘all-good’ and the ‘supra-good’, within which they are called to fulfil the mode of their existence. The ecclesial person and ecclesial existence subsist only in relation to the source of life, that is, only through participation in supreme beauty, which is nothing other than the world’s triadic God, the creator of existence. This God is the beginning and also the end of any human attempt whatsoever to seek out beauty within a world that is torn apart by the machinations of the devil, that is, by the ugliness which corrodes the unity of human existence, the unity of the whole of created reality, and in the end the human person’s unity with God himself.

We can confidently assert today that this teaching of the great Christian mystic, St Dionysius the Areopagite, is the nucleus of Orthodoxy’s philokalic aesthetics. If, until now, we have strongly emphasised that philokalic aesthetics is an aesthetics with reference, it is within the theology of the Areopagitical writings that we can find support for such an idea.

In Dionysius, beauty, a reality that is difficult to judge since according to Dostoevsky it constitutes a ‘mystery’, encounters its personal cause, its personal principle, the triadic God of revelation. In other words, it encounters the referentiality of its reference, outside of which aesthetics constantly risks relativisation and reduction to nothingness.

In the *Divine Names*, as the title implies, the Areopagite discusses the names that are given to God. I must emphasise, and this is a critical point in our exploration of the saint’s philokalic aesthetics, that the divine names – ‘what is said about God’ – are not syntheses which Dionysius himself has elaborated and attributes to God. The ‘initiative’, as in other cases of the created–uncreated relationship, belongs to God.³ Thus, according to Dostoevsky, the difficulty of judging beauty, together with

of St Paul’s Athenian convert, often known by Western theologians as ‘Pseudo-Dionysius’.

3. ‘Therefore one should not dare to say, or even to think of, anything about the supra-substantial and hidden divinity apart from what has been expounded to us in a divine manner by the sacred utterances’ (*Divine Names* I, 1 [PG 3, 588A]). Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6 (PG 73, 1048D): ‘On the affinity and relationship of the knowledge that is

the patristic practice of affirming the unsearchability and inscrutability of God, does not lead to some form of incommunicability of the good with beings. The uncreated and the created realise their relationship of communion on account of God’s revelatory praxis, which comes first, and then of the free assent of the created to God’s invitation, which follows. Alternatively, in Dionysius’ words, ‘what is said about God’ constitutes in reality various manifestations of the divinity for its own sake. That is to say, the supra-substantial and hidden divinity ‘discloses itself about itself’.⁴

Thus, God, precisely because he exists and reveals himself through his energies, is also praised by the sacred theologians ‘as good, and as beauty, and as love, and as beloved, and by whatever other divine names are appropriate to his beautifying and grace-filled loveliness’.⁵ That is to say, what comes first is the experience of what is revealed ‘in proportion to each one’ and then the attempt to describe this experience follows. Consequently, it must also be emphasised that in his ‘explication’ of the divine names the Areopagite does not make any attempt to define them, as is often mistakenly asserted, but, faithfully following biblical and patristic tradition, proceeds by way of describing ‘realities’.⁶ The discourse of the friends of God on the revealed God, on him who ‘defines’ all beings, even ‘being’ itself, was never ‘definitive’ but passionately ‘descriptive’.⁷ This is because life is not defined but is only experienced and described in multiple ways. How else could we interpret Dionysius’ statement that God is at the same time both nameless and many-named,

apprehended spiritually, again we repeat: it is not we who have initiated the matter but the only-begotten God from God.’

4. See *Divine Names* I, 2 (PG 3, 588CD). Cf. Siasos, ‘Lovers of the Truth’, p. 109; A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 166.

5. *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 701C).

6. See S. Triantari-Mara, *The Concept of Beauty in Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 46, where the author, following other bibliographical testimonies (see the case of V.V. Bychkov), says mistakenly: ‘Specifically, in his desire to formulate a broad definition of divine beauty, of the absolute beauty of God, which is the fount of beauty, Pseudo-Dionysius bases himself on Plato’s view of the good in the *Symposium*.’ Of course, the truth of the matter is not saved by whether the definition is ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’; a definition most certainly always remains a definition and runs the risk of objectification, something which St Dionysius vigorously denies throughout his work.

7. See *Divine Names* XIII, 3 (PG 3, 980CD).

both light and darkness, both being and not-being, both known and unknown?

Thus, aesthetics, the philokalic aesthetics of Orthodoxy, can only be a revealed aesthetics, an aesthetics of the revealed and revealing God. Thus, revelation is related to reference, and the revealed constitutes in the end the reference of aesthetics.

Within the limits of such a process, our aim is not to discuss all the names that have their starting-point in God, but to dwell on some of them, most of which have already been referred to and in any case are related to the search for an aesthetics within the framework of Orthodoxy.

Accordingly, for Dionysius everything begins with his discourse 'on the good'. This concerns a name which the theologians attribute to the supra-divine divinity 'in a transcendent manner'. That is because the thearchic existence as 'essentially good' extends its goodness to all beings. The sun, Dionysius says, illuminates all things – those, of course, that in accordance with 'their own principle' are able to participate in such an illumination – without the sun's exercising some form of reasoning or deliberative choice. In a similar way God, who is the good, sheds his rays of goodness, with greater intensity and in an analogous manner, on all beings. Thus, whatever receives its hypostatic existence from these rays, is assured by the same rays its continued being, along with stability, cohesion and maintenance of life, which cannot be truly attained except within goodness. The desire for this goodness and for coming to abide within it reveals in the end the specific mode which is the only mode of simple and true existence. More simply, true existence for Dionysius is not conceivable beyond and outside of God; moreover, existence itself is not conceivable outside of God. 'Being' and 'well-being' are related beyond any doubt to the creator of existence.⁸

At this point, modern scholars pose a basic question concerning the problem of God's freedom in relation to the creation of the world. That is to say, if the creation of the world by God was a result of his goodness, and his goodness is related to his being, beyond any operation of rationality and deliberate choice, then, certain scholars conclude, God is manifested as bound by some necessity in his substance – he cannot do other than create whether he wants to or not – and Dionysius, who admits such a thesis, is censured for deviating from Christianity and its basic position which distinguishes between the generation of the Son by the Father by nature and the creation of the world by God

8. See *Divine Names* IV, 1 (PG 3, 693B-696A).

in accordance with his will.⁹ In other words, within the perspective of such an interpretation Dionysius appears to regard the world as a result of some kind of ‘essential necessity of goodness’ and certainly not as a result of the freely willed act of a personal God.¹⁰

The subject is vast and no doubt such a sketchy account does not do it justice. Of course, it is not the first time that the nature or essence of God is related to necessity. The argument that anything natural is inevitably also necessary is an ancient one still brought up in contemporary Orthodox theology. It was this that gave rise to the much-debated thesis that ‘God, as Father and not as substance, perpetually confirms through “being” His *free* will to exist. And it is precisely His trinitarian existence that constitutes this confirmation: the Father out of love – that is, freely – begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit’.¹¹

It is perfectly clear that such a view, which, even if not a manifest distortion of patristic theology is still a misleading emphasis on one aspect of catholic truth, must, in order to escape from the dilemma of ontological priorities that cannot be maintained within the context of patristic teaching, be translated as follows: ‘The Father, as a substantive person and not as an impersonal substance, begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit.’ Within this context both the substantial (*kat’ ousian*) generation of the Son and the substantial (*kat’ ousian*) procession of the Holy Spirit by the Father constitute a fundamental and indubitable

9. See B. Brons, *Gott und die Seienden: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von neuplatonischer Metaphysik und christlicher Tradition bei Dionysius Areopagita*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), p. 231.

10. On this, see K. Garitsis, *Orasis Aoratou. Hē didaskalia tou hōraiou ston Dionysio ton Areopagitē* [*Vision of the Invisible: The Teaching on Beauty in Dionysius the Areopagite*; hereafter *Vision of the Invisible*] (Thera: Thesbitēs, 2002), pp. 63–64: ‘Goodness is also repeatedly described by D.A. as an essentially necessary point of divinity; it is a property of it, corresponding to its nature and its essence. The depictions of the essential necessity of goodness concerning the divinity are centred on the reception of the Neoplatonic projection of the sun.’ Cf. W. Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Ps.-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1958), pp. 158–59.

11. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), p. 41; A.G. Melissaris, ‘The Challenge of Patristic Ontology in the Theology of Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999), pp. 476–90, pp. 477ff.

truth which is based on the fact that patristic theology, as expressed chiefly by St Gregory Palamas, emphasises that just as generation from a non-hypostatic substance is impossible, so too is generation from a non-substantial hypostasis. This is because a non-hypostatic substance does not exist, any more than a non-substantial hypostasis.¹² The truth of the existence of being consists in the unity of substance and hypostasis. Thus, when we say that the Father is the cause of the existence of the other two persons of the Holy Trinity, we mean the Father as substance and hypostasis, not the Father independently of substance or the substance independently of the hypostasis of the Father.

Within nature in this sense, which does not entail any necessitude on the model of certain Antiochene deviations, the love of the persons of the Holy Trinity is an expression or fruit of the nature, but certainly not the 'sole' defining cause of the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹³ Such a hypothetical love, besides, cut off from its nature, could even be demonic. Of course, any similar hermeneutic misreading could be avoided if one pays attention to the fact that the Fathers of the Church never identified need with nature on the theological level, and never deprived the latter of the will to be that which it is, that is to say, free. On this point Cyril of Alexandria writes: 'There is nothing that exists naturally that is without will, for it has corresponding to its nature the will to be that which it is.'¹⁴

12. '... [P]ower, energy and will are not outside the nature, but nor is any of these non-substantial and non-hypostatic, not because each is essence and hypostasis, but because they are not separable from that trihypostatic nature, even if discourse about them, trying to say something about them, seems to separate inseparable things, as also when one treats of a hypostasis; and indeed how can a hypostasis be non-substantial?' (Gregory Palamas, *Antirrhethics* III, x, 31 [P. Christou (ed.), *Grēgoriou tou Palama Syggrammata [Works of Gregory Palamas]*, 5 vols (Thessaloniki, 1966–92), Vol. 3, p. 186]).

13. See Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John's Gospel* 14, 20 (PG 74, 272D–273A). Cf. Stamoulis, *Nature and Love and Other Studies*, p. 48.

14. Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogues on the Trinity* 2 (PG 75, 780B). Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *Against the Arians* 3, 62 (PG 26, 461C). On this topic, see Ch.A. Stamoulis, *Peri Phōtos. Prosōpikes ē physikes energeies; Symbolē stē sygchronē peri Hagias Triados problēmatikē ston Orthodoxo chōro* [On Light: Personal or Natural Energies? A Contribution to the Contemporary Debate on the Holy Trinity in the Orthodox World] (Thessaloniki: To Palimpsēston, 1999), pp. 101ff.; Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*,

Thus, the absence of deliberate choice and reflection in the creation of the world in no way signifies the absence of will and of freedom.¹⁵ God cannot but exist naturally, substantially, as goodness and this in no way admits any form of necessity into the mode of his being. When Dionysius says ‘without deliberate choice’, he clearly means without *moral* choice. The world is not an unwilled creation of God, a form of ontic emanation, but a result of his free and loving operation or energy, which is substantial, natural and common to the three persons of the Holy Trinity.¹⁶ It is clear in this context that God constitutes not a moral presence but an ontological presence. That is to say, he does not move within the bounds of a yes and a no which define any specific moral attitude, but manifests the absolute freedom of his nature everywhere and at all times as a one-way journey which transcends moral attitudes and manifests his ‘inability’ to deny his existence.¹⁷ Consequently, just

Vol. 2, pp. 96–97; G.D. Martzelos, ‘Hē gennēsē tou Hyiou kai hē eleutheria tou Patera kata tēn paterikē paradosē tou IV aiōna, Orthodoxo dogma kai theologikos problēmatismos’ [‘The Generation of the Son and the Freedom of the Father in the Patristic Tradition of the 4th Century. Orthodox Doctrine and Theological Debate’], in his *Meletēmata dogmatikēs theologias* [Studies in Dogmatic Theology] (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1993), Vol. 1, pp. 57–82; A.J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), pp. 283–306, esp. p. 289; P.O. Tamvakis, “Physis” kai “prosōpon” stē theologia tou hagiou Grēgoriou Nyssēs. Symbolē stēn triadologikē, Christologikē kai sōtēriologikē sēmasia tōn horōn autōn stē theologikē didaskalia tou hagiou Grēgoriou Nyssēs’ [“Nature” and “Person” in the Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa: A Contribution to the Trinitarian, Christological and Soteriological Significance of these Terms in the Theological Teaching of St Gregory of Nyssa’], doctoral dissertation, Thessaloniki, 2001, pp. 144, 146ff. and 198. For an introduction to the concept of ‘necessity’ in philosophical thought, see, for example, G.S. Karayannis, ‘Hē ennoia tēs anagkēs stē philosophia tou Plōtinou’ [‘The Concept of Necessity in the Philosophy of Plotinus’], *Epetēris Kentrou Epistēmōnikōn Meletōn* 19 (1992), pp. 777–78.

15. On this, see C. Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 196.

16. For a discussion of the subject in Western theological thought, see Garitsis, *Vision of the Invisible*, p. 64.

17. See Stamoulis, *Cyril of Alexandria: Against the Anthropomorphites*, p. 154: ‘Is it possible for him to make himself not to be good, or life, or

as the expression ‘in accordance with nature’ (*kata physin*) does not imply that the generation of the Son was ‘without will’ (*athelēton*), so too the expression ‘by his will’ (*kata boulēsin*) does not imply that the energies by which God creates the world are ‘without substance’ (*anousion*). Thus, the generation of the Son by the Father and procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, on the one hand, and the creation of the world by the triadic God, on the other, both have freedom as their common denominator, the ontological freedom of the uncreated, which transcends any form of freedom within the bounds of created being.¹⁸

We could even say that this existential – by no means exterior – bestowal, the extension of goodness to all beings, reveals that God creates in a universal manner and certainly not by picking and choosing. There is a universal, ecumenical dimension to Dionysius’ theology that manifests Orthodoxy’s teaching on God’s love for humanity and refers the fact of the realisation of communion to the exercise of freedom on the part of rational creatures, demonstrating in a dynamic manner the factor of their responsibility in the face of the unlimited freedom of the really good.

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It is on these truths that Dionysius builds his aesthetics and goes on to correlate the good with the ‘supra-substantial beautiful’ and then with ‘beauty’. At the beginning, and within the context of the economy, he is led to some form of interior distinction within the unity that is imposed by the principle of causality. That is to say, when the concepts of beauty and the beautiful are applied to created reality, one can speak

just? ... But why was God not able to make the woman who had prostituted herself not a prostitute? Because a lie cannot be made a truth. And this is not a fault of weakness, but a demonstration of nature, which is unable to experience anything that is not appropriate to it.’ Cf. I. Trethowan, ‘Irrationality in Theology and the Palamite Distinction,’ *Eastern Churches Review* 9, nos 1–2 (1977), p. 21; Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin, *Et introibo ad altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to His Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition*, Analecta Vlatadon 59 (Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1994), pp. 82–83.

18. See Cyril of Alexandria, *Thesaurus* 7 (PG 75, 93CD). Both Siasos (‘Lovers of the Truth’, p. 71) and Putnam (*Beauty in the Pseudo-Denis*, pp. 9 and 11) strongly deny the possibility of attributing any necessity whatsoever to the theology of St Dionysius.

of a distinction between participations and participants. Thus, what is beautiful is that which participates in beauty, the created reality, and beauty is the participated cause of all that is good, the uncreated triadic God. In other words, what is beautiful is the participant and beauty is the participated-in.¹⁹ When, however, we come to the domain of theology, where distinctions between what participates and what is participated-in have no application, then the ‘supra-substantially beautiful’ is called ‘beauty’ and is identified with both the beautiful and the good.²⁰ Thus, it is fully demonstrated that all the names in God are unified and manifest the one cause, the one principle and the one source of everything.

The hermeneutic view of contemporary Orthodox scholars that the ‘supra-substantial beauty’ is the divine energies, the procession of the divine loveliness, of the ‘supra-substantially beautiful’, which in its essence is ineffable and unknowable, is not quite correct.²¹ Such an approach to the Areopagite’s texts leads to the fragmentation of indivisible Being and creates insuperable problems. When our biblical texts and the Fathers emphasise that God is love, is light, is life, they are not limiting these realities to the energy or activity of God. The whole of God is love, the whole is light, the whole is life.²² Moreover, this also

19. See *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 701C): ‘The good and beauty are to be distinguished with regard to the cause which gathers all things into one. For since these with regard to all beings are divided into participations and participants, we call good that which participates in beauty, and beauty is the participation in the cause that beautifies all goods.’

20. See again *ibid.*: ‘The supra-substantially beautiful is called beauty on account of the loveliness which is communicated by it to all beings in a manner appropriate to each, and also as the cause of the harmoniousness and splendour of all things.’

21. On the identification of supra-substantial beauty with the divine energies, see Triantari-Mara, *The Concept of Beauty in Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 47.

22. In this connection Father Nikolaos Loudovikos’ comments in his book, *Hē kleistē pneumatikotēta kai to noēma tou heautou. Ho mystikismos tēs ischyos kai hē alētheia physeōs kai prosōpou* [*Closed Spirituality and the Sense of the Self: The Mysticism of Power and the Truth of Nature and of the Person*] (Athens: Hellēnika Grammata, 1999), pp. 273–75, may be regarded as particularly valuable and well targeted. Nevertheless, his attempt to combine such a reality with the trinitarian use of love by Metropolitan John of Pergamon, despite its interest, does not seem convincing. Similarly unconvincing is his observation that would have a

manifests the fact that the energies of the persons of the Holy Trinity are natural, substantial and common. That is to say, they do not proceed from nowhere, from nothing, but from the essence of God, which is their source and their cause, just as according to Dionysius the ‘source’ of divinity, the Father, is the cause within the trihypostatic essence.²³ Certainly, such a thesis does not deny the incomprehensibility of the essence of God and, of course, affirms the fact that God is known only through his energies.²⁴ This does not mean, however, that the content of

group ‘of professors teaching dogmatics in the faculty of theology at the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki’ holding the opinion that love is ‘simply and solely ... the uncreated energy of God’. Something of this sort, unless I am mistaken, does not seem to be borne out by their publications. Also very interesting for the debate on this theme are the observations of Tamvakis, “Nature” and “Person” in the Theology of St Gregory of Nyssa’, p. 198, and in his ‘Peri tou prosōpou tou Theou kai tou prosōpou tou anthrōpou. Parembasē stē syzētēsē gia tēn Ontologia tōn prosōpōn stēn Orthodoxē theologia’ [‘On the Person of God and the Person of Man: A Note on the Discussion on the Ontology of Persons in Orthodox Theology’], *Synaxi* 54 (April-June 1995), pp. 91–93. Here, too, however, the author centres the subject on the role which love plays in the generation of the Son. The problem, however, as I have already emphasised, lies in the relationship of love to nature and necessity. To be sure, love is not absent from the generation of the Son by the Father. The nature of God in the case of the Father, but not only in His case, is certainly loving, certainly not void of love. The Father loves the Son, but the Son also loves the Father. In such a case, without any doubt, love is not identified with God’s energies, but is also related to the mode of existence of the persons of the Holy Trinity. In her book *Eros Unveiled*, Catherine Osborne maintains, with reference to Dionysius the Areopagite, that ‘love logically pre-exists the Good, before (not chronologically but logically) the generation of the Son and before the creation. It is clear that we must interpret the passage on love as an exegesis of the Trinity and also as an exegesis referring to creation’ (*Eros Unveiled*, p. 194). Cf. *Divine Names* IV, 10 (PG 3, 708B): ‘For since this love that beneficently brought forth beings pre-existed in abundance in the good, it did not allow itself to remain unfruitful in itself, but moved itself to operate in accordance with its abundance that is generative of all things.’

23. See Gregory Palamas, *Antirrhetics* I, 7 (Christou (ed.), *Works of Gregory Palamas*, Vol. 3, pp. 61–62).

24. Compare *Divine Names* V, 1 (PG 3, 816B): ‘the purpose of the discussion [of the name ‘Being’] is not to reveal the supra-substantial essence (for that

the divine names is restricted to God’s identity with the divine energies. It is something more than this, regardless of whether human beings can know, much less express, this something more.²⁵ Thus, we could say, without the risk of falling into some form of scholasticism, that the Johannine ‘God is love’ (I John 4:8) clearly does not mean that the essence of God is love or that love is God but nevertheless that God is not bereft of love. The love of God, which in the present context is his goodness, is not something outside the divine nature, nor, of course, outside the divine persons, and this is because the whole of God, not just his energy, is by nature light, by nature life, by nature love and by nature goodness, and is ultimately by nature beauty and the beautiful. The energy reveals not only itself but the whole of the divinity.²⁶ It is the essential energy of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

Without the slightest doubt, then, when Dionysius refers to the ‘supra-substantially beautiful’ and calls it ‘beauty’, ‘love’ and ‘beloved’, he is referring to the whole of God, to ‘the good’, which is not impersonal,

is ineffable and unknowable, and utterly inexpressible, and transcends even the unity itself) but to praise the essence-producing procession of the thearchic source of essence to all beings’.

25. Compare *Divine Names* V, 2 (PG 3, 816C): ‘So then, my discourse now wishes to praise the divine names that manifest providence. It does not promise to express the absolutely supra-essential goodness, essence, life and wisdom of the absolutely supra-essential divinity, which, as Scripture says, is established above in secret places, beyond all goodness, divinity, essence, wisdom and life, but praises the goodness transcendently made known to us as beneficent providence, and the cause of all of all good.’
26. On this, see A. Golitzin, ‘Mystagogy: Dionysius Areopagita and his Christian Predecessors’, thesis, British Library, Document Supply Centre, Boston Spa, Wetherby, West Yorkshire, 1980, pp. 56ff., 75: ‘The intelligible names are not things, no longer have reference to objectively and independently existing entities, but are instead *windows* opening onto the sense – and reality – of God present in His powers or energies.’ Cf. G.D. Martzelos, *Ousia kai energeiai tou Theou kata ton Megan Basileion. Symbolē eis tēn historikodogmatikēn diereunēsēn tēs peri ousias kai energeiōn tou Theou didaskalias tēs orthodoxou Ekklesiās* [Essence and Energies of God according to Basil the Great: A Contribution to the Historico-dogmatic Investigation of the Orthodox Church’s Teaching on the Essence and Energies of God; hereafter *Essence and Energies*], E.E.Th.S.Th., fascicule 28 of vol. 27 (1982) (Thessaloniki, 1984), pp. 166ff.; D. Stăniloae, *Dionysios the Areopagite: On the Divine Names in Complete Works* (in Romanian) (Bucharest: Paideia, 1996), p. 234, n. 168.

but is the ‘good’ personal God of revelation. Like patristic theology as a whole, the Areopagite’s theology is purely holistic. The creation of the world, its becoming a reality, its sanctification and its maintenance in being are not the work of one of the persons, but of the triadic divinity as a whole. The trihypostatic God is the uncaused – because of a different essence – cause of creation. The one energy of the Holy Trinity is in operation in the Father, who acts as the ‘originating’ cause, and in the Son, who acts as the ‘creating’ cause, and in the Holy Spirit, who acts as the ‘perfecting’ cause. This thesis, which is first set out by Basil the Great, is encountered, with the relevant linguistic changes, in St Dionysius.²⁷ In his chapter in the *Divine Names*, ‘On Unities and Distinctions in Theology’, he says revealingly that ‘it is the entire thearchic existence, whatever the supreme goodness defines it to be and manifests, that is praised by the Scriptures’.²⁸ Such sayings as ‘I am good’²⁹ and ‘I am he who is’³⁰ cannot be attributed only to a part of God:

And the beautiful and the wise are praised with regard to the whole of the divinity, and light, and the power to deify, and causality, and all that belongs to the whole of the thearchy the sayings attribute to the whole of the thearchic hymnody ... whatever divine name we have undertaken to explicate refers to the whole of this divinity.³¹

Consequently, the cause of all things, and along with that, the cause of the beauty and loveliness of every created reality is the entire divinity, the trihypostatic monad. Of course, the whole of God, and beauty and the beautiful, is not circumscribed by this relation of causality but it does also constitute the boundary of this beauty. Every

27. See Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* (PG 32, 136B), and *On the Hexaëmeron* I (PG 29, 64A): ‘Let there be a firmament. This is the voice of the originating cause. God made the firmament. This is the witness of the making and creating power.’ On the subject of the ‘cause’ and the ‘caused’ in patristic theology, see Stamoulis, *On Light*, pp. 87–132; N.A. Matsoukas, *Epistēmē, philosophia kai theologia stēn Hexaëmero tou M. Basileiou* [*Knowledge, Philosophy and Theology in Basil the Great’s Hexaëmeron*] (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1990), pp. 140ff.

28. *Divine Names* II, 1 (PG 3, 636C).

29. Matthew 20:15.

30. Exodus 3:14.

31. *Divine Names* II, 1 (PG 3, 637C).

kind of created beauty has its origin in God and finds its term in God. The supra-substantial good, consequently, is called beauty, not only because it is from this that all analogous beauty is transmitted to beings, but also because he calls all beings to himself. Thus, the concept of beauty also lends Dionysius another dimension that is connected with the invitation to beings. In other words, the ‘beautifying’ of beings is their invitation to the unity of all things, which is realised only in God. Their definitive arrival at this ‘universal’ unity in God constitutes in reality the final end of beings.³² Thus, the good, that is, the beautiful, simultaneously constitutes the beginning and the end of all things.³³ It is the ‘productive’ and simultaneously the ‘final’ end of every existence.³⁴

Without any doubt, this procession of beings, their return to the source of the beautiful, to God himself, constitutes an act reversing the Fall. This is because humanity’s fall is nothing less than the loss of the beauty of the image of God. Consequently, the return to communion with true being, as participation in revealed beauty, returns human beings to their real mode of existence, the mode of universal unity in God. Thus, without any wish to exaggerate, I would say that the ‘aesthetics’, the ‘philokalic aesthetics’, of Orthodoxy, which moves on the boundaries of pure ontology and in this manner brings together things that were previously at variance with each other, constitutes the supreme mode of existence of the ecclesial body. The loss of aesthetics, or its rejection, on the part of rational beings constitutes in the end a rejection of the invitation of God himself to unity.

If, now, one should go on a little further to review this philokalic aesthetics in comparison with other aesthetics, one must certainly define the difference. St Dionysius replies to this question by proposing the fundamental ontology of the matter. He says that God, the supra-essentially good, is not any kind of moral good but the eternally good.³⁵ It is ‘ever existing’, and as such neither comes into being nor is

32. ‘... [A]nd as inviting [*kaloun*] all things to itself (whence it is also called ‘beauty’ [*kallos*]), it gathers everything into itself’ (*Divine Names* IV, 7 [PG 3, 701C]).

33. ‘... [A]nd the whole aim of beings has the good as its beginning and end’ (*Divine Names* IV, 19 [PG 3, 716C]).

34. See *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 704A).

35. With reference to this subject, the Russian writer and art historian V.V. Bychkov observes: ‘Another important aesthetic category of Pseudo-Dionysius’ system is the idea which on the transcendent level links the good with the beautiful: “the one good-and-beautiful” (*hen agathon kai*

destroyed, neither increases nor diminishes, nor is it, on the one hand, good and, on the other, bad. That is to say, there is no 'now yes and now no'.³⁶ The supra-substantial good is far from any relativism or any kind of exclusivity. It is the end of every relativism and exclusivity. The revelation of its beauty is not defined by moral criteria, by some kind of 'multiformity', but constitutes an outburst of ontological catholicity.³⁷ It is 'in itself and by itself the uniquely and eternally beautiful, and from itself sends forth superabundantly the spring of beauty as of every beautiful thing'.³⁸

kalon) ... which is distinguished essentially from the ancient *kalokagathia* ["perfect character"]. The latter was above all an ethico-aesthetic category on the anthropological level, the ideal of the perfect human being who had developed harmoniously, whereas in Pseudo-Dionysius the "good-and-beautiful" was a cosmological-transcendent idea' (*Byzantine Aesthetics: Theoretical Problems*, in the Greek translation by K.P. Charalambidis [Athens: Tzapherēs, 1999], pp. 86–87). I do not know precisely what the author means by the term 'cosmological-transcendent' idea, but it must certainly be emphasised that the linking by the Areopagite of the truly good with God not only does not reject anthropology, from which of course the good does not spring and to which it is not confined, but much rather presupposes it. Thus, Orthodox theology rejects neither anthropology nor the ethics developed within it. The problem is created by the isolation of ethics from ontology, as a result of which and within which it is true, a fact which facilitates the transformation of ethics into moralism.

36. *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 701D-704A).

37. Georgios Skaltsas rightly remarks: 'Consequently, that which appears superficially as a unifying beauty of the Son with regard to the members of his Body is nothing other than the relation of communion, or rather unity, which he possesses indissolubly with his Father, and naturally not some hypothetical "individual" beauty or monistic form' ('Ho anthrōpos hōs katoptron tōn eschatōn kata ton hagio Grēgorio Nyssēs' ['Man as a Mirror of the Last Things according to St Gregory of Nyssa'], *Synaxi* 59 [July-September 1996], pp. 52–53) and (p. 58, n. 30): 'Besides, let us not forget that for the human image the ultimate reference is to the Father's beauty and character.'

38. *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 704A). By contrast, the participation of beings in the 'uniquely and eternally beautiful' does not take place 'in a unique manner' [*monoeidōs*], but 'analogously' [*analogōs*] by its drawing near to the good. Thus, there are beings that participate universally in it,

Within the context of such a revelatory process, all beings without exception, even 'not-being' (*to mē on*) itself, participate in the beautiful and the good. This is because according to Dionysius 'not-being' is not identified with evil, which is 'non-hypostatic' and 'non-existent',³⁹ that is, beyond even not-being itself, but constitutes a 'reality' which is 'revealed' and is 'revealed' as beautiful and good, 'when it is praised in God supra-substantially by the subtraction of all things'.⁴⁰ That is to say, 'not-being' becomes being because it exists within the good, whereas evil, as complete non-existence, has no possibility of participating in the good. A characteristic example of such a distinction is the case of a licentious person who, even if he is deprived of the good, on account of his irrational desire, and finds himself in a state of non-existence, nevertheless participates in the good 'because of the faint echo of union and love'.⁴¹ This participation of his, of course, does not constitute a personal attainment, but is the will of the triadic God, the will of the surpassing greatness of the good, that is to say, an outburst of utter philanthropic love on the part of the creator for his creation. Even to those things that are 'deprived', or even 'fight against' his existence, he grants the power to enable them to participate in his absolute

lacking it, however, to a greater or lesser extent, but whose participation is dimmer, and some for whom the good is a distant echo. See *Divine Names* IV, 20 (PG 3, 720A).

39. *Divine Names* IV, 3 (PG 3, 809D).

40. *Divine Names* IV, 7 (PG 3, 704B): 'And my discourse would be so bold as to say this too, that even not-being participates in the beautiful and the good, and so it too is beautiful and good, when it is praised in God supra-substantially by the subtraction of all things.' Cf. *Divine Names* IV, 18–19 (PG 3, 713D–716D): 'And someone might say, "If the beautiful and the good is attractive and desirable and loveable to all (for even not-being, as already said, desires it and strives to be within it; and it is this that gives form to things without form, and it is in this respect that even not-being is said to exist supra-substantially) ... And if all beings are from the good, and the good is beyond beings, even not-being is in the good in that it has being; but evil is not even a being."'

41. *Divine Names* IV, 20 (PG 3, 720BC), and *Divine Names* IV, 19 (PG 3, 717A): '... but as from one source, and the product of one cause, it rejoices in communion, unity and friendship'. Cf. Garitsis, *Vision of the Invisible*, pp. 117–19; Triantari-Mara, *The Concept of Beauty in Dionysius the Areopagite*, pp. 58ff.

goodness.⁴² Essentially, neither the licentious person nor the person ‘who desires the worst kind of life’ is outside the grace of God.⁴³ Even the desire itself for life, the life that to them seems the best, but certainly is not, gives them the power to participate in the good. The licentious person, whatever form his licentiousness takes, is like a sick person whose illness has removed him from order – ‘illness is the lack of order’, says the Areopagite. Of course, this absence of order is not complete, or entire, because the absence of the whole of order would signify directly the destruction of the hypostasis of the illness itself. On the contrary, the illness remains and exists, having as its ‘substance’ the minimum of order.⁴⁴

The matter is therefore perfectly clear. For the Areopagite, the ‘faintness of the echo’, the ‘minimum of order’ and the presence of the ‘smallest modicum of good’ are one thing, and the ‘non-existent’ is another.⁴⁵ In the former case, being still subsists, even as the least existence, whereas in the latter, evil is entirely non-existent. God did not create evil; he only created good. Thus, that which God has never known does not exist – *ouk esti* – whereas that which has been known by God, namely creation, that which ‘has participated in being’, that which God has known even for one instant, is never entirely lost. Of course, the mode and the degree of its participation in being is related to and defined by the degree of its freedom. Thus, it can exist and be maintained in the good either in an entire manner, ‘as wholly being’ (*to holōs einai*), or even as ‘not-being’ (*to mē on*).

In other words, the *philanthropia* of Orthodox theology, as is evidenced in St Dionysius, far from being moralism and puritanism, leads to positions that are extremely impressive and extremely important for the self-awareness of the ecclesial body.⁴⁶ A human being, even a sinner, a sick person, one who is sliding towards the last marks of existence, is

42. See *Divine Names* IV, 20 (PG 3, 720B).

43. ‘And he who desires the worst kind of life, since he wholly desires life, and it seems to him the best kind of life, insofar as he desires it, and it is life that he desires, and he aims at the best kind of life, he participates in the good’ (*Divine Names* IV, 20 [PG 3, 720C]).

44. See *ibid*.

45. *Divine Names* IV, 20 (PG 3, 720CD).

46. The supreme form of *philanthropia* for Dionysius is the incarnation of the Word. He writes in this regard that the thearchy exhibits ‘divine love for humanity [*philanthrōpon*] pre-eminently, because in one of its hypostases it participated wholly and in truth in what belongs to us,

never outside the love of God, outside the possibility of the beautification which is offered constantly by the beauty that is supra-substantial. God did not make good known to humanity, but made himself known to humanity as good, as person, and in this manner invited humanity to know him. Evil is something he has never known. Creation, having come ‘from not-being into being’, does not come from evil into good. Likewise, when being moves towards not-being, it does not return to evil, but to minimal existence, to the faint echo of union and friendship with God.⁴⁷ Evil has no substance.⁴⁸

We may conclude from this – and Dionysius emphasises it strongly in the course of his discussion – that the invitation of humanity by God is an erotic invitation. The whole relationship of God with humanity, as his own initiative, is an erotic relationship and lays claim to exclusivity. That is to say, the ecstatic divine love by which God invites humanity does not allow the lovers to belong to themselves, much less to others, but invites them to belong to those beloved by them. Thus, the forsaking of every other person and thing implies not their rejection but their transcendence. Within love, ecstatic love, the only thing that truly subsists is the person of the beloved. Everything else proves to be relative and deficient – the self, persons and things seem not to exist. The only thing that exists is the person and life of the beloved. It was such a love that led the apostle Paul, dominated by divine love, to declare: ‘It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.’⁴⁹

If this ecstatic love of the creature for its creator seems ‘physiological’, the mystery of love is crowned by the love of the creator for his creation, an *eros*, an *agape*, which arrives even at the Cross and makes St Ignatius cry out, ‘My *eros* is crucified.’⁵⁰ Essentially this refers to the erotic exodus

inviting us up towards it and setting forth the final state of humanity’ (*Divine Names* I, 4 [PG 3, 592A]).

47. Knowledge and friendship are certainly very closely linked in the biblical tradition. See John 15:15: ‘I no longer call you servants, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father.’

48. See *Divine Names* IV, 20 (PG 3, 720CD).

49. Galatians 2:20. Cf. *Divine Names* IV, 13 (PG 3, 712A).

50. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 7, 2; cf. *Divine Names* IV, 12 (PG 3, 709B). St Dionysius says that there is no reason for anyone to be afraid of the word *eros* and to exclude it from discussions of God. According to the theologians, *eros* and *agape*, he notes, are used as synonyms. Thus, the

of the cause of all things from itself, an exodus which certainly belongs to the energies, with the object of the engaging with all beings. It is natural that beings should be attracted by this *eros* and *agape*. It would not, however, be wrong or provocative, the Areopagite observes, if one were to say that God himself attracts. Thus, he who is outside and above all things descends into all things with the object of the salvation of the entire world. This is not because of any moral imperative, any 'ought', but as the result of his great love (*eros*) towards beings, which also gives him his title of 'zealous'. He is zealous, then, on account of his zeal, which arouses the erotic desire, and he expresses his zeal for all that he encompasses by his presence.⁵¹ Of course, the 'beloved' and '*eros*' do not constitute for Dionysius a psychological, still less simply a sentimental, reality but an exclusive mark of the beautiful and the good. Essentially, *eros* is the power that unites, binds together and maintains beings within the beautiful and the good. In other words, the real foundation of *eros* is firmly set in the beautiful and the good, and, if it exists, it does so only as a result of this. Dionysius summarises the truth of the matter in the following words: 'Both the object of *eros* and *eros* itself belong wholly to the beautiful and the good, and were pre-established in the beautiful and the good, and exist and have come into being for the sake of the beautiful and the good.'⁵²

From the little that I have presented here drawn from the Areopagite's great work, it appears that the progressive negation of his theological thought does not end up in some form of nihilism or idealism; the thrust of his work is certainly not negative but extremely positive. The goal of

fears and assumptions of some that make them reject the use of the word *eros* in a theological context are certainly devoid of sense and absurd: 'So we should not be afraid of the noun *eros*, nor should we let any discussion of these two words disturb us. For the theologians seem to me to consider the two nouns *agape* and *eros* as equivalent to each other, and it is rather for this reason that the noun *eros* has been attributed to the divine sphere, on account of the absurdity of the preconception of such men' (*Divine Names* IV, 12 [PG 3, 709B]).

51. 'That is why those who are expert in divine matters also call him zealous, because of the intensity of his good *eros* for beings, and because the erotic desire for him arouses zeal, and because it shows him, in whom are the things that are desired zealously, to be zealous, and because of the beings for which he has foresight which are zealous for him' (*Divine Names* IV, 13 [PG 3, 712B]).

52. Ibid.

humanity is always the ‘hidden beauty’.⁵³ Thus, without any doubt, the negation on his part of every sensible and also of every noetic thing, in the course of coming to know God, in no circumstances constitutes a rejection of aesthetics but continuously manifests here and now the demand for its transformation, the attempt to give it a new meaning. The rejection of conventional, and consequently objectivised, forms of aesthetics, which impose their existence by division, as in many instances has been developed in the West and also sometimes in the Orthodox East, constitutes the only way for contemporary Orthodox self-awareness to arrive at the supreme aesthetics, the philokalic aesthetics that grants communion with the ‘supra-substantial good’, the ‘supra-substantial beauty’.⁵⁴

In the context, of course, of such a process of the negation of objectification, and consequently of the fullest affirmation of the mystery of contradiction and multiple meaning, Orthodoxy’s philokalic aesthetics, without this constituting knowledge, could still be seen as anti-aesthetic and anti-philokalic. This is because God is not only ‘of every form’ and ‘of every kind’, but also ‘without form’ and ‘without beauty’.⁵⁵ Consequently, what is most important is experience, and that which follows is simply and only a description – no doubt relative and therefore subjective – of this experience.

53. ‘We pray that we may enter into this supra-luminous darkness, and through not-seeing and not-knowing see and know him who is beyond vision and knowledge by this not-seeing and not-knowing – for this is truly to see and to know – and in a supra-substantial manner praise him who is supra-substantial through the negation of all beings, just as those who make a physical statue remove all the hindrances obscuring the clear vision of what is hidden and by this abstraction alone bring to light the hidden beauty itself’ (Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology* II [PG 3, 1025AB]). Compare Ch. Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, ed. with an introduction by A. Louth, trans. by H. Ventis (London and New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), pp. 74–75.

54. This, of course, is put in the terms of kataphatic theology. In the realm of apophatic theology, where every attempt to describe God is abandoned, the God who is ‘of every kind’ (*paneideos*) and ‘of every form’ (*panschēmos*) is at the same time ‘without form’ (*amorphos*) and ‘without beauty’ (*akallēs*). See *Divine Names* V, 8 (PG 3, 821B).

55. See *ibid.* On the subject of contradiction, see Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, Volume 2, pp. 120ff.