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Research Article

APOPHATIC THEOLOGY: PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AND THOMAS AQUINAS

B SANJEEWA MAHESHE MENDIS*

Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education, Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka. Email: bsmen@ou.ac.lk

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ABSTRACT

Dionysius's apophatic theology developed the basic tenets necessary for a deeper focus on God in Christian theology. The confusion it caused in Christian theology was powerfully presented through the investigations presented by the Neo-platonic philosophers. Furthermore, despite various interpretations of these teachings since the time of the Church Fathers, Pseudo Dionysius correctly presented the need to establish a correct foundation for it. His teachings were the foundation for later theological interpretations. This study examines the apophatic theology presented by Pseudo-Dionysius and Saint Thomas Aquinas. It is expected to investigate the facts presented using the analytical research method. Apophatic theology can be used to approach God by denying that any theological concept of God can be properly established by rejecting all the ideas and images of the theology laid by Dionysius and by entering into the divine darkness beyond understanding. A central theme of Aquinas's apophatic philosophy is that we can know God more by what he is not than by what he is. Apophatic theology is also seen as an affirmation of the inadequacy of human understanding of divine matters. It is seen as affirming God's essence through ignorance, even though man is aware through God's energies.

Keywords: Apophatic, Dionysius, Aquinas, Theology, Neo-Platonism.

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INTRODUCTION

The need for cataphatic and apophatic theology can be better understood when exploring the need to over-talk theological concepts and expand language forms beyond the boundaries of theology. Cataphatic theology or positive theology is limited. The limitations of the positive approaches of any theological concept are realized in their use. Nevertheless, apophatic theology transcends those limitations. Apophatic theology is also recognized as negative theology. In short, this teaching can be understood as an understanding that only apophatic theology can transcend the limitations of positive theology.

The early church fathers perceived apophatic theology as a form of factual, academic understanding, whereas Pseudo-Dionysius engaged in theological meditation that was intricate and multifaceted, involving elements of invocation, communion, and contemplation (Corrigan, 2019). Dionysius utilizes the term "Word of God" in theology to elucidate the internal essence of this practice within a Neo-Platonic framework, highlighting a concealed connection between the material world and the sacred. Dionysius explained the practice of apophatic theology out of a need to interpret Christian theology against the teachings of his Neo-Platonist contemporaries, lamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius.

lamblichus explains that through pure thought or contemplation, one can unite with divine beings (Da-Silva, 2021). Dionysius asserts that human nature is not transformed into divinity; instead, he emphasizes that God's presence in every aspect of the natural order does no nullify nature, morality, contemplation, or science. Rather, it enhances and enables them to reach their full potential.

Proclus interprets apophatic theology in terms of Neo-Platonism, explaining that the whole of theology can be revealed in one "analogy" and, through its negation, can show its transcendence over everything (Robinson, 2017). Accordingly, cataphatic and apophatic theology form a pair of contemplation of the whole of theology and say that corresponding to those manifestations return to cataphatic theology (Louth, 2012).

Dionysius attempts to establish Christian apophatic theology on a sound basis as a solution to the confused teachings of his contemporaries through their investigations.

This foundation is evident in the investigations of later Christian philosophers and theologians. Dionysian apophatic theology is one the foundation of the teachings of Aquinas, the foremost philosopher of Catholic theology. Fran O'Rourke points out that Aquinas handled Aristotelian philosophy on Dionysian grounds (O'Rourke, 1992). O; Rourke believes that Aquinas made a shift in Christian theology from the apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius to a holistic view (O'Rourke, 1992). The Thomistic foundation is a comprehensive view depicting the universe's return from its order to the Absolute through Dionysian apophatic foundations. In accordance with various levels of reality, which encompass everything from humans to other forms of existence, their position within the hierarchy of existence represents the point at which they diverge, and the significance that authors assign to goodness or existence as a universal principle. It is against this background that the influence of Dionysius on the central themes of Aquinas' metaphysics can be examined.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An analytical approach can be used to study apophatic theology. Analytical approaches, conceptual tools, and analytical perspectives are used as resources to identify appropriate theological goals. Analytical explanations for many aspects of religious literature can be found in research on ancient writings. They seek to support articles of faith (doctrines) that evaluate theological statements that go beyond them. The analytical methodology can be used to understand the basis of religion rather than evaluate the scientific validity of the data provided in the papers. Consequently, this method works better in determining the form of apophatic theology.

IDENTIFICATION OF PSEUDO DIONYSIUS

Pseudo Dionysius or Dionysius of the Areopagus is nicknames; those present various aspects of Christian theology (Castro, 2016). Even historians need to find out who the real person was. According to

theological history, Dionysius of the Areopagus witnessed the death of Jesus Christ from Heliopolis, Egypt (Kampouris, 2022). He became a follower of Christ after St Paul preached in Athens about the "Unknown God". His name is Saint Dionysius, the Great of Areopagus. However, this philosopher who lived between the late fifth and early sixth centuries was also called Dionysius of the Areopagus. The question of the true identity of Dionysius was met with skepticism first by Hypatius of Ephesus in the sixth century (Evans, 2023) and later by Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) (Hudson, 2007). First seriously questioned by Lorenzo Valla in 1457 and John Grocyn in 1501. After studying it critically, 1504 Erasmus recognized and publicized this theologian as Pseudo-Dionysius (Contributors, 2023).

However, Corrigan and Harrington highlight the likelihood that Pseudo-Dionysius might have been a pupil of Proclus, possibly originating from Syria. They possessed a deep understanding of and translated both Neo-Platonism and the Christian tradition. Since Proclus died in 485, and Severus of Antioch made the first clear citation of Dionysius' works between 518 and 528, it has been suggested that Dionysius' authorship could be placed between 485 and 518-28 (Corrigan and Harrington, 2019).

A question may arise as to why Pseudo-Dionysius followed a negative approach instead of an anti-cognitive one, presenting a deep analysis of the most complex teaching of Christian and mystical theology (Helmig and Steel, 2020). In reaction to Proclus' teachings, Dionysius introduces the concept of esoteric theology to emphasize that an individual can achieve a solitary journey, ascending from the lower, tangible realm of existence through the intermediary realm of intelligibility and into the profound obscurity of the divine.

INTRODUCTORY TEACHINGS IN APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

It was precisely Pseudo-Dionysius who introduced into Christian theology the "cataphatic" and "apophatic" theological practices, that is, the use of affirmative (kataphasis) and negative (apophasis) in human ways of speaking about God (Belzen and Geels, 2021). However, Dionysius only introduced its practices. Christianity has a long history of antithetical and negative usage of God (Hollywood and Beckman, 2012). Hebrew scriptural traditions are rich in these practices. Although Christian philosophy is independent, it has used classical Greek philosophical investigations for its foundations. It can be introduced as a practice built through it.

Old Testament

Salvation history reflects that since the beginning of the Old Testament, human beings have tried to establish something of God (Wahlberg, 2020). However, most of these approaches are positive. It can be recognized either as the result of speculation about the divine nature or as a confirmation of revelation about God. The Hebrew Scriptures contain accounts of God's self-revelation, and followers of other religious traditions have expressed both approaches equally (Shah, 2012). Revelations and divine virtues were celebrated in hymns, that is, lists of divine virtues. However, this divine declaration has always been guarded by a sense of divine mystery.

In the same way, they also understood that any statement about God could lead to negation or rejection. It proves that no human concept of God is sufficient. Even in the revelation of God's name to Moses, such a nature is embedded. That statement can be seen as a confirmation of an apophatic interpretation of God.

Church fathers and Latin fathers

Apophatic theology was founded in Christianity by Saint Clement of Alexandria (Hagg, 2006). In many ways and in various contexts, the writings of St. Clement state that the last principle cannot be explained or expressed (Reisner, 2009). The God of the universe, beyond the reach of human words, deeds, and thoughts, can never be the subject of any

1 Exodus 3:14.

human essay or discourse. Man cannot describe God in his dynamics. Central to St. Clément's conception of God is a clear foundation. God is above human speech and thought, so man cannot express Him (Scott and Citron, 2017).

Moreover, His existence cannot be empirically expressed in the sense perception of man. St. Clement made an effort to elucidate Moses' apophatic teachings. When discussing Moses' experience of encountering God on Mount Sinai, he expressed the challenge faced by humans in their quest to discover the Father and Creator of the universe. Even if Moses met God or His Messenger, he could not tell everyone about Him or His Messenger. This is evident because it is not mentioned anywhere in the scriptures in Egypt or in the return to Israel. When Moses ascended the mountain for holy meditation, the allwise God commanded all the people not to go with Moses. Furthermore, according to St. Clement, God is unseen, indescribable, and beyond human comprehension, in line with the Scriptures which recount how Moses entered into the dense darkness where God's presence resided (Philip, 2004).

The three Cappadocian bishops played a major role in developing apophatic theology (Radde-Gallwitz, 2024). The label apophatic theology is an anachronism for the Cappadocians (Goldhill, 2022). It is, moreover, misleading. That is because apophasis is negation. This broad sense of man's incomprehension of God is not a narrow interpretation of negation. For example, if God is infinite, that cannot be explained affirmatively. It can only be discerned through apophatic theology. The Cappadocians built this foundation on the teachings of the Stoics and Diogenes Laertius (Gavrilyuk, 2004). However, Plotinus accepted the earlier teachings more logically. It is along these lines that Plotinus presents the first formal analysis of God (MacKenna and Page, 1952). Nevertheless, according to the teachings of the radical Arian Eunomius of Cyrus (d 393), conceiving of God as a human being argued that there could be no essential, but at best only moral, resemblance between the Creator and the created (Chisholm, 1911). However, the Cappadocians have accepted that God cannot be interpreted by human thought (Laird, 2004). Thus, one can construct some concept of God by thinking about God's effects on creation that underlie their apophatic theology. Some can never grasp the divine nature, and some can (DelCogliano, 2010). They have long noted that this attitude to fear is very important, although it is often mistaken for an anti-genetic objection to such concepts. The Cappadocian apophatic instruction primarily represents a mindset that declines to construct affirmative or positive notions about God (Lossky, 1944).

Dionysian basis for presenting apophatic theology

Proclus, a contemporary of Pseudo-Dionysius, who followed the investigations of Plotinus, the pioneer of Neoplatonic philosophy, wrote three treatizes related to the problems of divine protection (providence), fate and free choice, and evil. It has created a problematic foundation for theological teachings. There, the question of how to reconcile divine foreknowledge and human free choice has been brought into focus. If God knows the past and present, and future events, then the outcome of future events must already be predetermined. Then, people would not be able to maintain free choice. It also questions why and how evil exists if the world is governed by divine guidance. He argued that evil has no existence but a derivative or parasitic existence (Opsomer and Steel, 2003).

Proclus, who lived at the same time as Pseudo-Dionysius and followed the philosophical inquiries of Plotinus, the forerunner of Neoplatonism, authored three treatises dealing with issues pertaining to divine providence, destiny, human free will, and the existence of evil. This body of work laid the groundwork for challenging theological discussions (Greig, 2014). In this context, the central issue revolves around the challenge of harmonizing divine foreknowledge and human free will. The dilemma arises when we consider that if God possesses knowledge of past, present, and future events, then it might seem as though future events are already predetermined, potentially infringing on human free

will. Furthermore, this dilemma extends to the question of why and how evil exists in a world under divine guidance. Proclus argued that evil lacks an independent existence; instead, it exists as a derivative or parasitic element.

Dionysius counters Proclus by suggesting that if Proclus' assertion holds, it becomes impossible for us to attain knowledge of God's intrinsic essence (Dillon, 2020). This is due to human lack of knowledge and lies outside the scope of human thought or rationality. Instead, everything is, in a way, emanating from God because He organizes and arranges everything for humanity. Based on this interpretation, His divine conditions can reveal certain images and resemblances. Man moves as far as his faculties allow, in due order, to that which is beyond all or upward. Dionysius suggests we go through it too. Understanding Him as the ultimate cause of everything can be achieved by eliminating and surpassing all other factors. Therefore, God is inherent in everything and distinct from everything (Dillon, 2020). On this basis, Pseudo Dionysius builds apophatic theology. The cataphatic approach examines the concepts presented in Christian theology from a positive perspective. Apophatic theology concerns the possibility and impossibility of realizing divine knowledge (Stenqvist, 2013).

Apophatic theology is

Apophatic theology posits an absolute distinction between the human and divine states. This difference makes it impossible for man to use his natural faculties or senses to attain divine knowledge. Because he realizes this impossibility, he has to step into a non-conceptual dimension where he perceives the incompatibility between himself and the divine conditions. Dionysius refers to this dimension as a reference to the divine darkness. He uses the metaphor based on the incident of Moses entering the dark cloud at Mount Sinai. It is not just darkness. It gives a divine experience. By entering the "cloud of the unknown," one moves beyond his divine understanding with knowledge.² Abandoning his natural abilities, he acquires the wisdom to be realized. The divine states are usually described as "hidden" and "secret", and man perceives the divine states through mental darkness (Markov et al., 2022). Apophatic theology uses the idea of a qualitative difference between human and divine states. This sense that God is beyond anything that man can ascertain from him is fundamental to studying apophatic theology (Hollywood and Beckman, 2012).

AQUINAS'S FOUNDATION OF DIONYSIAN APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

The significance of the concepts derived from the Latin translations of Dionysius' Greek writings in shaping theological and philosophical ideas is clear from St. Thomas Aquinas' studies (Taylor, 1996). However, it needs to be clarified how Aquinas read, understood, and translated the Neo-Platonic philosophy of Proclus or Iamblichus and Damascius (Helmig *et al.*, 2020). It remains uncertain how this vision was employed and integrated into his comprehension of God and the act of creation (Darley, 2022). O'Rourke highlights that before Aquinas, Dionysius disregarded theological matters in those inquiries (O'Rourke, 1992).

The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic theology on Aquinas' theological beliefs is evident (Reese, 2022). Dionysius was indeed very important in laying the foundations of Thomistic philosophy. The impact of Thomistic ideas has sparked a renewed embrace and resurgence of interest in Pseudo-Dionysius within both popular and scholarly communities. During the Second Vatican Council, scholars placed significant emphasis on the relevance of Pseudo-Dionysius in the context of Thomistic philosophy (Darley, 2022). These explanations are common in modern scholarly discourse in response to many thinkers who argue that Thomistic thought is merely Aristotelian philosophy (Brown, 2023). Consequently, Aquinas elaborated on a constructive apophatic theology by incorporating ideas from Pseudo-Dionysius, particularly the negative theology that acknowledges God as beyond the realm of language, concepts, and existence (Delfino, 2019).

2 Exodus 20:21.

The origins of apophatic theology can be discerned by examining the connection between Neo-Platonism and integral theology, shedding light on why Aquinas takes a more extensive approach than Dionysius when it comes to rejecting the concept of contingency (Silva, 2016). Aquinas has turned the concept of God's unknowability as taught by Dionysius into a form of knowledge that varies when it comes to the afterlife. This teaching allows us to name God using positive "perfect" terms. He has aimed to explain how it is qualified through the analogical doctrine of present life.

Primordial perfection applies literally and primarily to God, "beyond being", as opposed to the God of Dionysian theology. Aristotle highlights that this has consequences for epistemology since knowledge and rational communication are fundamentally based on existence. He accepts that Dionysian theology leads to absolute ignorance as the reason for God's existence (Rolt, 1997). The Metaphysics of Aquinas builds a logical discourse by analogy while retaining the true story of God while rejecting a singular being. In that context, Aquinas's 'Positive Apophatic Theology offers a powerful interpretation to address an increasingly agnostic culture (Floyd, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Apophatic theology is an approach that transcends the limits of theology. In many cases, complexities arise in the investigation of positivist theological issues. Only apophatic theology can avoid such situations and effectively analyze theological teachings. In this context, it becomes evident that Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Thomas Aquinas began to shape Christian theology by establishing apophatic theology principles rooted in the teachings of early church fathers. They have shown that apophatically describing what cannot be said positively about God can explore new approaches. They have tried to confirm that God is an indescribable, incomprehensible mystery. Aquinas laid the foundation for apostolic theology, which aims to indicate the boundary and pinnacle of our understanding of this earthly existence. In this realm, as described by Pseudo-Dionysius, we are in communion with God as the unfathomable. This happens when we know what is not of Him and what is completely unknown to Him.

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