

illusion, something without true existence? Certainly not, as long as we remain lovers of this light.

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Since the Reality which transcends every intellectual power is impossible to comprehend, it is beyond all beings; such union with God is thus beyond all knowledge, even if it be called "knowledge" metaphorically, nor is it intelligible, even if it be called so. For how can what is beyond all intellect be called intelligible? In respect of its transcendence, it might better be called ignorance than knowledge. It cannot be a part or aspect of knowledge, just as the Superessential is not an aspect of the essential. Knowledge as a whole could not contain it, nor could this knowledge, when subdivided, possess it as one of its parts.

It can in fact be possessed by a kind of ignorance rather than knowledge. For by reason of its transcendence, it is also ignorance, or rather it is beyond ignorance. This union, then, is a unique reality. For whatever name one gives to it—union, vision, sense perception, knowledge, intellection, illumination—would not, properly speaking, apply to it, or else would properly apply to it alone.⁵⁴

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What then is this union which, by virtue of its transcendence, is not to be identified with any being? Is it apophatic theology? But it has to do with union and not negation. Moreover, to theologise negatively, we do not need to go out from ourselves, whereas to enter into this union, even the angels must go out from themselves.⁵⁵ Moreover, while it is true that one who does not theologise by negation is not orthodox, even among the orthodox, only the deiform can attain this union. Again, we have an understanding of apophatic theology and express it verbally; but the great Denys has told us that this union is indescribable and inconceivable even to those who behold it.⁵⁶ Also, the light of apophatic theology is nothing more than a kind of knowledge and rational discourse, whereas the light beheld in this contemplation possesses objective reality.⁵⁷ It operates intellectually and converses spiritually and ineffably with the one who is being deified.

The mind which applies itself to apophatic theology thinks of what is different from God. Thus it proceeds by means of discursive reasoning. But in the other case, there is union. In the one case, the mind negates itself together with other beings, but in the other there

is a union of the mind with God. It is of this that the Fathers speak when they say, "The end of prayer is to be snatched away to God."⁵⁸ This is why the great Denys says that through prayer, we are united to God.⁵⁹ For in prayer, the mind gradually abandons all relation with created things: first with all things evil and bad, then with neutral things capable of conformity to either good or ill, according to the intentions of the person using them. It is to this last category that all studies belong and the knowledge that comes through them.⁶⁰ Hence the Fathers warn us against accepting the knowledge that comes from the Enemy at the time of prayer, so as not to be deprived of that which is superior.⁶¹

Thus the mind slowly abandons all relation with these things, and even with those superior to them, in order to be totally separated from all beings through pure prayer. This ecstasy is incomparably higher than negative theology, for it belongs only to those who have attained impassibility.⁶² But it is not yet union, unless the Paraclete illumines from on high the man who attains in prayer the stage which is superior to the highest natural possibilities, and who is awaiting the promise of the Father; and by His revelation ravishes him to the contemplation of the light.

This contemplation has a beginning, and something follows on from this beginning, more or less dark or clear; but there is never an end, since its progress is infinite, just as is the ravishment in revelation.⁶³ There is a difference between illumination and a durable vision of light, and the vision of things in the light, whereby even things far off are accessible to the eyes, and the future is shown as already existing.

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But I am incapable of expressing and explaining these matters. If the preceding topics are equally inexplicable,⁶⁴ yet these relate to the subject which concerns us. So to return—the contemplation of this light is a union, even though it does not endure with the imperfect.⁶⁵ But is the union with this light other than a vision? And since it is brought about by the cessation of intellectual activity, how could it be accomplished if not by the Spirit?⁶⁶

For it is in light that the light is seen, and that which sees operates in a similar light, since this faculty has no other way in which to work.⁶⁷ Having separated itself from all other beings, it becomes itself all light and is assimilated to what it sees, or rather, it is united to

it without mingling, being itself light and seeing light through light. If it sees itself, it sees light; if it beholds the object of its vision, that too is light; and if it looks at the means by which it sees, again it is light. For such is the character of the union, that all is one, so that he who sees can distinguish neither the means nor the object nor its nature, but simply has the awareness of being light and of seeing a light distinct from every creature.

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This is why the great Paul after his extraordinary rapture declared himself ignorant of what it was.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, he saw himself. How? By sense perception, by the reason, or by the spiritual intellect?⁶⁹ But in his rapture he had transcended these faculties. He therefore saw himself by the Spirit, who had brought about the rapture. But what was he himself, since he was inaccessible to every natural power,⁷⁰ or rather deprived of all such power? He was that to which he was united, by which he knew himself, and for which he had detached himself from all else. Such, then, was his union with the light. Even the angels could not attain to this state, at least not without transcending themselves by unifying grace.⁷¹

Paul therefore *was* light and spirit, to which he was united, by which he had received the capacity of union, having gone out from all beings, and become light by grace, and nonbeing by transcendence, that is by exceeding created things. As St. Maximus says, he who is in God has left behind him "all that is after God . . . all the realities, names and values which are after"⁷² God will be outside those who come to be in God by grace.⁷³ But in attaining this condition, the divine Paul could not participate absolutely in the divine essence,⁷⁴ for the essence of God goes beyond even nonbeing by reason of transcendence, since it is also "more-than-God".⁷⁵

But there is also a "not-being by transcendence"⁷⁶ spiritually visible to the senses of the soul, which is definitely not the divine essence, but a glory and radiance inseparable from His nature, by which He unites Himself only to those worthy, whether angels or men. And since angels as much as men see God in this fashion, being united to God and singing hymns to Him, it is probable that if even an angel were to explain this supernatural vision, he would say, much as did Paul: "I know an angel who saw, but I do not know if it was an angel, God knows."⁷⁷ How could anyone who recognises the infinite majesty of God, and the heights to which in His love for men He has

elevated our lowliness, how could such a man claim that these visions of the saints—which are known only to God and to those to whom they have been revealed, as Gregory the Theologian says⁷⁸—are sensory and, being sensory, are imaginary and symbolic, and human knowledge?⁷⁹

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This knowledge, which is beyond conception, is common to all who have believed in Christ. As to the goal of this true faith, which comes about by the fulfilling of the commandments, it does not bestow knowledge of God through beings alone, whether knowable or unknowable, for by "beings" here we understand "created things"; but it does so through that uncreated light which is the glory of God, of Christ our God, and of those who attain the supreme goal of being conformed to Christ. For it is in the glory of the Father that Christ will come again, and it is in the glory of their father,⁸⁰ Christ, that "the just will shine like the sun";⁸¹ they will be light, and will see the light, a sight delightful and all-holy, belonging only to the purified heart. This light at present shines in part, as a pledge,⁸² for those who through impassibility have passed beyond all that is condemned, and through pure and immaterial prayer have passed beyond all that is pure. But on the Last Day, it will deify in a *manifest* fashion "the sons of the Resurrection",⁸³ who will rejoice in eternity and in glory in communion with Him Who has endowed our nature with a glory and splendour that is divine.

Even in the created realm, this glory and splendour do not pertain to essence.⁸⁴ How, then, could one think that the glory of God is the essence of God, of that God who while remaining imparticipable, invisible and impalpable, becomes participable by His superessential power, and communicates Himself and shines forth and becomes in contemplation "One Spirit"⁸⁵ with those who meet Him with a pure heart, according to the most mystical and mysterious prayer which our common father addressed to His own Father? "Grant them," He says, "that as I am in you, Father, and you in me, so they too may be one in us", in truth.⁸⁶

Such is the vision of God which in the Age which is without end will be seen only by those judged worthy of such a blessed fulfillment. This same vision was seen in the present age by the chosen among the apostles on Thabor, by Stephen when he was being stoned,⁸⁷ and by Anthony in his battle for inner stillness⁸⁸—indeed

by the saints, that is, the pure in heart, as one can learn if one wishes from their own written lives and biographies.

I would also affirm that the prophets and patriarchs were not without experience of this light, but that (with a few exceptions) all their visions, especially the most divine ones, have participated in this light. For indeed, why should God have simulated some other light, when He possesses the eternal light in Himself, made visible (albeit in a mysterious way) to the pure in heart today just as in the Age to Come, as the great Denys affirms?⁸⁹ Since such is the vision of God, how could He Who said, "Blessed are the pure in heart" not have promised it for eternity, but promised only the knowledge that comes from creatures and can also belong to the wise of this age?

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It is time to repeat those divine words: "We give thanks to You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because", uniting Yourself to us and making Yourself manifest to us by Yourself, "You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent",⁹⁰ who are prudent only by their own account and learned only in their own eyes. This is why, when they hear the words of the saints, they reject some and give a false interpretation to others, and sometimes dare even to falsify certain passages to deceive everyone. So, when Gregory of Nyssa explains what is the nature of the contemplation of God granted to the pure in heart, he says, "It is possible also for the wise of this age to obtain a notion of God from the harmony of the world"; however, he then adds, "But, in my opinion, the nobility of the Beatitude suggests another meaning."⁹¹

Denys the great Areopagite indeed asks how we know God "since He is neither intelligible nor sensible", adding, in a tentative manner, "perhaps it is true to say we know Him not from His own nature but from the dispensation of created things."⁹² But he then goes on to reveal to us that most divine knowledge according to the supernatural union with the superluminous light, which comes to pass in a manner beyond mind and knowledge.⁹³ But these people have ignored the supra-intellectual knowledge as if it did not exist. They have not thought to investigate the reason why Denys expresses himself in a tentative way, as if he had done so from no particular motive; and they have given prominence to this phrase, taken out of context, as if it affirmed that God is known only through His creatures. Our philosopher, Barlaam, has failed to remark that the saint is speak-

ing here of that human knowledge which belongs to all by nature, not of that given by the Spirit. In fact, he is saying, since everyone possesses sense and intelligence as natural faculties, how can these faculties permit us to know God Who is neither sensible nor intelligible?

By another way, certainly, than that of sensible and intelligible beings; these faculties, in short, constitute the means of knowing created beings, but are limited in scope to such beings and manifest God through them.⁹⁴ But those who possess not only the faculties of sensation and intellection, but have also obtained spiritual and supernatural grace, do not gain knowledge only through created beings, but also know spiritually, in a manner beyond sense and intelligence, that God is spirit, for they have become entirely God, and know God in God. It is therefore by this mystical knowledge that divine things must be conceived, as the same St. Denys reminds us,⁹⁵ and not by natural faculties. We must transcend ourselves altogether, and give ourselves entirely to God,⁹⁶ for it is better to belong to God, and not to ourselves. It is thus that divine things are bestowed on those who have attained to fellowship with God.