

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite

(ca. 500 AD)

1. Identity

- not the judge of the Areopagus who, as related in Acts, xvii, 34, was converted to Christianity by the preaching of St. Paul
 - the reason for his unexcelled authority in the Middle Ages
 - both in the Western and Eastern Church
 - lasting till the beginning of the fifteenth century;
- not the Bishop of Athens
- not the first bishop of Paris, was died as a martyr

- His writings are our only source of information on his person.
 - lived around 500 A. D., probably in Syria
 - His thoughts, phrases, and expressions show a great familiarity with the works of the neo-Platonists, especially with Plotinus and Proclus.
 - He is also thoroughly versed in the sacred books of the Old and New Testament, and in the works of the Fathers as far as Cyril of Alexandria.

2. Authority

- almost canonical

- The *Mystical Theology* was translated into Latin ten times.
- Walter Völker: "If someone were to write a history of the interpretation of Denis, the entire intellectual development of the Middle Ages would be reflected in it."¹

3. Writings

- *On the Divine Names* [*De divinis nominibus*]
- *On the Heavenly Hierarchy* [*De caelestis hierarchia*]
- *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* [*De ecclesiastica hierarchia*]
- *Mystical Theology* [*De theologia mystica*]
- ten letters
- He refers to *Theological Outlines*, *Sacred Hymns*, *Symbolic Theology* and others, but there exists nothing of these writings.

4. Objectionableness

- Martin Luther: "despise the Mystical Theology of Dioysius like the pest. Just lies. ... In his *Mystical Theology* he reveals himself to be extremely corruptive by being more a Platonist than a Christian."

¹«Wenn ein berufener Kenner einmal mit überlegener Sachkenntnis eine Geschichte der Dionys-Interpretation schreiben würde, so würde sich in ihr die ganze geistige Entwicklung des Mittelalters abspiegeln.» Walter Völker, *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Ps-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1958), 218.

-
- Thomas Aquinas wrote no commentary on the *Mystical Theology*
 - Although he quoted Denis 1702 times.

5. Theological Themes

- God, the One Being (to hen), transcending all quality and predication, all affirmation and negation, and all intellectual conception, by the very force of His love and goodness gives to beings outside Himself their countless gradations, unites them in the closest bonds, keeps each by His care and direction in its appointed sphere, and draws them again in an ascending order to Himself.
 - Dionysius represents the procession of all created things from God by the exuberance of being in the Godhead (to hyperpleres), its outpouring and overflowing, and as a flashing forth from the sun of the Deity
 - Pantheism?

- love

- beauty

- God as light

- Angelology

- Symbolical Theology
 - "Now although such sacred forms are more venerable, and seem in one sense to surpass the material presentation, even so they fail to express truly the Divine Likeness which verily transcends all essence and life, and which no light can fully represent; for an other word and wisdom is incomparably below It. But at other

times It is extolled in a supermundane manner in the same writings, where It is named Invisible, Infinite and Unbounded, in such terms as indicate not what It is, but what It is not: for this, in my judgment, is more in accord with Its nature, since, as the Mysteries and the priestly tradition suggested, we are right in saying that It is not in the likeness of any created thing, and we cannot comprehend Its superessential, invisible and ineffable Infinity. If, therefore, the negations in the descriptions of the Divine are true, and the affirmations are inconsistent with It, the exposition of the hidden Mysteries by the use of unlike symbols accords more closely with That which is ineffable.”

6. Mystical Theology

(a) The Divine Unknowability

- the cloud in which Moses saw God’s back
- Plato’s cave allegory

(b) The Mystical Union of Ecstasy

- beyond experience, knowledge, thinking, being and beyond oneself
- Read chapters one and two of the *Mystical Theology*

(c) Apophatic Theology (*theologia negativa*)

- positive (kataphatic) theology and negative theology

-
- "The most holy Mysteries are set forth in two modes: one, by means of similar and sacred representations akin to their nature, and the other through unlike forms designed with every possible discordance and difference. For example, the mystical traditions of the enlightening Word sometimes celebrate the Sublime Blessedness of the Superessential ONE as Word, and Wisdom, and Essence; proclaiming the Intellect and Wisdom of God both essentially, as the Source of being, and also as the true Cause of existence; and they make It equivalent to Light, and call It Life."

 - Are there three ways?
 - *via eminentiae*

7. The Meaning of Dionysian Theology

- the truth question
 - the prefix *super* [ὑπέρ-]
- (a) The Cause of Everything
- creation
 - Glaubenspositivismus

 - Is this theology Christian?