

Unknowing, Knowing: and the Link with Scripture in Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*

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Introduction

The writings (*Corpus Areopagiticum* or Areopagitical Corpus) of Dionysius the Areopagite have, no doubt, had great influence on Medieval thinkers and beyond, on the way humans conceive of their relation to the One (Supreme Deity). But a crucial issue in this regard is—how can we apprehend our place (in life) and ultimate realization as humans, given our limitations of knowledge, and inability to transcend our sphere of shortcomings on our own, including the deficiencies of our spiritual apprehension? As such, the Areopagite, i.e., Pseudo-Dionysius, or Ps. Denis—a name stemming from Acts 17:19, 22-23, 34—was seen as duly concerned with the Divine and human realms and the possible connections between the two, as evidenced throughout his writings and certainly in *The Mystical Theology*. This noble undertaking of *The Mystical Theology* treatise by Ps. Denis, also seeks to offer insight into the validity of contemplation, piety, and active spiritual attainment. However, for purposes of this paper, the focus, based on this particular treatise, is on the concepts of ‘unknowing’ (negative theology) and ‘knowing’ (positive theology), and their link with scripture, insofar as they pertain to the transcendence of God.

Attempting to account for a type of intimate union between one’s self and the divine (the ‘mystical experience’)—in a telling way, Ps. Denis expounded on the notion that we are a little more than the pitiful perception of ourselves. This mystical union, Ps. Denis admonished, involves leaving the senses and activities of the intellect, and everything that the senses or

the intellect can perceive.¹ The idea being that in the “unceasing and absolute renunciation” of self, when our (personal) understanding is laid to rest, then it is that we can move toward a “union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain.”² In other words, this references the idea of a letting go of self, in order that the blessings of God’s eternal light can be better received or appreciated. Needless to say, God’s transcendence and infinite power supersedes our finite knowledge—i.e., the limits of our ability to know, as well as our grasp of spiritual matters. Thus, it is only through a process of letting go of self (desires, personal biases, ways of knowing, etc.), and accepting God’s eternal wisdom, knowledge and light, that a union with Him is even deemed possible. Such is the tenor of Ps. Denis’s *Mystical Theology*, as also understood through the ‘darkness of unknowing,’³ bringing together and conceptualizing both the notions of ‘unknowing’ and ‘knowing,’ as emphasized in this paper.

Background to Pseudo-Dionysius and the Dionysian Corpus

Writings concerning mystical theology, undertaken by Ps. Denis of around the fifth century (AD), were actually written as if by Dionysius of the first century. Thus, the pseudonym ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’ (referencing an actual Athenian convert of Paul—of New Testament times) is given or applied to the author of the writings.⁴ Ps. Denis’s work has preoccupied numerous scholars, including a translation and commentary of some of his work, by the twentieth century British scholar, C. E. Rolt (a prime source for this paper); and numerous translations and commentaries on the Dionysian corpus have emerged since the Middle Ages (including Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on the corpus). But the actual name of the author dubbed ‘Pseudo-Dionysius,’ is not actually known, and he may have been a monk, perhaps a bishop,⁵ but a clergy of some sort. He is believed to have lived in Syria, where speculative theology was rampant and daring.⁶

¹ Clarence E. Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite: on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1957), *Mystical Theology*, Chapter I— writing on the way to achieve mystical union, 191.

² *Ibid.*, 191-192.

³ *Mystical Theology*, Chapter I—Ps. Denis explains the ‘Darkness of Unknowing’ as a state wherein one “renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things ... Him that is wholly Unknowable” in order to possess a knowledge that exceeds one’s understanding. In Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 194.

⁴ Rolt, Introduction to *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

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This idea that “the author was possibly a Syrian and probably a monk,” is also corroborated elsewhere.⁷ Yet, this work printed under a pseudonym could hardly be said to be forgery, since such a practice (of pseudonymous authorship) was not only widely acceptable in the author’s day, but encouraged⁸ as well.

The main thrust of these Areopagite writings, however, is seen as a means to serve the needs of a Christian community, with the immediate object of concern being the use of the Christian scriptures within that community.⁹ Of the works of the Areopagite that survive—four are known, besides some (ten) letters and missing documents. These four are: “Concerning the Heavenly Hierarchy; Concerning the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy; Concerning the Divine Names; and, Concerning Mystical Theology.”¹⁰ Taken altogether, this is understood to be the *Dionysian Corpus*.

Ps. Denis’s work seemed to have made its way around during the period of the Middle Ages, being quoted from not only by Thomas Aquinas but also influenced Medieval figures such as John Scotus Eriugena (the Irish Neoplatonist and Ps. Denis scholar), and Hilduin (Abbot of the Abbey of St. Denis) both of the ninth century. Other figures who were influenced include Robert Grosseteste (English theologian of the thirteenth century), and Hugh of Saint Victor (German-born leading theologian and mystical theology writer of the twelfth century).¹¹ Ps. Denis’s *Mystical Theology*, in particular, also seemed to have been a main literary force helping to mold the mystical theology of Christendom.¹² Moreover, it is said to have contained some type of hidden manna (‘plain and nourishing spiritual meat’) since it created and satisfied spiritual hunger and want, in the hungering heart of man.¹³ A main thrust here, nonetheless, engages not merely the metaphysical, but a type of spiritual seeking, whereby divinity touches humanity, so to speak. Mystical theology hence can refer to sublime regions (or the sublime), which entails the relationship of the soul to God—a

⁷ Cf. Anne Fremantle (ed.), *A Treasury of Early Christianity* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), Writing on ‘Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite’ c. 500, 453.

⁸ Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 1-2.

⁹ Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 2001), 18.

¹⁰ Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, writing about ‘The influence of Dionysius in Religious History,’ 202.

¹¹ See Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Writing about the influence of the Dionysian Corpus in the Medieval west, 16.

¹² Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

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God who is beyond the concepts of mind and soul, and who cannot be described, comprehended or conceived.¹⁴ In other words, we see here the inner quest by humans to engage meaningful spiritual relationship—with reference to that of the otherworldly (as in a type of union of the soul with God); in a sense, a yearning and reaching forward to touch the very helm of transcendence. In this inner quest, it must be understood that while God is ultimately unknowable in conceptual terms, this does not mean that we cannot know Him in the least measure. We simply have to change our way of thinking and any preconceived notion of the nature of knowledge.¹⁵

Further, a review of Rolt's translation of Ps. Denis exposes the nature of the writings, as it is shown that rather than being considered only as historical documents, the scope of the 'Dionysian' writings is with the working of man's mind and spirit;¹⁶ and moreover, historically, there have been an interest in them, regardless of the authorship. But there is a somewhat peculiar dimension to this work, in that neo-Platonism (itself a school of mystical philosophy), having strong affinity with ancient philosophy of India, may be detected.¹⁷ As such, the Dionysian writings perhaps can also help the church to better understand certain Indian teachings when encountered—and they are encountered, particularly by way of missionary endeavors,¹⁸ for instance. Besides, the author of this work is seen as introducing "Neoplatonic thoughts and methods into Christian theology; however, his doctrine of the Trinity is substantially the same as that of St. Augustine,"¹⁹ as in God-the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being three persons, one substance. Ps. Denis's Trinitarian doctrine is, nonetheless, expressed in perhaps more fantastic terms at first sight,²⁰ as at times he tried to show sophistication in speaking of the divine attributes, common unity, and divine operations (in his exposition of the trinity, or Godhead), as seen in the *Divine Names*, for instance. Aside from that, Ps. Denis's work also bears the influence of Platonism, which is not unlike the

¹⁴ David N. Bell, *Many Mansions: An Introduction to the Development and Diversity of Medieval Theology, West and East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1996), 158.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII, 159.

¹⁶ Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Expounding on the nature of Ps. Denis's writings, and their connection with Plotinus, neo-Platonism and Indian philosophy, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Fremantle, *A Treasury of Early Christianity*, 453.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 453; cf. *On the Divine Names*, in Fremantle, 455-456.

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utilization of Platonic ideas in Origen's work, which came to impact the early church.²¹

In citing the actual precedence for use of Ps. Denis's work, it is understood that the first mention of Dionysius came up at a council held in Constantinople, in the year AD 533, as the writings were used in support of the Monophysite²² doctrine—by one, Severus (Patriarch of Antioch). Yet, in spite of this unpleasant beginning, the writings soon garnered great standing, and even elucidated upon by ecclesiastic scholarship by the seventh century.²³ Even St. Maximus the confessor wrote commentaries on Dionysius (or Ps. Denis), “and throughout the Middle Ages the works of the Pseudo-Areopagite were accepted as genuine and enjoyed enormous success and prestige.”²⁴ They seem, then, to have done great service to many a seeker, and also seem to be drawing many a new reader into its curious ranks—which includes its motif of darkness (of unknowing) in the well-thought of mystical work.

Via Negativa, Via Affirmativa and the Limits of Knowing in *The Mystical Theology*

Now we come to take a closer look at the whole motif of ‘unknowing’ and ‘knowing’ that permeates Ps. Denis's *Mystical Theology*. But before going further, the concept of the *via negativa* or negative theology, as seen in Ps. Denis's writings,²⁵ can be rather instructive—particularly in terms of its edifying nature, by informing and impressing the human understanding with the whole motif of ‘limitations of knowing’. In its totality, *via negativa* (negative theology), or *apophatic* theology—from the *Greek* (ἀπόφασις – suggesting ‘beyond information,’ or a cognate, ἀπαρνέομαι: *aparneomai* -

²¹ David N. Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses: An Introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine to AD 500*, second revised edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007); A note on Christian Platonism, op. cit. pp. 57-59.

²² See Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 2-3. Note: ‘Monophysites’ were said (incorrectly) to stress the divine at the expense of the human nature of Christ, while Nestorianism, for instance, appears to stress the human at the expense of the divine – compared to Council of Chalcedon (451) which avows of dyophysitism distinguishing between person and nature, showing that Christ is one person in two natures, while emphasizing that the natures are without confusion, change, division, and separation [but really these positions are all essentially expressing the same thing].

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ Fremantle, *A Treasury of Early Christianity*, 453.

²⁵ *Mystical Theology*, Chapter II, in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 195.

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to deny),²⁶ is simply a way of defining God in terms of what may not be said about His perfect goodness. And it is in that light that what is not or may not be said is not perfectly known, and therefore, in a sense, reside in the sphere of the unknown. In other words, we lack information when it comes to comprehending the infinite nature of God.

This is unlike the *cataphatic* stance (also derived from the *Greek*, as seen in the word—κατανοέω: *catanoeo*—to detect, perceive, consider, discern, apprehend)²⁷—whereby an understanding and expressed thought of God (or the divine) is perceived in ‘positive’ terms. Another way of stating it is—*via affirmativa* (or affirmative way/positive theology);²⁸ i.e., to speak or affirm that God is goodness, life, beauty, fairness, omnipotent, great, being, light and so forth. Such expressions of God, it must be noted, are taken in light of human perceptions and attempts at conceptualizing the nature of God, based on our experience and (limited) logical way of thinking. Besides these ways of perceiving/not perceiving God, there also seems to be a type of parallel between Ps. Denis’s notion of *symbolic theology*—as it consists of what’s considered a downward movement in ever greater multitudes of symbols,²⁹ and that of *positive theology*. For example, Jesus spoke in symbolic terms,³⁰ when he spoke (in parables, for instance) of the kingdom of heaven—making connections between that which is spiritual (or heavenly) and the earthly. In other words, heavenly themes were proclaimed by wrapping them around common human events or occurrences, in order to reach the average listener.

Nonetheless, as Ps. Denis saw it, to think of God in cataphatic (or positive) terms (like: God is love), is seen as limiting to the divine, or rather—limiting the divine.³¹ In other words, in defining what God is, is in this sense, limiting the unlimited. But to not say anything about God, in a way, simply claims possession of unknowing, whereby illustrating human limitation on the one hand, and perhaps the urge to know on the other. Silence in itself, then, suggests a type of eloquence, for the true seeker also

²⁶ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 83.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁸ Bell, *Many Mansions*, Chapter VIII—‘Experiencing the Trinity,’ 157.

²⁹ Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A Study in the Form and Meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 80.

³⁰ Cf. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, in commentary based on Dionysian *Letter 9*—on theme of Biblical and Liturgical Symbolism, 24, 26.

³¹ *Mystical Theology*, Chapter I, in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 192-3.

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falls speechless before an infinite God. Such a sense is clearly seen in chapter four of *The Mystical Theology*, for instance, where Ps. Denis stressed the ‘darkness of unknowing,’ and emphatically showed that God (or God’s transcendence) cannot possibly be perceived by the human mind.³² It is in that sense that (our) silence becomes king.

Reflecting on the general nature of Ps. Denis’s *via negativa*, a link is also seen with Plato’s *Parmenides*,³³ insofar as it pertains to the concept of shadows and dreams.³⁴ In that regard, the connection between Ps. Denis and scripture is also noted, as scripture is seen as the stuff of which shadows and dreams are made.³⁵ The term ‘shadows’ here refer to the uncertainty of our knowing, which is understood in relation to the Dionysian ‘darkness of unknowing.’ And in that respect, the importance of scripture, as Ps. Denis saw it, had to do with the unplumbed mystery that is behind the words of scripture and also streaming through them.³⁶ Scripture, from that angle, is understood to be rather profound with a deep mysterious nature. In spite of that, Ps. Denis still argued “that in scripture we have a revealed religion and that things which are revealed belong necessarily to the plane of manifestation.”³⁷ But caution must be taken even in this revealed religion since the words (of scripture) are given to us in human thought, insofar as they pertain to “things which, being incomprehensible, are ultimately beyond thought.”³⁸ As such, all our notions of ultimate reality, and our best approach to God even through scripture, are deemed inadequate, in terms of fully apprehending the incomprehensibility of God. This, of course, has implications for apprehension of theology in general, and Adventist theology in particular.

Altogether, notwithstanding, Ps. Denis’s positive and negative theology can be seen in a type of symmetrical relation; i.e., one comes downward (positive), in relation to the other heading upward (negative). To be clear, positive or cataphatic theology ascribes to God positive qualities moving

³² Op. cit., Chapter IV, 199.

³³ *Parmenides* is one of Plato’s dialogues—purporting to be an account of a meeting between great philosophers of the Eleatic school (c. early 5th century BC), including Parmenides (its founder)—with discussion around issues such as: the All is one, the unchanging nature of existence, and the false appearances of the senses.

³⁴ Cf. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, Chapter III, 81.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, Chapter VIII—on *The Scriptural Basis of Dionysius’s Doctrines*, 40-41.

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁸ Ibid.

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from the universal (heavenly/infinite) to the particular—surrounding humans in the sensory realm. And the negative is sort of the contrary, reflecting on what God is not, i.e., from the particular to the universal or heavenly, conceptually speaking. In referring to this symmetrical-type relationship, one scholar rightly shows that in Ps. Denis’s work, “. . . positive theology studies the descent of God into the world, or the phases of his manifestation.”³⁹ In other words, the positive aspect shows God, through his beneficence, revealing himself to the world. But negative or apophatic theology on the other hand, reveals more of the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God. It is in this *via negativa* (negative theology) method, after climbing to a certain level (of the particulars) in approaching God, one realizes a thick wall of darkness that cannot be penetrated. Thus, it is in that sense that the human senses hit ‘brilliant’ darkness, such that they are spared the brightness of the full glory of Supra-Divinity.

Putting this in pedagogical perspective, you can think of this phenomenon of knowing/unknowing as an ultra-towering ‘U’ phenomenon with ‘knowing’ (positive theology) beginning at the top left corner and proceeding downwards, and then ‘unknowing’ (negative theology) picks up at the bottom (on the U turn) and proceeds upwards. This is precisely the idea in Ps. Denis’s own description of the *via negativa* method, but with added details. The following quote gives an idea of Ps. Denis’s thinking on the matter. According to him:

Now in the former treatises the course of the argument, as it came down from the highest to the lowest categories, embraced an ever-widening number of conceptions which increased at each stage of the descent, but in the present treatise it mounts upwards from below towards the category of transcendence, and in proportion to its ascent it contracts its terminology, and when the whole ascent is passed it will be totally dumb, being at last wholly united with Him Whom words cannot describe.⁴⁰

This is a depiction of the mystical ascent by way of the *via negativa* method. As such, this illustrates a spiritual journey from that which can be universally ascribed, to particularity, and then from particular (objects, phenomena around us) up to universal conceptions (attempting to piece

³⁹ See, Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, commenting on Ps. Denis’s positive theology, 82.

⁴⁰ *Mystical Theology*, Chapter III—writing about the affirmative and negative (theological) methods, In Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 198.

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together a picture of God).⁴¹ Altogether, it's actually about gaining closer communion with God—the journey to God, which eventually leads upwards, as in an ascent to God; and as part of that process, one inevitably encounters a scope of darkness (becoming dumb as it were); a place where our knowing and unknowing dissipates.

This scope of our darkness, insofar as it concerns the limitations of knowing, should be taken in light of One who surpasses our highest limits (our knowing and unknowing); so that the emphasis is not on lack of knowledge per se, but rather on the limits of knowledge. We can know what we can know, which simply means that our (human) knowing is finite. For example, we can perceive or know that God is good, and love and light (as in positive theology); but exactly how we describe the fullness of such goodness, we cannot say. Thus, of crucial importance, is to realize that we can see traces of a God who brought the universe into being,⁴² but He himself remains bigger—much more powerful than that which He brought forth. It is from that standpoint that we can understand that, “The God of Pseudo-Dionysius is a God who is known and unknown at the same time.”⁴³ So then on one hand you have knowing, and on the other hand, unknowing (as in a sphere of darkness), and God's transcendence sits above it all. It's no wonder, then, that Psalm 97:2 speaks of the clouds and thick darkness that surround God, which depicts the type of thought Ps. Denis alludes to.

Example of Moses' Experience and 'Unknowing' in Ps. Denis's *Mystical Theology*

In this downward (positive theology) and upward (negative theology) process, it is the unknowing (upward) phase that takes one to that level or moment of epistemological and rational limitation, as if into a sea of darkness. Thus, it is in attempting to piece together a picture of God on the upward climb—as in Moses' ascent to God, that the darkness of unknowing really sets in. It is a darkness so thick that there's no way to proceed upward on our own were it not for God's (gracious) light penetrating that darkness. Thus, while one can speak of that which is made manifest and knowable, the notion of mystical theology can be thought of in terms of the ineffable⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., cf. Chapter II—distinguishing between negative method and positive statement; then focusing on the universal (positive statement) to the particular, and back up towards the universal again. In Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 195-196.

⁴² See Bell, *Many Mansions*, Chapter VIII, 156.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cf. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, in Chapter Two—speaking of Denys and the nature of theological language, 24.

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(insofar as it references the light and infinite power of God that cannot be humanly expressed). This emphasizes the nature of the spiritual activity—one’s ascent to God with the goal of union with Him, as it intersects the limitations of our knowing (and leads to the cessation of knowing), as we encounter God.

This notion of the ineffable nature of mystical union, can be seen in the manner in which Moses’ experience is spoken of—in terms of a divine ascent, whereby “he meets not with God Himself,” and cannot behold Him for He is invisible, “but the place wherein He dwells.”⁴⁵ This is powerful and profound, to just think of the place wherein God dwells, let alone encounter (or see) that place. But after all, Ps. Denis explained that this encountering of the place where God dwells, is actually “symbolic language,”⁴⁶ which itself also helps explain the nature of the mystical union. This type of experience (Moses’s ascent on Mount Sinai) is thus described as a type of “mystical ascent,” whereby in a kind of ‘contemplative union’ with God, “the soul passes beyond images and comes to know God as he is in himself. . . .”⁴⁷ The notion of ‘contemplative union,’ in turn, can be seen in relation to Rolt’s point of a higher kind of contemplation, which is “performed by the *via negativa*,”⁴⁸ insofar as it relates to unknowing and submitting to a higher source—the overwhelming power of God. And in terms of the notion of ‘passing beyond images’ and coming to know God, this type of interpretation of Ps. Denis in the Middle Ages and today, portrays the idea that the soul abandons forms of prayer that rely on imagery and meditative reasoning, and “learns an openness to God himself in the darkness of the abandonment of techniques. . . .”⁴⁹ This means that even the best of our spiritual intentions and meditation, falls short of the glory of God.

For as Moses ascends, “he passes beyond all that can be discerned by the senses and the intellect and enters into a divine darkness where he is united with God in a way that surpasses knowledge.”⁵⁰ It is important to

⁴⁵ *Mystical Theology*, Chapter I—writing about preparation for, and the nature of, union with God and divine ascent, in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 193-194.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁷ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Chapter Six on: “Visions and Darkness,” Subheading: ‘Darkness,’ 100-101.

⁴⁸ See Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*—footnote 4, p. 58—referring to meditation that leads to contemplation, and the higher kind of contemplation that is performed by the *via negativa*.

⁴⁹ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Chapter Six, Subheading: ‘Darkness,’ 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

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note here, that the intellect is not merely subject to failure, but both senses and intellect actually fail, as one encounters ‘divine darkness,’ before being united with a holy, transcendent God. Such thought lies at the heart of unknowing and the darkness surrounding the state of unknowing, as it relates to God’s transcendence (that surpasses knowledge) and mystical theology. This reifies the fact that due to our limitations in encountering the supreme (or full) light of God, no human has seen (or can see) God himself at any time; nor can we imagine such holy and dazzling brightness that shines from glory to glory.

It has been eloquently noted that, the true vision and true knowledge of what we seek “consists precisely in not seeing, in an awareness that our goal transcends all knowledge and is everywhere cut off from us by the darkness of incomprehensibility.”⁵¹ This speaks precisely to the fact that we must engage ‘unknowing’ (darkness), in the sense of surrendering to an incomprehensible God. “To pass into darkness,” then, “is to pass into the awareness of the incomprehensibility of God: here there is seeing by not seeing, knowing by not knowing. And the reason is the absolute unknowability of God.”⁵² Such salient statement, underscoring the unknowability of God, emphasizes the nature of the darkness which we have to confront, in order to obtain a type of awareness of the nature of God’s transcendence—His holiness; so that we see by not seeing and know by not knowing. Thus, left to human capabilities alone, those embarking on that ‘divine ascent’ (similar to Moses) will grope in a dense and almost palpable darkness (as if stuck on thinking about what God is not), trying endlessly to feel around for a way out, yet to no avail. It is only by first recognizing then admitting the darkness of one’s unknowing, and renouncing apprehensions of understanding, that one can truly enter in or arrive at that state of spiritual union with God. This is the sense that Ps. Denis’s *Mystical Theology* carries.

Scriptural Basis for Notion of ‘Unknown’

Before delving directly into the scriptural reference for the ‘unknown’ in relation to Ps. Denis’s work, it is crucial to emphasize the nature of our ‘knowing,’ the nature of the ‘unknown,’ and the impact on theology.

⁵¹ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 87, Chapter V—‘Nicene Orthodoxy,’ Subtitle: ‘Gregory of Nyssa’—in reference to Moses’ mystical experience—as also seen in Ps. Denis’s *Mystical Theology*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 88.

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Throughout his (Ps. Denis) writings, moreover, this type of duality theme of knowing/unknowing (which is actually a major overall theme in the Dionysian corpus) is cast in terms of light and darkness;⁵³ light–knowing, and darkness–unknowing. And *The Mystical theology* particularly embraces the concept of ‘the darkness of unknowing.’⁵⁴ The phrase ‘the darkness of unknowing,’ also became well known as it also inspired the title of a 14th century English mystical treatise–*The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁵⁵ Putting this in perspective, the opening lines in Ps. Denis’s first letter (to the monk Gaius), for example, are poised to propose (or can be interpreted as) darkness as the absence of light and ignorance as the absence or deprivation of knowledge.⁵⁶ The opening of the first letter reads thus: “Darkness [or shadow] disappears in the light, the more so as there is more light. Knowledge makes unknowing disappear, the more so as there is more knowledge.”⁵⁷ Here is exposed a type of subjugation of darkness and unknowing, due to the presence of light and knowledge. But it is important to note that that doesn’t necessarily mean that unknowing is inherently inferior in our human sphere of conceptualizing. Rather, it merely speaks to the fact that the very nature of our knowing is limited.

This, in a sense, can trade on our natural inclination to perceive of light as superior to darkness and knowledge as superior to ignorance (unknowing), due to the deprivation of darkness and ignorance (or conversely, the absence of light and knowledge). But as Ps. Denis saw it, one should not think of this in terms of deprivation but rather in terms of transcendence. And here comes the moment of clarity. In actuality, Ps. Denis offered us a key to unlocking and understanding his exposition of the ‘unknown,’ particularly since he is understood as treating darkness as the absence of light and thus inferior to it. However, here is where the revelation hits home—darkness can be considered beyond light and thus superior to it—in terms of transcendence, as when a light is so dazzlingly bright that it actually precludes the sense of sight.⁵⁸ This poses a profound

⁵³ Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 8.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 8. Note: the term “the darkness of unknowing” is an actual term found in ‘The Mystical Theology.’

⁵⁵ As an example, see Justin McCann (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing, Together with the Epistle of Privy Counsel* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1964).

⁵⁶ In Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, in commentary on Ps. Denis’s *The Mystical Theology and Letter 1* (to the monk Gaius), 8.

⁵⁷ From Letter 1, Cited in Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 7.

⁵⁸ Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*—Continuing discussion on the nature of God’s transcendence in relation to our knowing/unknowing, 8.

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interpretation of the meaning of ‘UNKNOWN’ (as in Acts 17:23) as it is wrapped up in both epistemology (what and how we can see/know), and the transcendent. As such, what we can know or hope to know is limited to the human finite realm, so that no one truly knows God within the conceptual frame of human sight and knowledge. This simply means, in a sense, that the language of ‘darkness’ is a unique language for speaking of our best approach to God. In other words, our best sense of knowing and understanding God is so vastly and infinitely inferior to the actual light that emanates from God, that were it to hit us directly, it would be blinding. In that sense, then, unknowing or darkness resides at a particular height, even surpassing (spiritual) light or knowledge, as we understand it, in our approach to God.

In recapitulating this key insight, the idea of ‘unknowing’ may not simply be the deprivation or lack of knowledge, but instead, the recognition that “someone or something” is indeed transcendent “and far beyond the limits of human knowing.”⁵⁹ In astute terms, therefore, Ps. Denis introduced “a new kind of language for speaking about the nearest approach to God, the language of darkness.”⁶⁰ And that is a refreshing take on the whole matter, seeing that someone or something indubitably and illimitably transcends the limits of our knowing. From that standpoint, it is absolutely striking that the name Dionysius the Areopagite is a pseudonym (attributed to) or so tactfully selected by an author himself unnamed or unknown.

This is the point at which scripture looms large, bursting upon the scene; it could hold back no longer. In conjunction with the snippets already proffered, we see in the book of Acts the most explicit connection between the Areopagite and Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill (or the Areopagus), Athens, where Paul spoke concerning the ‘UNKNOWN GOD’—Acts 17:22-23. In fact, from all accounts, this is the very genesis of the entire discourse on the Dionysian Corpus and on Dionysius the Areopagite. This is where it all begins! Thus, in historical perspective, it is on this very hill in Athens—the Aeropagus, to which Paul is brought by the Epicureans and Stoics, to set the record (of his strange doctrine of Jesus) straight (Acts 17:18-19).⁶¹ And it

⁵⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁰ See Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, writing about Ps. Denis in light of his Syrian connection, 112.

⁶¹ Here, the scriptures speak of the philosophers—Epicureans (given to luxury, indulgence and appetite) and Stoics (unmoved by passion, and submitted to unavoidable necessity) intently engaging Paul as they crossed paths. Some wondered if Paul was indeed making any sense at all, while others thought he might be introducing some strange gods—since he preached to them about Jesus and the resurrection. Their curiosity was thus highly

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is precisely within this thrilling contextual narrative (Acts 17:19,34) that the terms ‘Areopagus’ and ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’—member of the Areopagus council, are derived.

Thus, Dionysius the Areopagite emerges as a brilliant choice of name (pseudonym) for the author attached to these writings, who is actually believed by many to be Paul’s Athenian convert. One thing that is certain, though, is that the actual author of the *Mystical Theology* treatise and the broader Dionysian Corpus (i.e., Pseudo or Ps. Denis as used in this paper), had a particular preoccupation with God as known and unknown.⁶² Nonetheless, looking a little closer at the scriptural context (at the end of Acts 17), it is seen that indeed the New Testament (KJV) does specifically mention only two people by name, of those who believed and followed Paul after his preaching; and that is: “Dionysius the Areopagite” (or member of the council) and a woman named Damaris. Thus, this New Testament Dionysius heard Paul and perhaps picked up on Paul’s mention of the ‘Unknown God,’ since that was a crucial lead into the sermon. But no doubt, based on all that has been shown thus far in this paper, Ps. Denis certainly seemed to have not only picked up on this motif, but had a very keen sense, or at least interest, in Paul’s exposition on the ‘Unknown God.’

It was towards the beginning of his sermon (on the Areopagus) that Paul began by pointing out his curiosity or rather observation of the altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. That this is a theme (the ‘unknown’) that radiates with splendor in Ps. Denis’s writings, testifies also to a high probability of his awareness of the actual details of Paul’s sermon, as well as being inspired to use the mentioned name (in Acts 17:34) of one of Paul’s actual converts (from the Areopagus). In that light, Ps. Denis, it can be said, took his cue of the unknown—and notions of *cataphatic* and *apophatic* theology directly from Paul (also discussed in the next section of this paper) and ran with it.

In the following New Testament passage—referring to the ‘Unknown God,’ take note of the word ‘superstitious’ (with reference to the notion of irrational belief) in the KJV, and its replacement by the word ‘religious’ (with reference to belief in and reverence for a deity or God) in the NIV. Here is a rendering of that passage:

piqued. It is on that count that they brought Paul to the Areopagus, in really trying to make him flesh out the new doctrine (as in his preaching Christ) of which he spoke.

⁶² Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 7.

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Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars Hill [or the Areopagus], and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too *superstitious*. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you (Acts: 17:22-23, KJV).

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very *religious*. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you (Acts 17:22-23, NIV).

Then Paul continued his sermon,⁶³ which went on for another eight verses, and declared, in essence, that this unknown God is the same one who made the world, and has need of nothing; but rather gave life, breath, and everything else to all. But Paul didn’t end without an appeal on the Areopagus, in which he earnestly urged that God is calling people everywhere to repentance; “for he has a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. [and furthermore] He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31 NIV). The resurrection reference here points to Jesus. What seemed to have begun as a wily exposition quickly turned into a mini evangelistic meeting—something perhaps the philosophers and council members were unprepared for; it caught them a bit off guard. Yes, that bold was Paul, as is evident in his ever-ready disposition; and after he was done, he simply departed as cool as ever (Acts 17:32-33). Let that be a lesson to all, that it is a powerful thing to be fully submitted to God; moreover, it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

In other words, Paul (as a staunch follower and perhaps the most enthusiastic preacher of Christ in his time) seized the opportunity to do what he did best, and that is to preach a Supreme God who created all people equal, of all nations. In that, the end goal was to preach repentance, the reality of Christ’s ministry on earth and his resurrection, judgment and the approaching end of the world. This is classic Paul-style preaching, with a particular emphasis on Jesus and the resurrection, telling his audiences, essentially, that assuredly just as Christ was alive, died and resurrected from the dead, so it is that others (those repenting) would be resurrected in the

⁶³ Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus actually spans ten verses—i.e., Acts 17:22-31.

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end to also face a new and eternal life.⁶⁴ He showed this elsewhere, in I Thessalonians 4:13-18, for instance, where he stressed hope and the belief that just assuredly as Jesus died and rose again, even so, them which also sleep in Jesus (as in their graves), will God resurrect and take to that eternal abode.

In fact, as far as Paul was concerned, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ himself was not raised from the dead (*see context in I Corinthians 15:12-15*); and that has implications of momentous import for the soteriological-eschatological outlook of Christianity in general, including Adventism—not the least of which, all hope is lost (in terms of ultimate salvation from sin), without any resurrection. Not to mention, the ‘advent’ (i.e., second advent) in Adventism would be but a moot point. So central is this point (doctrine of salvation as linked to the resurrection) to the New Covenant, that were it to be nullified, would essentially take down the entire prophetic outlook of New Testament theology with it. All of this stemmed from the occasion and cause—of an altar to an ‘unknown’ God—which evoked this highly emotionally charged sermon of such weighty and climactic proportions.

Linguistic Note and Rationale

The Greek for ‘unknown God’ is: Ἄγνωστω θεῷ *–agnosto theo* (unknown God); and Ἄγνωστω *–agnosto* here is adjective (normal) dative masculine singular, from ἄγνωστος *–agnostos*: meaning, ‘to the unknown.’ The root used for *agnostos* is the same root by which we derive our English notion of agnosis/agnostic—in reference to ignorance. Thus, the Athenian altar to the ‘unknown God’ which Paul referenced, actually incited not merely his deep curiosity, but readiness of mind to expound on that which was written off as unknown. In other words, it was a moment to show forth the brilliance emitting from the darkness, or (put another way) that brilliant light that is circumscribed by our darkness.

In reflecting back on Ps. Denis’s writings, then, transcendent spiritual activity is called ‘unknowing,’ in that, when we know a thing we are able to trace the lines of difference separating it from other things, or separating a part of it from the other.⁶⁵ Simply put, our unknowing inadvertently

⁶⁴ Cf. Follow such perspective in I Corinthians chapter 15—including discourse on the destruction of death itself.

⁶⁵ In Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, Chapter V, writing on ‘contemplation’ in Ps. Denis’s work, 28.

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presupposes a 'knowing' that overwhelms human limitations. It is in that vein that all knowledge is seen as including the power of separating one thing from the other, as in the ability to recognize, to learn and grow in a cognizant fashion. Thus, (as Ps. Denis later pointed out), 'unknowing' had to do with a type of spiritual apprehension which soars beyond the intellect—as in a transcendence of knowledge.⁶⁶ As such, our limitations of knowing do not preclude that which is transcendent and far beyond our cognizant capabilities; for it is through a type of dense mystical darkness, ultimate reality eventually "becomes so near as utterly to sweep away," in a sense, the distinction separating us from it.⁶⁷ Based on the whole trend of Dionysian mystical theology, such thought seems to lie at the heart of the meaning of 'unknowing.'

Concept of Unknowing/Apophatic and Knowing/Cataphatic in Pauline Writings

Besides the episode in the book of Acts (chapter 17), unknowing can be attested to elsewhere with reference to Paul and his writings. Alluding to the whole character of 'unknowing,' Paul related an experience of his, which perhaps he thought to be quite profound, since it was included in his epistle to the Corinthians. In II Corinthians 12:2, 4 he spoke of a man that he knew in Christ up above, and whether in body or out of body (i.e., in spirit) he didn't know—but God knows for sure; nonetheless, that man was caught up to the third heaven (or heavens of heavens). Moreover that man which was caught up to paradise (heaven) heard words of the highest order, which was in and of themselves wholly ineffable.

But the immediate context of that narrative is couched in II Corinthians 12:1-5, where Paul spoke of visions and revelations of the Lord. Here, the mystical experience comes to the fore—as in reference to communion with or revelation of God (or heaven), particularly that which was not written down. And here we can also tell of the influence of Paul (his visions and ineffability of that which is revealed) on Ps. Denis.⁶⁸ For example, this is also seen where Ps. Denis wrote about visionaries such as Moses and his pressing forward to the topmost pinnacle in his ascent to God, or divine ascent.⁶⁹ From such a standpoint, it is not surprising that someone who

⁶⁶ Ibid., Chapter VI, In commentary on: 'Dionysius and Modern Philosophy,' 32.

⁶⁷ Op. cit.

⁶⁸ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 99.

⁶⁹ See *The Mystical Theology*—Chapter I, in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 193.

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referred to himself as Dionysius the Areopagite (referencing Paul's convert) would draw on such mystical experience.

Then referring back to Acts 17 (where Ps. Denis is understood to have taken his cue), it is precisely there that we see a prime example of 'knowing' and 'unknowing'—*cataphatic* and *apophatic* theology—actually expressed. And from what we've already discussed and already know about Ps. Denis's positive and negative theology, it bears rather overt resemblance (in theological method) to part of Paul's Areopagus sermon.⁷⁰ Accordingly, Paul made his objective and sermon plain (in reference to the altar to an unknown God); Acts 17:24-25 posits his words vividly:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the **Lord of heaven and earth** and **does not live in temples made with hands**. And **he is not served by human hands**, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (NIV emphasis mine—highlighting the two *cataphatic* phrases followed by the two *apophatic* ones.)

Here, after being brought to the council (at the Areopagus) since the people's curiosity got the better of them, Paul (the former persecutor of Christians, turned Christian zealot) was all too happy to be given a chance to tell his piece. That's precisely what he lived for. Thus, he not only vivaciously and pointedly spoke, but with absolute certainty, unflinching boldness, and a lurid clarity of mind, told of the universal and transcendent character of an all-powerful God—in unmistakably loud and clear tones. Paul was so sure about his message as he posed gracefully yet assuredly, letting his audience know that this very thing they worshiped as 'unknown' he was going to make plain to them as to what it involved.

An animated Paul, so eager and full of passion, in a sermon which can aptly be entitled, "The Unknown God," proclaimed in an effervescent manner of the God of heaven and earth; a God that was all too very real to him in his converted life experience and extensive missionary endeavors (of which, this Athenian episode forms a rather critical and integral part).⁷¹ The

⁷⁰ Referring specifically to Acts 17:24-25, which portrays the *cataphatic/apophatic* method—as part of the sermonette of Acts 17:22-31.

⁷¹ This particular Athenian affair (the major highlight of much of Acts 17) is believed to be part of Paul's second (adventurous) missionary excursion (with Silas and other companions), around the year A.D. 50; and is actually set in the region of north-northeast Greece, before moving southward to Athens. It is due to persecuting circumstances, however, that Paul was hastily whisked away (from Berea), winding up all the way in

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first two highlighted phrases in the above passage (verses 24-25) are positive (cataphatic)—positing what God is, and the next two highlighted phrases are negative (apophatic)—positing essentially what God is not, showing a type of symmetry in this poised style. It must be emphasized, however, that Paul’s overall objective, indubitably, was to connect with his audience (by using one of their very own objects), expound on the gospel message, and call the listeners to repentance.

This exposition style is also attached to Paul’s colorful experience and theological energy (his zealousness). In illuminating that gospel message, this pericope of Acts 17:24-25 (immediately following the reference to the ‘Unknown God’) is couched within the succinct sermon (in Acts 17:22-31). And in that sermonette, five crucial power points emerge: (a) the characterization of an omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, yet immanent God, (b) this same God created all humans equal to worship him, (c) the importance of Christ in salvation (d) repentance and the coming judgment, and (e) assurance of the resurrection, because Christ was resurrected. It should be pointed out here, then, that the emergent difference between Paul and Ps. Denis is evinced in Paul’s greater weight on a Christocentric outlook, compared to Ps. Denis (who seemed to have placed heavier emphasis on the notion of the Godhead). And while on that note, Paul’s approach, it can be said, tends to be, or at least appear, more salvific in outlook.

Besides that, other Pauline passages that speak to the transcendence and mystery of God, with respect to the limits of our knowing are those such as Ephesians 3:14,17-19—referring to the transcendent nature of love that surpasses knowledge. And Colossians 2:2-3 speaks of the “acknowledgment of the mystery of God. . .” in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. In other words, God, shrouded in mystery, is where true knowledge or the riches of knowledge reside, making our (human) knowledge and wisdom weak and pale in comparison. This is comparable to Ps. Denis, where in the opening prayer (in chapter one) of *The Mystical Theology*, he prayed, “. . . Guide us to that topmost height of mystic Lore which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden

Athens—that’s where the specific drama and ‘sermonette of Acts 17:22-31’ comes in. Thus, it is while in Athens, essentially passing the time alone, that Paul also took curious notice of the altar to the ‘UNKNOWN’ god (and couldn’t help but comment on it), as he waited on Silas and Timothy to join him speedily (Acts 17:13-21).

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...⁷² Thus, in both the writings of Paul and Ps. Denis, there is particular interest in the mystery of God and heavenly truth, and God's transcendence in comparison to our meager knowledge, along with a motif of things being hidden in God's mystery—such as knowledge, wisdom, and the unchangeable mysteries of heavenly truth.

This is quite understandable in light of the way in which Ps. Denis (following Paul's lead) employed cataphatic and apophatic theology—in essence, reminding us of our finite place before an incomprehensibly powerful God, who has no beginning, and whose very presence is light underived. Thus, we can imagine that our knowledge is so frail, that in approaching God it ends up in a sea of darkness. In other words, we and anything that we claim to know, or ever hope to know, absolutely falls weightless before the infinite treasure and depth of God's wisdom, light and knowledge. As such, God's divine light must penetrate our dense and desolate darkness in order that union with Him (i.e., a measure of spiritual relationship) can be made possible.

Conclusion

What started as mere academic routine, turned out to be quite fascinating as I dug deeper into the Dionysian discourse of the 'unknown.' And what an exhilarating experience this has been. Taking the entirety of this research into consideration, in the first three chapters of *The Mystical Theology*, the method, along with examples (as in the case of Moses) of the *via negativa* have been explicitly shown, including a stress on the transcendent nature of God in relation to our unknowing. The last two chapters (chapters four and five in *Mystical Theology*), however, particularly emphasize the application of the *via negativa*; i.e., they simply place emphases on showing what God is not. It's almost as if Ps. Denis was stressing method in the first three chapters, to prepare the reader for a vivid example (or rather idea) of what God's transcendence looks like, in relation to our unknowing. The high point of the *via negativa* comes to a head at the end of this treatise (*Mystical Theology*), in swell notes of the awesomeness of God's infinity. And so towards the very end of the treatise, Ps. Denis affirmed God's transcendence, in resounding tones, which is way

⁷² *Mystical Theology*, Chapter I: From opening prayer—in reference to the mysteries of heavenly truth, and spiritual riches that surpass knowledge, in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 191.

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beyond human intellect—even making both our affirmations and negations void before such an incomprehensible God.⁷³

This paper also discussed some linkage between the Dionysian usage of negative and positive theology, and the biblical usage—particularly in light of Pauline theology. In brief, a sense of the vivid eloquence of ‘darkness’ is gained, with respect to our unknowing, as one lets go of self and presses on upward. It is in that type of ascent that the spiritual seeker realizes his/her weakness before an infinite God, in a type of darkness that is brilliant beyond mortal tongue. To be sure, the brilliance has nothing to do with what we can accomplish on our own initiative, but rather with that which intersects and supersedes finite humans in their natural state. Altogether, then, it is as a result of God’s penetrating light that our darkness is not only made manifest, but we can ultimately better begin to plumb, or at least be aware of, the riches of His grace and mercy, in whatever faint a measure our finiteness could engage, as we continue to let go of self, pride, and all.

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⁷³ A closer look at Chapter V of Ps. Denis’s *The Mystical Theology*—in Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 201.