

“Filled with the Visible Theophany of the Lord: Reading Dionysius East and West”*

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Abstract

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This article is the latest in a series of papers in which the author has explored how the Divine Names and Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite have been read in terms of three ‘frameworks’: Neoplatonic, Greek patristic/Orthodox Christian, and Medieval Latin scholastic. In this article, the author focuses on Dionysius’s reference to the Transfiguration of the Lord (DN 1.4, 592B-C) and the sort of embodied knowledge we can have of God in theophanic experiences. This text provides a very good example for contrasting the Latin scholastic and Orthodox/Greek patristic interpretations of Dionysius. It also provides an excellent example of a text that cannot be accommodated within a strictly Neoplatonic interpretation of the Divine Names. The author spends most of the article examining the quite different frameworks in which St. Gregory Palamas, on the one hand, and Sts. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, interpret this text. In the end the author shows that these different frameworks for interpreting Dionysius’s reference to the Transfiguration rest on quite different epistemologies.



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For the past few years, I have been interested in how the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*¹ of Dionysius the Areopagite have been read in terms of three frameworks: Neoplatonic, Greek Patristic/Orthodox Christian, and Medieval Latin Scholastic.² In the process, I have found a set of texts that offer a particularly good opportunity to test how Dionysius is interpreted within these frameworks.³ One of these texts is found at DN 1.4, 592B–C:

(T) Then [in the next life] ... when we have attained a Christform lot ... we shall “always be with the Lord” (I Thess.4:13). In altogether pure contemplations, we shall be filled with His visible theophany, which shall shine round about us in most brilliant splendors, as were the disciples in that most divine Transfiguration.⁴

¹ I will use standard abbreviations for Dionysius’s works in this paper: *On the Celestial Hierarchy* (CH), *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (EH), *On the Divine Names* (DN), the *Mystical Theology* (MT) and *Epistles* (Ep.). All column references in citations of Dionysius refer to J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus accurante. Series graeca* vol. 3.

² The articles in which I have explored this topic are: “An Absolutely Simple God? – Frameworks for Reading Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite,” *The Thomist* 69 (July 2005): 371–406; “(Mis?)-Reading the *Divine Names* as a Science: Aquinas’s Interpretation of the *Divine Names* of (Pseudo) Dionysius Areopagite,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008): 142–171; and “The *Divine Names* in John Sarracen’s Translation: Misconstruing Dionysius’s Language About God?” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2008): 661–682. I might add that these articles constitute an implied reassessment and correction of my earlier work on Dionysius insofar as I thought his works were best read in a Neoplatonic context: see especially my book, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

³ Some other texts are found at: DN 1.4, 589D–592A (the celebration of the divinity as monad and Trinity); DN 2.3–5, 640B–644B (all of the texts dealing with the divine union and differentiation); DN 4.1, 693B (dealing with the analogy between the production of things by the good and the illumination of things by the sun); DN 5.1, 816 (cf. DN 1.5–6, 593B–596A and 13.3, 981A–981B) (the understanding of God as *ousia hyperousios*); and MT 1.3, esp. 1001a (Moses’s union with God).

⁴ Both St. Albert and St. Thomas used Sarracen’s translation of the *DN* and they were aware of Eriugena’s translation. Sarracen consistently translated *theophania* as *apparitio Dei*. Eriugena either simply transliterated the Greek word or used *divina manifestatio*.

I have fairly straightforward reasons for selecting (T) as a test case for seeing how Dionysius is read in these three frameworks or traditions. The feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord is one of the twelve major feasts of the Orthodox Church. St. Gregory Palamas's insistence that the disciples experienced and saw the uncreated light of Christ's divinity is fully in line with the hymns for the feast⁵ and the interpretation of the Transfiguration within the Greek patristic tradition.⁶ On the other hand, as I will show, the Latin scholastic interpretation of the Transfiguration – as exemplified by St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas – does not hold that the disciples in any sense knew or experienced the uncreated light of Christ's divinity at the Transfiguration. Their accounts of what the disciples experienced at the Transfiguration are both different from and, I think, incompatible with the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Christian tradition.

If (T) provides a crucial text for comparing Eastern Orthodox and Latin Scholastic readings of the DN, I do not see how (T) can be accommodated within any strictly Neoplatonic interpretation of the DN. The reference to the Transfiguration clearly presupposes the Incarnation of the Son of God as Christ and, thus, that God is the Holy Trinity. Indeed, the scriptural accounts of the Transfiguration are central to the Christian experience of God as the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet no strictly Neoplatonic interpretation of God as the undifferentiated One can take seriously the idea that God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, I cannot see how any Neoplatonic metaphysics can make sense of the Incarnation in any sense that would be compatible with traditional Christianity.

⁵ St. Gregory Palamas cites several texts for the feast to support his claim that the light revealed on Mt. Tabor was the uncreated divine light, e.g., the Exapostalarion from Matins (*Triads* III.1.12), the last verse of the Aposticha for Vespers of Aug. 7 [the Afterfeast] (*Triads* III.1.12), the third sticheron of the Lite at the Vespers for the feast (*Triads* III.1.15), etc.

⁶ See, e.g., Christopher Veniamin, "The Transfiguration of Christ in Greek Patristic Literature: from Irenaeus of Lyons to Gregory Palamas" (Oxford Univ. unpublished dissertation, 1991) and Peter A. Chamberas, "The Transfiguration of Christ: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Scripture," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 14 (1970): 48–65.