



Christian Apophaticism in Jean-Luc Marion's Early Works

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Abstract: In this article, I investigate Jean-Luc Marion's early interpretation of Christian apophaticism with special reference to his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. I observe that the most remarkable, but rarely noted, aspect of this interpretation is Marion's avoidance of the typical derivation of Dionysius' negative theology from the Platonic tradition. Instead, he places him in the tradition of the critique of idols in the Old Testament. I argue that this intuition should not be lightly dismissed as early Christian apophaticism was at least partly developed in the context of Christian polemic against pagan idolatry. If Christian apophaticism is understood against this background, Marion's claim that it foreshadows the modern and postmodern critique of theism appears more plausible than his detractors have been willing to admit.

Keywords: apophaticism, Pseudo-Dionysius, phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion, idolatry, metaphysics, postmodern theology, Jacques Derrida

Contemporary scholarship dealing with the history of apophaticism often takes it for granted that this can be delineated in a fairly straightforward way:¹ Plato's insights mainly in the *Republic*,² the *Seventh Letter*,³ and the *Parmenides*⁴ were developed into a systematic form by Middle and Neoplatonist philosophers.⁵ Following the example of Philo of Alexandria, Christian authors such as Clement of Alexandria,⁶ Gregory of Nyssa⁷ and, chiefly, the mysterious fifth-century writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite⁸ took over and modified those philosophical ideas. This tradition was continued and further elaborated, albeit in different ways, by medieval theologians in the Eastern and in the Western Church. On the basis of such a historical reconstruction it would appear strange indeed that postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida could even be supposed to have anything to do with the tradition of apophatic or negative theology, and Jean-Luc Marion's attempt, in some of his earlier

¹ Louth, *The Origins*; Mortley, *Word to Silence*, II.

² Cf. Plato, *Resp.* VII, 509b: The idea of the Good is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας.

³ Plato, *Ep.* 7, 341c–e.

⁴ The relevant passages in the *Parmenides* are the first and second hypotheses: Plato, *Parm.* 137d–146a.

⁵ The classical study is still: Dodds, "Parmenides."

⁶ Cf. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*.

⁷ Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 190–199. Louth, *The Origins*, 78–94. See also: Laird, "Whereof."

⁸ Louth, *Denys*, 78–98.

works, to reaffirm it in critical dialogue with such post-structuralist philosophers must at best seem a benign misunderstanding and at worst a fundamental distortion of that tradition.⁹

There are indubitably some serious problems with Marion's reconstruction of Dionysius' thought, but I shall argue in the following that it would be rash to dismiss his reading on account of those.¹⁰ Rather, I believe those problems in Marion's interpretation of Dionysius point to some deep-seated ambiguities within the specifically Christian tradition of negative theology. I shall thus argue that Marion's interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysian version of apophaticism deserves serious study insofar as it prompts the theologian to ask more fundamentally what the meaning and purpose of negative theology within Christianity could or should be.

1. Jean-Luc Marion: Philosopher and Theologian

Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical work is part of what a critic has called the theological turn (*tournant théologique*) of French phenomenology,¹¹ and while I am unable here to give anything like a sufficient sketch of his philosophy,¹² it is important to realise that Marion's more specifically theological interests and ideas have arisen in close connection with an attempt to develop further Edmund Husserl's phenomenology.¹³ Marion believes that Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction can be extended to the point where it reveals an unconditioned phenomenon of 'pure givenness' (*étant donné*) and thus the fundamental structure of the world turns out to be based on an excess of self-giving. This, however, becomes manifest only at the end of a reflexive process designed, paradoxically, to recover strict immanence. While Marion has always insisted on a distinction between his philosophy and his theology, the structural parallels between the two are obvious and willingly admitted by

⁹ The phase in Marion's work on which this article is based seems to have ended at some point in the first decade of the second millennium. From *Au lieu de soi*, published in 2008, Marion's historical and theological coordinates seem to have shifted away from his earlier concern for the trajectory from Dionysius to Derrida. In *D'ailleurs, la révélation*, his latest theological work, Marion mentions Dionysius only incidentally. In Marion – Littlejohn – Rumpza, "From Idolatry," Marion refers to his early work as "a negative moment" with the sole purpose of breaking "the walls of the jail." As the present article should make clear, I do not think the author's retrospective view does justice to the theological significance of those writings. See also Jones, *Genealogy*, 153.

¹⁰ A good account of legitimate criticisms in Jones, "Dionysius." See also my own earlier discussion in Zachhuber, "Jean-Luc Marion's Reading," 11–13.

¹¹ Janicaud, "Theological Turn." See also the very helpful "translator's introduction": *ibidem*, 3–15.

¹² Such an account is provided by Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*. See also Marion's own reflections in Marion – Littlejohn – Rumpza, "From Idolatry to Revelation."

¹³ Marion, *Reduction*, 4–39. See also Mooney, "Hubris."

the author himself.¹⁴ Just as the positive truth about reality is revealed to phenomenological research only as the result of a process seemingly designed to reduce to immanence all outward layers of transcendence,¹⁵ so the theological truth of God as love becomes manifest only after the complete destruction of his idolatrous representations. This has a number of immediate consequences: First, the radical otherness of God is revealed by careful attention to reality as it is – not by turning away from it. Second, God's commitment to us is recognised alongside his majestic distance from us.¹⁶ Third, there is resistance to both – our encounter with the phenomenon as well as our recognition of God, and this resistance needs to be overcome through a critical and, as such, destructive movement. No knowledge of God without critique of the idol; no understanding of reality without phenomenological reduction.

In this manner, the early Marion integrated into both his philosophical and his theological project the postmodern critique of metaphysics as a necessary liberation of “the other” from the shackles of visual or conceptual constraints. Only when we have forsaken any such attempt to bring the other under our control are we capable of receiving it in its selfless superabundance.

2. Apophaticism and the Critique of Metaphysics

It is this very insight, which, according to the early Marion, has been contained in, and expressed by, the Christian tradition of negative theology.¹⁷ In the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius, he argues, a fundamental critique of metaphysics is not merely anticipated, but actually present in a way that rivals and ultimately outdoes its more recent secular manifestations. There is a subtle, dialectical polemic underlying this postulate. Marion is aware, of course, that Derrida himself rejected this parallel,¹⁸ but he insinuates that for the secular philosopher such a rejection is a necessity as to do otherwise would be to undermine the very project he seeks to advance:

This quasi-deconstruction [sc. in negative theology] cannot be said simply to anticipate, unknowingly, the authentic deconstruction since it claims to reach *in fine* what it deconstructs: It claims to put us in the presence of God in the very degree to which it denies all

¹⁴ Marion, *Being Given*, 71–74, with n. 2 (p. 342) and Carlson, “Translator’s Introduction.”

¹⁵ The famous ‘third reduction’: Marion, *Reduction*, 192–198.

¹⁶ Cf. the title of his early theological work – Marion, *Idole et la distance!*

¹⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of Marion’s use of the apophatic tradition cf. Jones, *Genealogy*.

¹⁸ Cf. the discussion between Marion and Derrida, documented in Caputo – Scanlon, *God*. Paul Rorem (“Negative Theologies,” 458) thinks Derrida “was correct” to distance himself from Dionysius and Eckhart.

presence. Negative theology does not furnish deconstruction with new material or an unconscious forerunner, but with its first serious rival, perhaps the only one possible.¹⁹

In dealing with Derrida's engagement with apophaticism, then, one would need to exercise the very hermeneutic of suspicion the philosopher of deconstruction himself practiced in his own readings of past texts. It cannot be denied that, should Marion be successful in his argument, this would have serious consequences not only for theology, but also and perhaps above all for postmetaphysical philosophy, whose relationship with theology would by necessity appear more complex than many of its practitioners are currently willing to admit. This notwithstanding, I shall not here be concerned with this latter question, but instead seek to elucidate some aspects and consequences of the theological side of Marion's thesis.

I take it that the latter starts from the premise, which is at once obvious and non-trivial, that theo-logy as a discourse of the unsayable is in constant need of reminding itself of its own inadequacy. All theology then is in some sense apophatic; at the same time and by the same token, "apophaticism" if understood as a system would be an oxymoron or worse, a travesty: it would be the supreme form of idolatry. Rather, apophaticism serves as a reminder that theology ought to speak about God in a way that is, or at least attempts to be, radically aware of the complications and contradictions involved in this very exercise. Yet if this is true, such an insight cannot only function as a methodological rule guiding the individual theologian; it must apply to theological discourse in its entirety. Theology thus inevitably becomes unstable, polymorphous, and radically exposed to the risk of failure. More specifically, theological discourse must constantly engender and include its own critique, and this, one might say, in its most radical form precisely is negative or apophatic theology.²⁰

Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical-theological interest in Dionysius goes back to the very beginning of his academic career. The first substantial engagement with the corpus of Dionysian writings, which to this day has remained the most extensive one, is contained in his early study, *Idole et la distance*. This was originally published in 1977 but has been translated into English only in 2001,²¹ a full ten years after Marion's major theological work, *Dieu sans l'être*, had been made available to the English reader²² and some time still after the author's memorable exchange with Jacques Derrida and others at Villanova University in 1997, which I have mentioned before. This inverted order of publication in English notwithstanding, it is Marion's early study of Pseudo-Dionysius that must serve as the starting point of any serious

¹⁹ Marion, "In the Name," 22.

²⁰ For the purposes of this paper, I treat these two expressions as equivalent.

²¹ Marion, *Idol*.

²² Marion, *God*. Note the ambiguity in the French title which is lost in the translation.

assessment of his appropriation of negative theology during the early decades of his scholarly career.

4. Marion's Interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius

Idole et la distance unmistakably betrays the intellectual world of the early 1970s. It is one of several attempts of responding theologically to the radical “death-of-God” debate of the late 1960s. Not quite unlike others who wrote at that time, one recalls the notable example of Eberhard Jüngel's *God as the Mystery of the World*,²³ Marion seeks to address this constellation by teasing out its own genuinely theological potential: “Those who meditated on the ‘death of God’ most decisively – Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and a few others (among whom Feuerbach is not) – read in that pronouncement something completely other than a refutation of the (existence of) God. They recognized in it the paradoxical but radical manifestation of the divine.”²⁴

In the course of the book, Pseudo-Dionysius is coupled together with two of those thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin, as a representative of those inhabiting what Marion calls the “marches” of metaphysics, a borderline area that is already indicative of what lies beyond.²⁵ This “beyond” Marion perceives, in theological language echoed by Martin Heidegger,²⁶ as the Word of the Cross, ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ (cf. 1 Cor 1:18), in and through which philosophy, and for Marion this means specifically metaphysics, is revealed as folly: “To take seriously that philosophy is a folly means, for us, first (although not exclusively) taking seriously that the ‘God’ of ontotheology is rigorously equivalent to an idol, that which is presented by the Being of beings thought metaphysically.”²⁷

Marion's appeal to Dionysius then is, from the very outset, situated within an argument that contrasts rather sharply with the conventional narrative that sees in him the facilitator of a Platonic-Christian synthesis.²⁸ Perhaps the fact that Marion in his earliest work thinks of Dionysius as part of the “marches” of metaphysics and does not (yet) claim that he achieved deconstruction *avant la lettre* is an implicit nod recognising the undeniable presence of Platonic metaphysics in his writing. Be this however as it may, there can be no doubt that, for Marion, Dionysius' writing is above all an attempt to execute St Paul's intimation of a discourse alternative to the philosophy

²³ Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*.

²⁴ Marion, *Idol*, 4.

²⁵ Marion, *Idol*, 19.

²⁶ Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 208 quoted in Marion, *Idol*, 18.

²⁷ Marion, *Idol*, 18.

²⁸ Louth, *Denys*, 81–88.

of his time. The latter intention Marion finds expressed most radically in the Areopagus speech of Acts 17, which in his reading equates the “conceptual idolatry” of Epicureans and Stoics with the more obvious idolatry of Athenian religious life.²⁹ As is well known, in Luke’s narrative Paul’s speech divides his audience: some ridicule him and turn away (Acts 17:32) but some others, including a certain Dionysius, are converted (17:34). Whoever the real author behind the Dionysian corpus may have been,³⁰ his literary persona is none other than this Athenian convert. What is the significance of this choice of pseudonym? Surely, the mere fact of St Paul’s encounter with Greek philosophers on that occasion is notable and was undoubtedly intended as such by the narrator, whatever his sources for this particular event may have been. Yet what exactly this key New Testament text is meant to tell us about the relationship between Christianity and philosophy is much more difficult to ascertain.³¹ Marion, at any event, decides to interpret it alongside Paul’s critical remarks about the “wisdom of this world” in 1 Cor 1:20, and it is in this light that he considers the decision of the anonymous fifth-century author to call himself Dionysius: “Hence nothing could be more rigorous than to complete [sc. *Idole et la distance*] with a reading of Denys, a text that the recollection of the discourse to the Athenians inaugurates – the one issues, as certainly as paradoxically, from the other.”³²

It is this basic intuition that provides the hermeneutical premise for Marion’s interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius’ writing. These texts are fundamentally understood as developing the Pauline insight of a contrast between the idolatrous discourse of metaphysics and an alternative language inspired by the very “death of God” on the cross.

What makes this alternative possible, in Marion’s view, is recognition of distance. In a move that is clearly inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas,³³ Marion reconstructs the fateful history of metaphysics as a series of attempts to gain totalitarian control over being by forcing it into the presence of the reflective mind, a history which for Marion culminates in Martin Heidegger.³⁴ Husserl’s phenomenological reductions, whose importance for Marion has already been noted, are here seen as the inevitable critique of those constructions. In the same way, knowledge of God can only become possible by foregoing the deep-seated human desire to *make* him present in favour of a willingness to let him approach and address us. In this sense, recognition of distance only permits and enables a true encounter with God as with any “other”; this ultimately is the core of biblical teaching.

²⁹ Marion, *Idol*, 23–24.

³⁰ On the question of Dionysius’ identity see now the important study by Mainoldi, *Dietro “Dionigi l’Areopagita”*.

³¹ Sandnes, “Paul”; Soards, *Speeches*, 95–100.

³² Marion, *Idol*, 26.

³³ Cf. esp. Levinas, *Totality*.

³⁴ Marion, “La double idolâtrie,” 67–94.

In reconstructing how this insight is expressed in Dionysius, Marion took his starting point, with Étienne Gilson and many others,³⁵ from God's self-revelation in Exod 3:14: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה.³⁶ This expression has been translated in two different ways: "I am who I am," is the rendering often preferred by scholars of Hebrew, whereas the Septuagint, followed by the Vulgate and much of traditional Christian theology, read, "I am the one who is" (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν). These two translations, Marion urges, should not however be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Rather, they reflect the fact that this biblical verse expresses precisely the unity of revelation and concealment,³⁷ of manifestation and distance: "The name ... delivers the unthinkable, as the unthinkable that *gives* itself; this same unthinkable also gives *itself*, and hence withdraws within the anterior distance that governs the gift of the Name. The Name delivers and steals away in one and the same movement."³⁸

By not offering a "real" name, God makes himself known. By demanding that his distance must be respected, he communicates his being. By rejecting idolatrous appropriations of himself, he permits true community. This paradoxical self-revelation of God both requires and allows to be uttered in a new and different kind of theological language. A move is required, as Marion puts it, "from a model of language in which the speaker makes an effort to take possession of meaning to a model in which the speaker receives meaning."³⁹ Conventional, predicative structures of language have to be denied in order for the revelation of God to be accepted. Speaking of God is speaking without speaking, as much as knowledge of God is *docta ignorantia*. Marion quotes the words of St Paul: "If someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know in what way it is suitable to know: but if someone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor 8:2–3).⁴⁰

It is not difficult to recognise in this programmatic demand for an alternative theological language Marion's original thesis that the "word of the cross" gave rise to nonmetaphysical God-talk. Characteristically, in his early work Marion emphasises the continuity between the two Testaments and, specifically, the hermeneutical indispensability of the Mosaic covenant for a proper understanding of the New Testament. In his overall interest to cleanse theological language of "ontological" vocabulary, which is the hallmark of his later work, he obscures this parallel by stressing the utter novelty of God's revelation as "love" in the New Testament. Yet his original intuition may have been the better one hinting, albeit mostly implicitly, at the identity

³⁵ See Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 80–82 on Gilson and the "Metaphysics of Exodus."

³⁶ Marion, *Idol*, 141–142. Underlying Marion's later argument in *God Without Being* is a more critical stance towards Exod 3:14, which he thinks has been "reversed" by 1 John 4:18 (see Marion, *God*, xx).

³⁷ There is an echo here of Karl Barth's famous theory of revelation-in-concealment in his *Church Dogmatics*: Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, §5.4.

³⁸ Marion, *Idol*, 142.

³⁹ Marion, *Idol*, 144.

⁴⁰ Marion, *Idol*, 145.

between the God who revealed himself without visual representations (Exod 20:4) and the crucified one who in paradoxical language is called the “*icon* of the invisible God” (Col 1:15⁴¹).

It is precisely the theological difficulty posed by this biblical idea of God’s revelation-in-concealment that Marion reconstructs as the backdrop to the so-called negative theology of the Pseudo-Dionysius: “Language carries out its discourse to the point of negation and silence. But just as the death that is refused according to the love matures into Resurrection, so silence nourishes infinite proclamation.”⁴²

Two steps are discerned but also conjoined here: the first is negative, critical in the narrower sense of that term. It delegitimises inappropriate attempts to obtain knowledge of God through visual or conceptual “idols.” Its end product is denial of any expression and, ultimately, silence. This progression cannot be avoided or sidestepped. Yet it is not in itself the end. Rather, it is followed by a transition to a new and different and ultimately rather wordy language: “silence nourishes infinite proclamation.” These two successive operations effect a reconfiguration of language, a “linguistic model of the dispossession of meaning,” and this, in Marion’s view, is the essence of Dionysius’ “negative theology.”⁴³ It is the former of those two steps that has been advanced by the critique of metaphysics in Nietzsche and Heidegger; yet whatever its achievement, it is of value only insofar as it serves the ultimately theological purpose of making room for the establishment of a radically different discourse based on the principle of love. The modern and postmodern critique of metaphysical theism, therefore, is correct and appropriate, but ultimately only an extension of the traditional theological critique of “idols” and does not deny the legitimacy of proper theology, but – rightly understood – enables it.

It is important, if also idiosyncratic, that negative theology for Marion has this dual aspect. It is in the first instance a *critical* discourse, an exercise intended to escape idolatry. Such idolatry would include, but not be limited to, the naïve visual representations of God. Its more dangerous objects are attributes and concepts applied to God by philosophical or theological language: “To avoid such an idolatry, one must ... *deny* attributes as imperfections.”⁴⁴

One must, more specifically, deny every attribute including the loftiest ones, such as One, Unity, Divinity, or Goodness. Yet even this is not all for it might appear that the negation itself reveals the being of God. If understood in this way, however, negative theology itself would still be, in Marion’s words, “idolatrous.”⁴⁵ This is what happens, ironically, in atheism, which “by force of negations literally dissolves what

⁴¹ See Marion, *Idol*, 18.

⁴² Marion, *Idol*, 144.

⁴³ Marion, *Idol*, 144–145.

⁴⁴ Marion, *Idol*, 146.

⁴⁵ Marion, *Idol*, 147.

those negations supposedly aim at, and destroys the Absolute.”⁴⁶ It is in this sense, and in this sense only that, as Marion formulates with Claude Bruaire, “negative theology is the negation of all theology. Its truth is atheism.”⁴⁷

In Dionysius, however, this critical, *apophatic* discourse is, according to Marion, justified only to the extent that it leads to, and entails, its own negation. While its practice may take the theologian to the far end of a precipice or indeed into the abyss of a godforsaken world, it also takes him beyond that point. As God is revealed in the words of Christ on the cross, “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?,”⁴⁸ so the most radical negation of divine predicates postulates God as being beyond affirmation and negation. Thus, we read in the *Mystical Theology*: “... nor can any affirmation or negation be applied to it, for although we may affirm or deny the things below it, we can neither affirm nor deny it, inasmuch as the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation – free from every limitation and beyond them all.”⁴⁹

What does this mean in practice? Marion observes that the Syrian author is still willing to use one word for God until the end, and this is cause (αἰτία). In this notion, he suggests, is contained precisely the unity of distance and intimacy that permits us to move beyond the impasse of pure apophaticism: “Anterior distance ... governs positively that which it allows to be received in it. We have not thus distanced ourselves from Denys’s position, but we have slowly approached what he indicates under the name of Goodness, when he assigns it to the cause/αἰτία.”⁵⁰

At the vantage point of utter negation, it becomes possible to relate to God in a new way. Dionysius knows, Marion contends, of a *third way* beyond affirmation and negation, and this is adumbrated by his mention of “cause” at the every end of the *Mystical Theology*.⁵¹ Cause, of course, must not here mean the *causa sui* of metaphysics, but it indicates that God is beyond affirmation and negation insofar as he is love, pure giving or indeed, as the *Divine Names* suggest, goodness.⁵² Goodness and cause, Marion maintains, are interchangeable; goodness is the first name of God, according to the *Divine Names*, thus the upshot of Dionysius’ theology is the view that intimacy and distance are but two sides of the same coin. “Revelation communicates the very intimacy of God – distance itself.”⁵³

⁴⁶ Marion, *Idol*, 147.

⁴⁷ Marion, *Idol*, 147. See Bruaire, *Droit*, 21. On Bruaire who had a profound influence on Marion, see López, *Spirit's Gift*.

⁴⁸ Marion, apparently, does not make use of the ‘cry of dereliction’ in his argument, but many others have done so. An overview is given by Yocum, “Cry of Dereliction,” 73–74.

⁴⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* V (Rorem – Luidbhéid, 141).

⁵⁰ Marion, *Idol*, 154.

⁵¹ Marion, *Idol*, 151. For Marion’s use of the ‘third way’ cf. Jones, “Dionysius,” 747–748.

⁵² Marion, *Idol*, 154–155.

⁵³ Marion, *Idol*, 157.

Marion's interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic theology has not been affected in its essentials by a number of shifts in his theological and philosophical views between the mid-70s and the end of the millennium. For the purposes of the present study, it is therefore legitimate to treat this first reading of the Patristic author as his considered view of the matter during this period even though a full analysis, which cannot here be given, would have to include a detailed treatment of *God without Being*, Marion's theological masterpiece. In assessing Marion's account, the first question that springs to mind would seem to be how faithful it is to the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and, more broadly, to early Christian apophatic theology. In asking like this, the reader takes for granted that Marion intended to offer a historical interpretation of Patristic negative theology. Whether this is the case, however, and if so to what extent such an intention determines his actual reading of the fifth century corpus, seems far from obvious. In 1997, as we saw earlier, Marion insisted that Dionysius had in fact offered not only an early version of deconstruction, but one that in important ways is superior to its contemporary, secular forms. If this is what he really believes, engagement with the critique of metaphysics and with post-metaphysical thought would merely be an extraneous job for the theologian, useful for apologetic purposes, but without inherent value for his own theological project. It seems, however, unlikely that this is Marion's own opinion.⁵⁴ He clearly understands that the philosophical critique of metaphysics is relevant for theology insofar as – the merits of the apophatic tradition notwithstanding – most Christian theologians had taken for granted a metaphysical foundation throughout the centuries. At the very least then he would have to grant a hermeneutical function to those critical philosophers with regard to the Dionysian Corpus, as it appears that only through their radical lens a full appreciation of the groundbreaking nature of his writing has become possible. In fact, a stronger interpretation is not unlikely; if Dionysius' views about the God beyond affirmation and negation only receive their full sense from the vantage point of the "death of God," then the modern critique of religion and theism had its own unique contribution to make to the proper self-understanding of Christianity. As much as the "death of God" was only possible *because of* the historical gospel of the crucified God,⁵⁵ so it was only by virtue of that intellectual and historical datum that the full extent of faith's subversion of the "wisdom of the world" could be grasped and articulated.

Within the confines of this paper, it is impossible fully to explore this line of thought. Even such a brief sketch should be sufficient, however, to guard against a merely historicist critique of Marion's argument. While it is necessary and indeed

⁵⁴ Cf. Marion's declaration that "the right that one can claim to submit certain thinkers to a theological approach escapes the danger of a trivial recuperation only if it goes hand in hand with the conviction that *a theological contribution can come to us from those same thinkers* [Emphasis mine]" (Marion, *Idol*, 22, n. 19).

⁵⁵ Marion, *Idol*, 1.

relevant to gauge the distance between his reading of the Dionysian Corpus and its historical meaning (so far as the latter can be established), this in itself only brings to the surface a question Marion does not address; it does not however answer it. The mere fact, in other words, that a certain interpretation only becomes possible in the light of recent historical developments, does not in itself make this a bad interpretation, but it raises the question of why it should be a good one. There arguably are several answers to the latter question,⁵⁶ but the one I shall presuppose in what follows is that an interpretation is justifiable where it actualises a potential meaning that is historically plausible even if it is not made explicit in the text itself. Specifically, I shall argue that while Marion's interpretation faces considerable exegetical difficulties in Dionysius' writings, his intuition of a critical dimension in Patristic use of apophatic discourse is much closer to historical truth than certain textbook accounts would suggest.

5. Apophatic and Kataphatic Language in Pseudo-Dionysius

While any interpretation of the Dionysian corpus is fraught with difficulties and uncertainties, there are good reasons for objecting to a number of assumptions Marion makes in his reading of those texts. Dionysius offers to his readers essentially two ways of speaking about God – the *kataphatic* way based on the possibility of naming the divine mainly through names revealed in Scripture; and the *apophatic* way, which uses increasingly few words and ends in silence. The former of those is developed primarily in his writing *The Divine Names* whereas the latter has its exposition in the brief, but highly influential treatise *On the Mystical Theology*. At the beginning of the latter writing, Dionysius relates the two by reviewing his broader oeuvre, a review, which puzzlingly includes references to works, most people agree never existed.⁵⁷ Be this as it may, Dionysius equates the kataphatic in the first place with dogmatic theology (allegedly dealt with in a work entitled *Theological Representations*); the *Divine Names* apparently fall into the same rubric as does a treatise called *Symbolic Theology*, which is said to have contained a reflection on “metaphorical titles drawn from the world of sense and applied to the nature of God.”⁵⁸ The apophatic, on the other hand, is the approach practiced in *The Mystical Theology*. Connected to these distinctions, Dionysius further suggests, is the degree of prolixity the author will exercise in his writing:

⁵⁶ I have argued elsewhere that reception history could be a way of mitigating the hiatus between historical and systematic readings of an author such as Dionysius: Zachhuber, “Jean-Luc Marion's Reading.”

⁵⁷ An exception to this rule is Balthasar, *Glory*, 154–164.

⁵⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* III.

I feel sure you have noticed how these latter [sc. the elaborations of the *Symbolic Theology*] come much more abundantly than what went before, since *The Theological Representations* and a discussion of the names of God are evidently briefer than what can be said in *The Symbolic Theology*. The fact is that the more we take the flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.⁵⁹

It will be noted that Dionysius here makes no reference whatever to the notion so central to Marion's reconstruction that the silence resulting from the apophatic way is subsequently transformed into "infinite proclamation" as part of an alternative theological discourse. He presents the two kinds of discourse, kataphatic and apophatic, as two equally valid and equally necessary ways of talking and writing about God without giving an indication as to whether one necessarily comes before or after the other: "What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being."⁶⁰

One *might* possibly argue that what is proposed here implies that the affirmative discourse must come first if only because predicates cannot be denied before they have been affirmed. One might further speculate about the precise force of Dionysius' remark that negation is "more appropriate" than affirmation, especially when seen in the light of his willingness to call the first principle "Cause" without apparent reservation. Whatever the impact of such subtle interpretative questions may be, however, it seems indubitable that *prima facie* Dionysius here characterises the two ways as complementary and fundamentally equivalent to each other. Both are necessary if one wishes to speak properly about the Cause of all beings.

Yet such an observation in important ways leaves open the actual significance of the two ways Dionysius practices. *Prima facie* affirming and negating the very same predicates of the same subject is simply contradictory. If this twofold way of speaking about God is to have any meaning, some relation must obtain between them. The solution adopted by Dionysius' Platonic teachers ascribed affirmative and negative statements ultimately to different entities, the participated and the unparticipated One respectively.⁶¹ Such a position Dionysius is unlikely to have found congenial. An alternative solution is formulated by Denys Turner and Oliver Davies:

⁵⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* III (Rorem – Luibhéid, 139).

⁶⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I (Rorem – Luibhéid, 136).

⁶¹ Carabine, *Unknown God*, 174.

The interdependence of the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names* shows the dialectical pulsation between affirmations and negations that characterises the enterprise of Christian negative theology as a whole. Here negation is not free-standing but secures the theological character of the affirmative speech-patterns in address to God or in speech about God. Being cancelled in this way they are shown not to be ordinary language use at all, but speech that is burdened to the point of excess: as exhausted as it is full.⁶²

In this interpretation, Dionysius' apophatic discourse, however important it may be, is ultimately subordinated to an affirmative mode of theology. While it may be indispensable, it can never do more than qualify, albeit in a crucial manner, kataphatic God-talk. It guards against the abuse of affirmative language, especially probably against its univocal application in matters divine. Any attempt, therefore, to construe negative theology along the lines of the modern critique of metaphysics or religion fails to the extent that it takes negative theology out of this vital connection with the Church's proclamation of theological truth.

It appears that the strength of this reading is essentially the weakness of its alternative. In other words, the view espoused by Turner and Davies derives much of its plausibility from the difficulties Marion's postmodern interpretation encounters at the exegetical level. There simply is not much evidence, if any, that Dionysius' apophatic theology is meant to be "critical" of religious or metaphysical idols as such. The negations in his *Mystical Theology* concern predicates the Bible and the Christian tradition used and continued to use of God; in other words, these predicates represent the contents of divine revelation. It is hardly imaginable that Dionysius would have thought the *kataphatic* way of speaking about God was idolatrous. He certainly never says so, and it is extremely difficult to believe that even in his most daring moments he had an inkling that this might be the case.

Dionysius does indeed, at the outset of the *Mystical Theology*, refer to the two types of idolatries Marion so strongly emphasises. He expressly rejects those "who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place,"⁶³ and those "who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being."⁶⁴ It would be intriguing to think that this is an oblique reference to the philosophers and the popular idolaters of Acts 17:16, 18. However, these low-minded people are mentioned as those from whom the contents of the present writing must be hidden; their reprehensible views are not in any obvious way connected to the negations Dionysius goes on to detail in the treatise.

⁶² Davies – Turner, "Introduction," 3.

⁶³ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I 2 (Rorem – Luibhéid, 136). The reference is to Ps 18:11.

⁶⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* I 2.

Evidence, then, that Dionysius' exercise in apophatic theology is meant to be "critical" in the modern sense seems slim. The problem becomes, if anything, more acute once one considers the entire Dionysian Corpus, not just the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names*. Dionysius' theology as a whole is characterised by its adoption of the Neoplatonic sacred cosmos structured hierarchically in the angelic and the ecclesial order. None of this is affected by the apophatic critique. Negative theology, it appears, functions perfectly well within a kind of theological *Gesamtkunstwerk* of which it is one important aspect, but no more than that.

At the same time, the virtual absence of evidence supporting Marion's reading of negative theology as radically critical should not blind us to the exegetical weakness of the interpretative premise in Turner's and Davies' argument. Whatever may be the case for Christian negative theology as a whole, it seems difficult to pin down with certainty the "dialectical pulsation" between the *Mystical Theology* and the rest of the corpus not least because Dionysius' other works do not contain references to it and the few passages in this writing that discuss this relationship are, as we have seen, much less committal than either Turner/Davies or Marion would wish to make us believe. The truth is, or so it would seem, that the place and the role Dionysius meant to assign to apophaticism for theology as a whole is sketched by him in a way that is far from conclusive, and it is for this reason that all those who interpret it do so by taking into account, whether explicitly or not, contextual information that is supposed to be relevant for an evaluation of Dionysius' own thinking.

6. Early Christian Apophaticism and the Critique of Pagan Idolatry

It is at this point that the larger issue, broached at the outset of this essay, of the history of negative theology becomes relevant. There seems to be but little doubt that for most modern interpretations of the Dionysian Corpus its closeness to Platonic patterns of thought and argument is a major point of departure.⁶⁵ While for some this link served to justify a highly critical attitude towards those writings,⁶⁶ many of those who commended them still saw their syncretism and their willingness to embrace a wide range of philosophical and religious terms of non-Christian origin, as their hallmark. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, praises Dionysius as the first Greek theologian who stood apart from the spirit of controversy so characteristic of the early centuries and who was therefore able to use affirmatively

⁶⁵ The most recent full exposition of the philosophical background of Pseudo-Dionysius is to be found in: Wear – Dillon, *Dionysius*.

⁶⁶ Most notoriously, perhaps, Martin Luther (*Church Held Captive*, 225) who called him "more like a Platonist than a Christian." For the context see further Zachhuber, "Dionysius."

Gnostic, Manichaeic, and Neoplatonic ideas with only “a few corrections from time to time”⁶⁷: “What was once historical, temporally conditioned reality becomes for Denys a means for expressing an utterly universal theological content. ... Each thought-form of which he makes use will, at this touch, be liberated from its historical context and exalted into eternity.”⁶⁸

Such a reading of the Dionysian Corpus is, in a sense, not surprising. After all, the demonstration of massive borrowings or at least literal parallels between his work and the writings of Proclus, the Neoplatonist, stands at the origin of modern Dionysian scholarship.⁶⁹ It nevertheless bears recalling that literary dependence is rarely if ever sufficient to explain the main ideas and tendencies of a major work. In other words, however impressive the presence of Proclean language in the Dionysian Corpus may be, this does not in itself prove that Dionysius’ understanding and use of apophatic theology was the same as that encountered in the great Athenian philosopher. More specifically, it is doubtful whether in the absence of clear textual evidence within the Dionysian Corpus for the relationship between affirmative and negative theology, the substitution of evidence from Platonic parallels is methodologically legitimate. Reading Dionysius against this backdrop, admittedly, makes it all but inevitable to deny his apophatic theology any critical edge; one major concern of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology* is, after all, to provide a philosophical underpinning for the traditional sacred cosmos of Greek religion.⁷⁰ Yet whether Dionysius’ use of texts such as this warrants the hermeneutical conclusion that the Neoplatonic model of affirmative and negative theology is normative for the Areopagite as well, should be treated as an open question.

This question cannot be further pursued here, but articulating it serves to throw into sharp relief what really is most unusual about Marion’s interpretation of Dionysius’ apophaticism, namely his insistence to read Dionysius without any regard to Platonic theories of negation and instead against the backdrop of Scripture. As we saw earlier, his justification for reconstructing Dionysius’ apophatic theology as a critique of idols was drawn on the one hand from the Old Testament revelation of God in the burning bush (Exod 3:14) and on the other hand from a combined reading of Paul’s critical comments about the wisdom of the world and the “word of the cross” in his first letter to the Corinthians, and his Areopagus speech according to Acts 17. The latter in particular served as the point of contact to Dionysius who, whatever his historical identity, decided to employ the name of Paul’s Athenian convert.

Whatever the merits of this move for the direct interpretation of the Dionysian Corpus, there is considerable historical evidence corroborating Marion’s

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *Glory*, 152.

⁶⁸ Balthasar, *Glory*, 152.

⁶⁹ Koch, *Pseudo-Dionysius*; Stiglmayr, “Neuplatoniker Proclus.”

⁷⁰ Bonnefoy, *Greek and Egyptian*, 60–65.

intuition of a connection between Christian negative theology and the polemical critique of “idols.” This evidence has been gathered almost exactly forty years ago by D.W. Palmer, but it has hardly ever been brought to bear on the wider question of Christian apophaticism.⁷¹ Palmer studied the use of negative attributes for God by the Christian apologists of the second century and found it closely related to their defence against the charge of atheism. This charge, as is well known, was countered by the countercharge that the Pagans themselves were atheists since they ignored the one, true God.⁷² This is classically formulated in the words of Justin Martyr: “Hence we have been called atheists and we admit that we are atheists as far as these so-called gods are concerned.”⁷³

Commenting on this statement, Eric F. Osborn expressed himself in words strikingly reminiscent of Marion and Bruaire: “Half his [sc. Justin’s] account of God is atheistic or negative. The ‘gods’ of the established religion, who beget and are begotten, who speak and are spoken of and who see and are, as idols, seen – these gods do not exist. God is unbegotten, ineffable, and invisible.”⁷⁴

This connection between the inverted charge of atheism, the rejection of idols, and the use of negative attributes for God, Palmer goes on to demonstrate, is prevalent throughout the second century in all those writers loosely connected by the epithet “apologetic.” Thus the early second century *Kerygma Petri* argues that as creator God is “the Invisible who sees all things; the Incomprehensible who comprehends all things; the One who needs nothing, of whom all things stand in need.”⁷⁵ It is for this reason that pagan worship is illegitimate. It is for this reason also that the idea of sacrifice is rejected. Thus the so-called *Epistle to Diognetus* chastises the Jews for their sacrificial ritual: they “ought to regard it as foolishness, not reverence, that they offer these things to God as though he were in need.”⁷⁶ And the apologist Aristides uses the idea that “no man has ever seen to whom He is like; nor is he able to see him,” to reject worship of “dead idols” and sacrifices: “God is not needy and none of those things is sought for by him.”⁷⁷

Much of this admittedly is familiar within the Greek tradition itself, which since the fifth century BCE has had its own philosophical critique of anthropomorphic religion. In fact, it has rightly been observed that the resulting philosophical monotheism is in many ways similar to that of the early Christians.⁷⁸ However, Palmer is

71 Palmer, “Atheism.”

72 Harnack, *Vorwurf*.

73 Justin, *I. Apol.* 6,1. English translation in Osborn, *Justin*, 17.

74 Osborn, *Justin Martyr*, 17.

75 *Kerygma Petri* = Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* VI, 5, 39, 3. Palmer, “Atheism,” 238.

76 Anonymous, *Epistula ad Diognetum* 3, 3. Palmer, “Atheism,” 239.

77 Aristides, *Apologia* 13 (Syriac Version). Palmer, “Atheism,” 240. See nn. 46–47 for the text critical problems with this text.

78 Cf. the various papers in: Athanassiadi – Frede, *Pagan Monotheism*, and esp. the contribution by Frede himself.

surely right to insist that “the concern of Greek and Roman writers, who deal with idolatry, seems rather different to that of Judaism. The Jews aim to reject pagan deities as being merely material. The pagan writers, when they were not merely making a joke, wished to distinguish between mere images and true deity.”⁷⁹ To the extent then that early Christianity took over Jewish concerns, their insistence that neither visual images nor mental concepts could adequately represent God implies polemical rejection of traditional pagan religion in a way the philosophical critique of educated Greeks or Romans did not.

This is still a far cry from the modern and postmodern “critical” philosophies. Jewish and Christian apologists practice a critique of idols in order to confess all the more strongly the truth of the God who revealed himself through Scripture and, for Christianity, in the Incarnation. Yet while it is thus undoubtedly true that the *ultimate* purpose of those denials is the affirmation of the biblical God, this is not their *only* and, in many ways, not their *immediate* purpose. God is elevated above material and intellectual perfections in order to exclude his identification with pagan or quasi-pagan, “idolatrous” objects of worship. This same God, however, is in his turn meant to be the object of religious worship. It is not difficult to perceive the tension that must result from this twin claim, a tension that may be temporarily defused but can hardly be permanently resolved. Any Christian conception of God, any visual or indeed intellectual representation of him, would inevitably, sooner or later, be exposed to the very same critique that the earliest theologians found convenient to use against the dominant religious culture of their day. At the same time, insofar as those critics would inevitably found their critique on an affirmation, the latter would sooner or later make them targets of precisely the same kind of critique.

In this way, one can indeed draw a line from the critique of idols in the earliest Christian theologies to the radical critique of religion in modernity and postmodernity. Yet for Marion’s most fundamental and most original argument this observation is only the first step. Quite what, he asks, comes to be perceived once this critique has been carried out? What is its purpose, what is – literally – revealed by this operation? The answer he gives is, in a rather unrefined way, anticipated once again by an early apologist. The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*, having rejected various pagan ideas of God by means of negative theology, commends God’s revelation through Jesus Christ: “No man saw God nor made him known, but he revealed himself; and he revealed through faith, through which alone it has been made possible to see God.”⁸⁰

If this combination of the absolute negation of divine perfections with belief in divine revelation through and in a human being is anything more than the perverse substitution of one set of idols by another, then it might well be that it is precisely the ostensibly ungodly appearance of Jesus including his shameful death on the cross

⁷⁹ Palmer, “Atheism,” 255.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, *Epistula ad Diognetum* 8, 5–6. Palmer, “Atheism,” 239.

(cf. Gal 3:13) that allows to perceive God in a way not achieved by *kataphatic* or *apophatic* speculation as such, namely as the God of love whose freely given gift calls for a response encapsulated in the double command to love God and your neighbour (Luke 10:27; cf. Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18). It is this mutual love that is constantly impeded by the “idols” of our own making as they bar us from recognising the other as other. Their critique therefore is needed to tear down that barrier, but the criterion of its success can be no other than the reality of mutual recognition and mutual love that it enables and sets free.

Once again one may doubt that Pseudo-Dionysius is the most obvious point of departure for such a reading of Christian apophaticism; a recent survey of different types of apophatic approaches within Christian theology certainly suggests otherwise⁸¹ indicating that the “incarnational apophatic” was developed by baffled readers of the Areopagite who either sought respectfully to correct him (Maximus Confessor⁸²) or sharply rebuked him for the very absence of the “word of the cross” from his ruminations (Martin Luther⁸³).

Conclusion

While there are, then, some serious flaws in Jean-Luc Marion’s early interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysius, the French thinker was surely justified in his more fundamental intuition to recover in modern and postmodern critical philosophies a motif that has been equally foundational for Jewish and Christian attempts to articulate the God of biblical revelation, while insisting that that motif, “negation,” is constantly in danger of undermining itself unless it is recognised in its positive function of uncovering what, in phenomenological language, he calls “pure givenness” while in the Christian idiom it is the God of love. In many ways, serious theological questions only begin to emerge at this point. What is the appropriate “response” Christians are called to give to this revelation? Is it really “praise” as Marion suggests, or is it not, in the first instance, discipleship and the *practice* of love? In other words, should not the Christianity emerging from Marion’s critical apophatic theology be more ethical than aesthetic? And further, what does the transformation of language Marion demands as a result of apophatic insight mean for the form and the content of theology itself? It would seem arguable that traditional dogmatic theology, which comes mostly in propositional form and constantly betrays its metaphysical underpinnings,

⁸¹ Rorem, “Negative Theologies,” 458–463.

⁸² Maximus Confessor, *Capita de caritate* II 76. See Louth, *Maximus*, 52–54.

⁸³ Cf. Luther, *Enarratio Psalmi XC*, in *Weimarer Ausgabe*, XL/3, 543, 11–12: “Nos autem, si vere volumus Theologiam negativam definire, statuemus eam esse sanctam Crucem et tentationes.”

has to be fundamentally challenged and reformed. By and large, however, the early Marion was reluctant seriously to tackle any of those issues but was content to defend doctrine in its traditional garment – and this certainly has not changed in his later works.

Part of the reason for this remarkable contrast between his radical call to re-think the foundations of Christian theology and his rather conservative hesitancy to advocate change to its received doctrinal content may well be Marion's ambiguity, which was noted earlier, about the relationship between Dionysius and the modern and postmodern critique of religion and metaphysics. To the extent that he occasionally presents Christian apophatic theology as "claim[ing] to reach *in fine* what it deconstructs" and therefore "a serious rival," not an "unconscious forerunner," of deconstruction,⁸⁴ he might feel justified in promoting theology as a mere retrieval of traditional teaching. At the same time, the seriousness and the persistence of his engagement with Hölderlin and Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida suggests an awareness that theology learns in its dialogue with modernity and postmodernity as much as it has its own insight to contribute to that debate. It seems likely, then, that it will emerge with substantial changes not only to its basis but also to the way this basis is developed, expressed, and applied to a plethora of issues in today's world and in the lives of believers.

Apophatic theology in Marion's sense, as a radical critique of the conceptual idols that stand in the way of our loving attention to God and the neighbour, can never be accomplished by supplanting one theory by another,⁸⁵ but it must radically call into question any confidence to "possess" knowledge of things divine as it turns the whole of theology into a tentative and fallible discourse lacking stability and with no guarantee of success. Examples from ancient and modern, Christian and non-Christian thought abundantly demonstrate those risks, but also the promise of a truly liberating language permitting a real encounter with an other, human or divine.

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⁸⁴ Marion, "In the Name," 22.

⁸⁵ To that extent Marion's critique of more recent theologies of the Eucharist is justified – but not his blanket defence of the Tridentine formula: Marion, *God*, 162–181.

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