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The Goodness of Light and the Light of Good Symbolism of Light in Ancient Gnoseology and in Eastern Christianity

ABSTRACT: Light and darkness were central motives in the Bible and in the Platonic tradition (Plato, Plotinus, Proclus). First and foremost light was the essential element and the basic principle of existence and cognition in the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagite. His metaphysics of light contained imagery that inspired builders of French cathedrals and provided Christian thought with rich presuppositions and themes. The main purpose of the article is to highlight the Gnostic aspect of the reflection on light in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. The author of the *Divine names* speaks of light in a figurative sense and compares its physical properties to the process of transmission of knowledge. He uses the term “light” to describe the actualizing powers of God or God’s sovereignty over the world that he identifies with goodness. This goodness is also described as “supersubstantial light” which as a transcendent Unity permits divine intellects to partake of the supreme knowledge about themselves. Thus light is shown as essential to the transmission of knowledge. It constitutes the process of enlightenment and supports the hierarchical process of transmission of knowledge. Assuming that this is a correct reading of Pseudo-Dionysius Aeropagite the authors conclude that contrary to the predominant interpretation his philosophy Pseudo-Dionysius did not describe emanations of beings but transmission of knowledge. Which in turn indicates that he developed his theory as a part of Christian philosophy rather than neoplatonic thought.

KEYWORDS: Platon • Pseudo-Dionysius • gnoseology • metaphysics of light • Christian philosophy

ἀγαθὸν γὰρ εἶρηται διὰ τὸ ἄγαν θεῖν ἐπὶ αὐτὸ πάντα
ELIAS, *Prolegomena philosophiae*

According to ancient thinkers, light being the inexhaustible cause of life and growth is, at the same time a phenomenon particularly difficult to grasp, and is an exceptionally expressive metaphor of the unspeakable nature of divinity or the principle of all existence. Therefore the motive of light and darkness, one of the central biblical themes was also employed by

ancient philosophers, which is particularly visible in the centuries of platonic tradition.

In philosophical terms, this particular value of light was most poignantly formulated by Plato. In Book VI of *The Republic*, the most luminous of all principle idea of Good is defined both as the principle of knowledge and of existence. Therefore he compares them to sunlight, which begets everything and at the same remains, as the source, entirely transcendent: “the sun is only the author of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth, though he himself is not generation”¹.

Plato demonstrates the correspondence of the structure of the noetic world, where the idea of Good reigns and the sensual world, where the supreme role is that of the visible Sun. the author of *The Republic* makes it particularly clear by means of a parable of the cave. This image, together with its metaphysical and epistemological message becomes a foundation of considerations both for Neo-Platonist and Christian thinkers. The central motive is the pursuit of truth-source by transcending opinion and actual spiritual effort. Light is understood here as the most perfect manifestation of Good itself, which begets absolute existence and illuminates our mind so that it could become acquainted with truly existing things:

in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual (ἐν τε ὁρατῶ φῶς καὶ τὸν τούτου κύριον τεκοῦσα, ἐν τε νοητῶ αὐτῇ κυρία ἀλήθειαν καὶ νοῦν παρασχομένη); and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed².

The metaphor of light as the factor that animates and enables true cognition will be creatively developed in the philosophy of Plotinus, who compares the process of the emanation of the Absolute to radiation and sunlight (περίλαμψις)³, while the soul’s way upwards is described as a gradual

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, 509b, trans. Benjamin Jowett.

² *Ibidem*, 517b8–c6.

³ Cf. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, I,8,1; V,3,12: “The entire intellectual order may be figured as a kind of light with the One in repose at its summit as its King: but this manifestation is not cast out from it: we may think, rather, of the One as a light before the light, an eternal irradiation resting upon the Intellectual Realm; this, not identical with its source, is yet not severed from it nor of so remote a nature as to be less than Real-Being. Cf. VI, 8, 18: What is present in Intellectual-Principle is present, though in a far transcendent mode, in the One: so in a light diffused afar from one light shining

illumination and ever increasing participation in “a different, stronger light” (φωτὸς κρείττονος ἄλλου)⁴.

This theme will be continued in Neoplatonic philosophy, particularly by Proclus, who however was influenced by *Chaldean Oracles* “separates and combines in distinct orders what for Plotinus was a dynamic unity. For Plotinus, Good, Light, the One were different names of one and the same reality”⁵. Thus the goal of the mind is unification, not with Plotinus’ One, but with Being, understood as an element of the intelligible triad: Being–Mind–Soul. This unification is effected by the cessation of cognitive activity of the mind and “confiding oneself to the divine light”⁶. In Pseudo-Dionysius’ texts we will find a very powerful influence of this theme, combined with Neoplatonic understanding of the meaning of theurgical acts and hierarchy in the process of becoming acquainted with the supreme principle. The works of the Areopagite are not mere footnotes to Proclus and Iamblichus, as they also contain a good deal of references to the Books of the Old and New Testament. It should be stressed that they are not only verbal references, but attempts to render the spirit of the Christian faith in the personal God⁷.



The motive of light and, in a sense, a *proemium* to the “metaphysics of light” can already be found at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, in the description of Creation. This well-known passage mentions “the beginning”, when darkness reigned over the created waters and land, and God said:

“Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light, that *it was good*; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night⁸.

within itself, the diffused is vestige, the source is the true light; but Intellectual-Principle, the diffused and image light, is not different in kind from its prior [...].”

⁴ Cf. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, V,3,12; VI, 7, 21.

⁵ Cf. Agnieszka Kijewska, *Neoplatonizm Jana Szkota Eriugeny*, Lublin 1994, 78–79. According to *Chaldean Oracles*, the aim of the unification of the soul is God-Light (Eternity-*Aion*), born of the Father, who being the source remains beyond any cognition.

⁶ Cf. Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, TP I, 25; cf. Kijewska, 80.

⁷ It is, obviously, a different issue whether Pseudo-Dionysus succeeded in avoiding Neoplatonic overtones and whether this effect was deliberate. This has been the subject of consideration by a number of contemporary scholars, or even an axis of discussion on the Areopagite.

⁸ Gen 1:3–5. All biblical references to New King James Version (NKJ) unless otherwise specified.

Light, the first to have been called Good by its Creator, will become a metaphor for descriptions of divine acts, and even the nature of God himself. The Bible contains numerous expressions to describe the essence of God by the metaphor of light, e.g. “Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment”⁹, or “dwelling in unapproachable light”¹⁰. In the language of the Old Testament Light often means life in happiness and prosperity, while in the supernatural sense – God’s grace and His guidance in following the Law¹¹. In the New Testament, the symbolism of light is inseparably connected with the person of Christ, even identified with God-Man. In the Old Covenant, hidden under the name of “Wisdom”, which is a “a reflection of the eternal light”¹², foretold by the prophets, awaited by humanity that sits “in darkness and the shadow of death”¹³, appears on the Earth as the Word incarnate. It is “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world”¹⁴. Christ confirms these words: I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life¹⁵. John the Evangelist says directly: “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all”¹⁶.

One of the fundamentals of all Christian mysticism and divine theology of divine light is the description of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor¹⁷. For philosophers and theologians that interpret this passage, light becomes the model epiphany of divinity, and the possibility of spiritual interpretation of divine light is tantamount to participation, acquaintance with divine energies, i.e. divine acts (actualizing acts)¹⁸.

Equally numerous are liturgical testimonies that speak of God’s light, exalt its glory in hymns, and show its sacramental symbolism. Mystic light plays a particular role in the first of the sacraments, which is a kind of impulse that stimulates the soul to seek its prototype. As M. Eliade writes in one of his studies, undoubtedly, the symbolism of baptism is extremely rich and complex, but the photic (*phos* – light) and fiery elements play and exceedingly import role in it. Justin, Gregory of Nazianus and the Fathers

⁹ Ps 104: 2.

¹⁰ 1 Tm 6: 16.

¹¹ Cf. Ps 27: 1; 43, 3; 119:105, Prov 6: 23.

¹² Wis 7: 26 (New Jerusalem Bible, NJB).

¹³ Lk 1: 79.

¹⁴ Jn 1: 9.

¹⁵ Jn 8:12; 9: 5.

¹⁶ 1 Jn 1:5.

¹⁷ Mt 17: 1; Mk 9:2; Lk 9: 28.

¹⁸ Cf. Eliade 1994, 56–64.

of the Church define baptism as *photismos (illuminatio)*: based, naturally on two fragments of the Epistle to the Hebrews¹⁹, where those baptized were called the *photistenes* – “the enlightened”²⁰.

These ideas were quickly accepted by the Christian world. We will find them in Augustine’s epistemology, in Robert Grosseteste’s and Bonaventura’s physical and aesthetic cosmology, in Albert the Great’s and Thomas Aquinas’ ontology. But the founder of this metaphysics, where light is the first principle of being as well as of cognition is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.



In the Middle Ages there were reasons to call the Areopagite the “eulogist of light.” His works, translated by Johannes Scotus Eriugena were kept in the St. Denis monastery, who was supposed to be its founder and a disciple of Christ. Influenced by these works, Suger, the abbot of St. Denis rebuild the choir thus revolutionizing architecture and giving a powerful stimulus for a new style, the Gothic openwork with its extraordinary stained-glass windows. Pseudo-Dionysius’ metaphysics of light and its message became the key to the new art, epitomized by the church built by Suger. The fact that the reconstruction of the abbey was no accident, but a thoroughly thought-out concept, is demonstrated in the treaties of the abbot, *Libellus alter de consecratione Ecclesiae Sancti Dionisii* and *Sugerii Abbatis Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis*²¹. The latter, not a theological or aesthetic treaty shows us nonetheless a profound influence of these two on Suger’s thought, who confesses in Dionysian terminology:

Thus when out of my delight – in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy mediation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred issues; then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which exists neither entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner²².

¹⁹ Heb 6:4, 10:32.

²⁰ Eliade 1994, 56.

²¹ Suger 1867.

²² Suger, *De rebus* in Frisch 1987, 9.

The first and the most important Suger's postulate, well-read in Pseudo-Dionysius' works, was the idea to rebuilt the church in such a manner so as to turn it into the most perfect symbol of the Absolute. But for the abbot, that meant flooding the building with light, thus the center of the aesthetic transformation was the choir. It was to be the focus of light as the place where liturgy is performed, a central part of the church, oriented eastward. Here Suger decided to remove the walls and to achieve that he ordered the builders to use all the possibilities afforded by the rib vault, i.e. by something that has hitherto been a mere architectural trick. A new style was born. The changes in the structure of the vaults made it possible to install large windows and have the walls replaced by piers. Chapels arranged on a semi-circle with wall pierced with enormous stained-glass windows gave a visible shape to Suger's dream: a row of chapels placed on a semi-circle so that the entire church shone with wonderful, continuous glow from the windows, filled with light as no others²³.

Pseudo-Dionysius proclaimed the unity of the universe filled with the travelling light and its radiation. Therefore it became necessary that the light could fill the entire interior from the choir to the entrance door, so that the construction became a symbol of Creation. Suger ordered the lectorium to be removed, which dark as a wall, cut through the nave and was an obstacle that overshadowed the beauty and magnificence of the church²⁴. The partitions that blocked the light within the church were torn down and Suger could triumphantly declare:

When the new eastern part is connected with the forward part, the church glows, lit up in the central part. Bright is what combines with bright and the work shines with the new light that permeates it²⁵.

Originally abbot Suger's choir was ringed by a double bypass of nine chapels. When these chapels were rebuilt, what was left were shallow, shell-like conches large enough for an altar to be fitted in. the rest were incorporated into the circular bypass. The walls of each chapel are fitted with two enormous windows, which reduce the size of the wall to that of a frame. Precisely through these shallow chapels light, unobstructed, enters the bypass. According to Suger's aesthetic but at the same time exact description: the church glows with wonderful continuous light that penetrates through

²³ Suger, *De rebus* in Duby 1986, 122.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 123.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

the holiest of windows²⁶. These are, naturally, abbot Suger's famous stained-glass windows, which mark the dawn of the history of medieval stained-glass painting²⁷.

The above fragments concerning the aesthetic reception of Pseudo-Dionysius' thought make one sufficiently aware how big a mark his ideas left on the minds of the people of the era. Not only were the Areopagite's works translated and commented, but the face of the world was changed, alongside the existing worldview and the aesthetic canon in line with the ideas of the "Great Dionysius". One could say that Pseudo-Dionysius found Europe Romanesque – heavy and dark and left it Gothic – aerial and full of light.



The Frankish abbot was undoubtedly stimulated by a fragment in which Pseudo-Dionysius elaborates on the motive of light as one of God's names. The supreme manifestation of divinity is Good, the principle of all being, which permeates the entire universum, and at the same time completely transcendent of them²⁸. What good manifests itself through to all creatures is precisely light, but its transcendence is completely intact by virtue of the archetype-visible icon relation: "Light comes from the Good, and light is an image of this archetypal Good"²⁹.

Light is therefore energy emanated by Good, which at the same time reveals the cause of its existence and leads towards it. This return is effected according to a definite order, because Good is the source of the hierarchy and the system of forms. Higher beings transfer good and its gifts to lower

²⁶ Suger, *De consecratione Ecclesiae*, 4, p. 225 in Simpson, 1989, 140: "Illo urbano, et aprobato, in circuicit oratorium incremento, quo totasacratissimarum vitearum luce mirabli et continua interiorem perlustrante pulchritudinem enteret".

²⁷ The abbot ordered them with artists from Lorraine and the Rhine region. Their works glittered as amethysts or rubies, and thus were to render the noble beauty of God's light and guide toward it in the human mind "by way of anagogic meditation". Suger was not the first to see in the stained-glass window special opportunity to demonstrate this "anagogic theology" (i.e. one that lifts up the soul). The metaphor of the stained-glass window was employed by Hugh of St. Victor (in *In didactione ecclesiae. Sermones*, PL 177, 904). However, Suger gave the long-known element a completely new meaning. For him, windows were not holes in the wall, but lit-through walls, which in a most perfect manner expressed the aesthetic sensitivity of the people of the time.

²⁸ Cf. DN, IV, 1–6; IV, 4, p. 74: "The goodness of the transcendent God reaches from the highest and most perfect forms of being to the very lowest. And yet it remains above and beyond them all, superior to the highest and yet stretching out to the lowliest. It gives light to everything capable of receiving it, it creates them, keeps them alive, preserves and perfects them, everything looks to it for measure, eternity, number, order".

²⁹ DN, IV, 4, p. 74.

beings, thus enabling their ordered elevation to God's Authority³⁰. Good is therefore the ultimate cause (*causa finalis*), the source of life, understood as constant desire to return to its cause, constant desire of good and, at the same time, the fulfillment of a given entelechy, according to its internal capabilities. Good is at the same time the effective cause (*causa efficiens*), which brings about its own actualizations – *energiai* that it reinforces by turning them toward itself:

The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together whatever may be scattered, for it is the divine Source and unifier of the sum total of all things. Each thing looks to it as a source, as the agent of cohesion, and as an objective³¹.

The movement toward Good (*causa finalis*), effected by the creative movement (*causa efficiens*), and by the same token written in each being, however small, Pseudo-Dionysius puts on two planes: the neotic and the sensual. In both cases light plays the primary role, “the visible image of good” (DN, IV, 4). The Areopagite consistently develops here the idea of absolute transcendence of God's Authority over the creatures it is the cause of. Between Good and light there is a link in the form of actualizing powers, which through the levels of the hierarchy lead to their archetype. This sojourn, being essentially a gradual acquisition of knowledge, is a realization of each of these beings entelechy, and takes place according to their internal capabilities. The same principle holds both at the level intelligibility and in the world governed by sensory perception. The Areopagite tries to demonstrate it first by describing the lowest level (the material world), or the operation of Sun rays, in which the fundamental features of the prototype are revealed. These are: the power to stimulate life, growth, perfecting, giving measure and creation of moderated time. Primarily, however, the Sun is the principle of unity of the sensual world, where everything that is alive heads toward the invigorating rays of light. The only exception are beings that by their very nature are incapable of accepting light³², and apart from them the entire creation is inundated with life-giving rays.

So it is with light, with this visible image of the Good, It draws and returns all things to itself, all the things that see, that have motion, that

³⁰ Cf. DN I, 2.

³¹ Cf. DN IV, 4.

³² DN, IV, 4, p. 74: „It sends its shining beams all around the visible world, and if anything fails to receive them the fault lies not in the weakness or defect of the spreading light but in unsuitability of whatever is unable to have a share in light”.

are receptive of illumination and warmth, that are held together by the spreading rays. Thus is it the „sun” for it makes all things a „sum” and gathers together the scattered³³.

The completion of the cycle (a) “continued existence” (ἡ μονή), understood as unmoved being of the One and its integrity, (b) “emanation,” *resp. emanatio* (ἡ πρόοδος), the act of creation and the simultaneous revelation through energies, and the “turn,” *resp.* “return” (ἡ ἐπιστροφή) of creation to its source, to the One – thanks to these energies (actualizing powers), dynamizes the Dionysian cosmos primarily in the mental sphere, and not – as is commonly believed – in the sensual sphere. That is why the Areopagite stresses that Good is in the first place entitled to the name of “intelligent light”, i.e. one that is an unchanging and transcendent unity (μονή), and at the same time the source of illumination of intellects as well as a dynamic force which unifies, perfects and guides toward the One. In the first place, illumination comes to intelligible entities, or angels’ minds that perceive directly. They transmit (ἄγγελοι – *sc.* messengers) the received gifts to the beings at the lower levels of the hierarchy, thus enabling them elevation toward Good. Pseudo-Dionysius, writing about the process of illumination, in essence tells us about the hierarchical transmission of knowledge by “luminous lights” (angels’ intelligences³⁴) to intelligent souls subject to the limitations of their own nature:

Next to these sacred and holy intelligent beings are the souls, together with all the good peculiar to these souls. These too derive their being from the transcendent Good. So therefore they have intelligence, immortality, existence. They can strive towards angelic life. By means of the angels as good leaders, they can be uplifted to the generous Source of all good things and, each according to his measure, they are able to have a share in the illuminations streaming out from that Source³⁵.

Noeric (*sc.* intelligent light), similarly to the previously described Sun emanates onto intelligible entities. The fact that not all [of them] (Satan, demons) are subject to its salutary power is not caused by the weakness of light, but by the reluctance of minds. They can – thanks to their free will – turn away from the light of knowledge toward their errors and opinions, but the

³³ DN, IV, 4, p. 75.

³⁴ DN, IV, 2, 73: From his Source it was given to them to exemplify the Good, to manifest that hidden goodness in themselves, to be, so to speak, the angelic Messenger of the divine source, to reflect the Light glowing In the inner sanctuary.

³⁵ DN, IV, 2, p. 73.

light always remains constantly within their reach. Likewise, when minds desire to acquire more knowledge than their cognitive powers and their place in the hierarchy allow, and are in a sense “blinded”, i.e. deprived of their knowledge acquired earlier³⁶. Pseudo-Dionysius emphasizes at once the constancy and the independence of God’s light from whether the recipient is capable of perceiving them or not, because the source is the supreme principle:

Still, as I have already said, the divine Light, out of generosity, never ceases to offer itself to the eyes of the mind, eyes which should seize upon it for it is always there, always divinely ready with the gift of itself³⁷.

At the sensual level, the unification with God’s Good is also effected thanks to the uplifting power of light as a source of knowledge. It is at once the end and the beginning of the road. This moment of controversy, the first contact with “intelligent light” is given to man in the sacrament of baptism, hence its name – “illumination” μυστήριον φωτισματος:

Οὕτω δὴ καὶ τὴν ἱεράν τῆς θεογενεσίας τελετὴν, ἐπειδὴ πρώτου φωτὸς μεταδίδωσι καὶ πασῶν ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ τῶν θείων φωταγωγῶν, ἐκ τοῦ τελουμένου τὴν ἀληθῆ τοῦ φωτισματος ἐπωνυμίαν ὑμνοῦμεν³⁸.

Pseudo-Dionysius describes the rite of baptism precisely as the moment of “divine birth”, the beginning of the sojourn on the steps of the hierarchy, i.e. the realization of one’s entelechy³⁹. On the other hand, the Areopagite employs this moment to emphasize the primary task of the hierarchy, i.e. the transmission of knowledge, that is “holy light”, to the initiated. The “gift of vision” that causes the internal transformation, enables them to return to the One. We have here an obvious analogy between light and Good, which emanates and creates and at the same time attracts everything, moves from its stillness in oneness to diversity, in order to unite scattered beings in itself. Pseudo-Dionysius. Commenting on the sacrament of baptism, says:

³⁶ Cf. EH, II, 3, 3. This is one of the most deeply rooted ideas in the tradition of the wisdom of ancient cultures: the process of *paideia* must be gradual, constantly controlled by the teacher (Master). Omission of the necessary steps results in a regression and return to a greater chaos. This is, literally, blinding, such as can be caused by watching a solar eclipse without appropriate protection (means).

³⁷ Cf. EH, II, 3, 3, p. 205.

³⁸ EH, III, 1, p. 210: “It is the same with the regard to that sacred sacrament of the divine birth. It first introduces the light and is the source of all divine illumination. And because this is so we praise it, [...] that is illumination”.

³⁹ Cf. EH, II.

And the objective, the prime purpose of each sacrament is to impart the mysteries of the Deity to the one beginning initiated (εἰ γὰρ καὶ πᾶσι κοινὸν τοῖς ἱεραρχικοῖς τὸ φῶς ἱεροῦ μεταδιδόναι τοῖς τελουμένοις). Thus hierarchical lore has quite truly forged a name to signify the essential feature of what is being achieved⁴⁰.

Writing about light, Pseudo-Dionysius puts an enormous emphasis on its Gnostic aspect through which it reveals its salutary character, as it allows reason to achieve unity lost by perseverance in ignorance and erroneous opinion, and it enables elevation towards Good and attainment of perfection.

[...] it is the presence of the light of the mind which gathers and unites together those receiving illumination. It perfects them. It returns them toward the truly real. It returns them from their numerous false notions and, filling them with the one unifying light, it gathers their clashing fancies into a single, pure coherent, and true knowledge⁴¹.

As we analyze the numerous fragments where Pseudo-Dionysius describes how the supra-existential Good is achieved, we see that the author uses the terms “unifying light” and “true knowledge” interchangeably, also in order to more poignantly emphasize their supernatural and exclusive character. In chapter one of *The Divine Names*, the author speaks of a number of traces left by Providence to enable the initiated to reach It⁴². The foundation of initiation would be study of the Scriptures, and knowledge thus obtained would enable one to comprehend the incomprehensible, obviously – in proportion to the capabilities of the perceiving mind. Pseudo-Dionysius points out:

We are raised up to the enlightening beams of the sacred scriptures, and with these to illuminate us, with our beings shaped to songs of praise, [...] we behold the divine light, in a manner befitting us [...]⁴³.

Complete knowledge, i.e. illumination will be available when creation frees itself from the bonds of matter and subjective desires, imitating perfect divine minds. The condition of being permeated by the light of true knowledge as experienced by the disciples at the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor, but is only possible after death. Even though Pseudo-Dionysius speaks about the “visible personification” of Christ, who will

⁴⁰ Cf. EH, III, 1, pp. 209–210.

⁴¹ DN, IV, 6, p.73.

⁴² DN, IV, 4, p.52 : “This is the kind of divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the hidden tradition of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with scripture”.

⁴³ DN, I, 3, pp. 50–51.

illuminate us with the most magnificent beams of light,” this will happen and when we “are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being *sons of the resurrection*”⁴⁴ as well as when we become incorruptible and immortal⁴⁵. What cannot be achieved on earth is participation in illuminated knowledge transmitted by Christ to chosen hierarchs by means of symbols and liturgy. This knowledge is dynamic, capable of transforming the minds of its recipients so that they could continue passing this gift on to those at the lower levels of the hierarchy of truth. Pseudo-Dionysius, describing this process, speaks clearly of illuminating cognition, which leads to its recipients formed by this light to transmit this knowledge to others, making their minds perfect:

[...] and we thereby come to look up to the blessed and ultimate divine ray of Jesus himself. Then, having sacredly beheld whatever can be seen, enlightened by the knowledge of what we have seen, we shall then be able to be consecrated and consecrators of this mysterious understanding (καὶ τῆς τῶν θαυμάτων γνώσεως ἐλλομφθῆντες τὴν μυστικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἀφιερῶμενοι καὶ ἀφιερῶται). Formed of light, initiates in God’s work, we shall be perfected and bring about perfection (φωτοειδεῖς καὶ θεουργικοὶ τετελεσμένοι καὶ τελεσιουργοὶ γενέσθαι δυνησόμεθα)⁴⁶.

Considering the ways to learn God, Pseudo-Dionysius places the One-Good beyond any description, transcending entirely in this respect not only the created world and the noeric sphere, but also excluding itself from any description. The author of *The Divine Names* does admit, however, that pure angels’ minds, but also other “intellects of divine form” might be worthy of unification with “supra-divine light” by *aphairesis*, negative theology: the abandonment of all concepts and cessation of all “intelligent activity”⁴⁷. Also in this case the name of the divinity is closely connected with knowledge, precisely with the ultimate end of its acquisition (sc. ignorance above all knowledge or ignorance, with the point that can be reached only through mystical theology), with the source and the point of human intellectual experience:

We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we appro-

⁴⁴ Lk 20: 36.

⁴⁵ DN, I, 4.

⁴⁶ EH I, 5, p. 196.

⁴⁷ DN, I, 5, p. 54.

ach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, preexisted all the goals of all knowledge⁴⁸.

We see, therefore, that in the context of *Corpus Dionysiacum*, light itself is defined in a three-fold manner. The author of *The Divine Names* speaks of light in a metaphysical sense, referring its properties to the manner in which knowledge is transmitted (emanation, radiation, illumination, life-giving, permeation), and thus moves on to use the term “light” in order to render the actualizing powers being the manifestation of Divine Authority called Good, which he calls “supra-substantial light”, in what the transcendent One allows divine intellects, i.e. in the highest knowledge of itself available to creatures.

It seems that the “Great Dionysius” uses the term “light” to describe various aspects of knowledge, and in principle uses both interchangeably (sc. knowledge = the light of the intellect). Light, therefore, has an intelligible dimension, and its influence pertains to the intellect and is limited by the hierarchy of beings in its range, mode and power of influence⁴⁹.

Let us summarize:

The Dionysian theme of light understood as a source to make knowledge possible, leads us to a very extensive issue of the meaning of knowledge and its hierarchical transmission in the process of returning to the One. It will become the starting point for considerations by many Christian theologians who would attempt to reconcile Neo-Platonic gnosis of Pseudo-Dionysius with the fully orthodox doctrine of the Church. One of the most eminent theologians, who developed the Dionysian metaphysics of light was the Byzantine thinker Gregory Palamas. Light-knowledge in Palamas’ conception dismisses the reasons behind the existence of the hierarchy and the symbolic structure of the Pseudo-Dionysian cosmos, because he identifies them with God incarnate, Christ, who saved every man and comes to him directly, unobscured by symbols and the levels in the hierarchy.

One consequence of Palamas’ analysis will be a new perception of the Gnostic character of light. It will lose its evidently intellectual and

⁴⁸ DNI, 4, p. 53.

⁴⁹ DN, IV, 5, p. 75: “The Good is described as the light of the mind because it illuminates the mind of every supra-celestial being with the light of the mind, and because it drives from souls the ignorance and the error squatting there. It gives them all a share of scared light. It clears away the fog of ignorance from the eyes of the mind and it stirs and unwraps those covered over by the burden of darkness. At first it deals out the light in small amounts and then, as the wish and the longing for light begin to grow, it gives more and more of itself, shining ever more abundantly on them because they ‘loved much’ and always it keeps urging them onward and upward as their capacity permits”.

metaphysical aspect shaped by the Neo-Platonic tradition in favor of a new dimension created by Christianity – the light of knowledge understood as salvation, universal and direct. 

Bibliography

Abbreviation to the sources:

TP	Theologie Platonicienne
Suger <i>De rebus</i>	Sugerii Abbatis Sancti Dionysii Liber de rebus in administratione sua gestis
Suger <i>De consecratione Ecclesiae</i>	Libellus alter de consecratione Ecclesiae Sancti Dionysii
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina
DN	<i>De Divinis Nominibus</i> , in <i>Corpus Dionysiicum I</i>
CH	<i>De Coelesti Hierarchia</i> , in <i>Corpus Dionysiicum II</i>
EH	<i>De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia</i> , <i>ibidem</i>
Ep.	<i>Epistulae</i> , <i>ibidem</i>

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