

Lyceum 116, October 23, 2025 – – a forum to Think, Discuss, Share, and Learn from one another. Your input is welcomed - Iron sharpens iron.

Neighborhood “The1826, in Connecticut, a farmer named Josiah Holbrook started a school for ‘the general diffusion of knowledge and raising the moral and intellectual taste’ of Americans. In those days, the opportunities for higher education were limited to those venerable old universities that had long served the upper crust. Holbrook’s vision was to make learning – practical, liberal, and humane – available to working people of all kinds. He named his school the Lyceum, after the garden where Aristotle once taught his students philosophy.... We need to go deeper than the superficial fights that characterize public life. We need to return to the first principles and meet each other there as human beings.”– Nathan Beacom, Plough Magazine, Autumn 2023, p. 9.

The following is an essay I wrote in 1978 while attending Fordham University in the Bronx pursuing a degree in Theology/Spirituality. The course was entitled The Spirituality of the East and West, and was facilitated by Fr. George Maloney S.J. I decided to share it in the Lyceum since the focus of the essay, “Nothingness and Emptiness – For Mystics Only?” addresses the dynamics of Via Affirmativa and Via Negativa which we may not necessarily be familiar with in our spiritual and religious lives. I found the following on the Internet about my essay that was published in Contemplative Review. “Roger Vanden Busch responds to a recent reaction against the nothingness and emptiness of Dionysian mystics in his article "Nothingness and Emptiness: For Mystics Only?" in Contemplative Review, 15/4 (Winter, 1982), 27-31.”

Father Maloney was born in Green Bay, WI, the son of the late George

J. and Catherine (Karbowski) Maloney. He was for many years a Jesuit priest, and more recently a priest in the Eastern Orthodox Church assigned to SS Joseph and Andrew Orthodox Church and the retreat ministry of Still point Contemplative Ministries in Candler, North Carolina.

He entered the Society of Jesus in 1948 and was ordained in Rome as a priest of the Russian Byzantine Rite, April 18, 1957, earning a doctorate in Oriental Theology, June 21, 1962, summa cum laude from the Pontifical Institute, Rome.

The Reverend Father George Anthony Maloney, 80, died Tuesday, July 19, 2005, at the home of John Michael Zboyovski II. The Reverend Father John Sr., and Pani Cynthia Zboyovski were present at Fr. Maloney's falling asleep in the Lord.

A quotation by Fr. Maloney: “The Orthodox faithful of the East kept the ancient devotion to Mary as virgin and mother and, therefore, the archetype of the feminine contemplative spirit that lies as the integrating, healing force between our human consciousness and our unconscious. In the symbol of Mary as virgin we see ourselves as individuals and as Church, the community of individuals brought into unity by the Spirit of the risen Jesus.”

“Virginité on this primeval level is each human being opening to God's initial love in total surrendering obedience. It is the letting go of our lives in faith and childlike trust in God to let him have full centrality in our lives.”

— *George A. Maloney, Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh*

See the attachment for the article: “Being and Nothingness-For Mystics Only?”

Being or Nothingness. For Mystics Only?

See beyond the sawdust and glitter of the unreal, one-dimensional world. Burst the illusory, materialistic bubble as it floats by, its sirens calling you to take, to grab, to hold, to stuff, and to consume. Be vulnerable, open, and fragile like the “earthen-ware jars” for such an overwhelming power comes from God through his Son, Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit. Like the Dionysian mystics immersed in the mysticism of love, we are invited to see how God dwells, works, and labors in all of creation. As Meister Eckhart reminds us: “God is at home, and it is we who have gone for a walk.”

“God is a being beyond being and a nothingness beyond being. The most beautiful thing which a person can say about God would be for that person to remain silent from the wisdom of an inner wealth. So be silent and quit flapping your gums about God.” (Meister Eckhart)

One of my favorite quotations regarding the existence of God is from St. Anselm: “God is that, then which nothing greater can be conceived.” Is God being or nothingness? Or is God the antimony of opposites? Is God that contradiction of being and nothingness that challenges us to live, move, and have our being. William Johnston notes: “Ours is a culture which delights in the saying of Irenaeus that the ‘glory of God is a human being fully alive.’ It is a culture that believes with Teilhard de Chardin in the spiritual power of matter. On the other hand, it is a culture which looks with dismay on nothingness and emptiness. (1)

Considering this dismay with the nothingness and emptiness of the Dionysian mystics, this essay will reflect on the Via Affirmativa and the Via Negativa of the Pseudo-Dionysius in view of Louis Dupre’s category of the mysticism of love as developed in his book, “The Other Dimension.” In doing so, this essay will illustrate that God does not negate, rather God asserts. This assertion has positive implications for

our contemporary spirituality. As St. Thomas Aquinas writes: “No person is in such darkness as to be completely devoid of divine light. The divine light shines in the darkness and radiates upon them all.”

To achieve the notion of mystical union, Dionysius develops three stages: 1. Abstractive Negation (purification); 2. Intelligent Nescience (illumination); and 3. Union with God (union).

1. **Abstractive Negation**: “There is activity of the mind, which is grasping, achieving, dominating, but there is activity, which is receptive, attentive, and open to others. This is what we must learn.” (Bede Griffiths)

Dionysius’ notion of purification is based on the Plotinian sense of eliminating or cutting away: “Just as those who make a life-like statue chip off all the encumbrances and cut away all superfluous material in order to bring to light the Beauty hidden within, so we abstract everything in order that without veils we may know the Unknown.” (2) Thus, one must abandon all that is impure (faults) and strip away all that is pure (conceptual forms). Dionysius uses the example of Moses and his ascent to Mt. Sinai. (3)

Purification for Dionysius is based on the negative way: “Hence, we have given our preference to the negative method because it lifts the soul above all things cognate with its finite nature and guiding it onward through all conceptions of God’s being....” (4) For Dionysius, the positive way is incomplete. It gives only partial revelation and relative knowledge. Whereas the negative way leads to the knowledge of God in a perfect way. The negative way frees one from knowledge and the object of perception. God is no longer an object: it is a question not of knowledge, but of union. The positive way is preparatory for the negative way as it leads to the mystical way: “Leave the senses and activities of the intellect...strain towards a union with Him whom neither being nor

understanding can contain...be led upwards to the Ray of divine Darkness.” (5)

2. **Intelligent Nescience:** “Because in all speech divinity is inexpressible, there can be no limit in expressing it.” (Nicolas of Cusa).

Illumination is entrance into the divine obscurity, complete suspension of the faculties and a vision of God, “the soul shares in that super-essential light which enters a union above thought.” (6) Divine obscurity becomes bright because in contemplation it is the divine light which enlightens the soul and makes it know which reason is unable to grasp.

There is a complete suspension of the faculties, a binding of the powers of the soul, “absolute dumbness both of speech and thought.” (7) This great calm is not passive. The silence of contemplation is a silence which reveals mysteries. Silence says more than ten thousand words which fail to reach the point of our centering. The soul must actively be open to receive. The vision of God is not rapture or ecstasy but ends in rapture or ecstasy. Here there is a progression of Via Negativa which is a progression of Via Affirmativa. The sacred is beyond all distinction of affirmation or negation. So, the sacred is not good (negative), but it is not-not-good (negation of negation). Therefore, sacred is hyper-good, hyper-one and hyper-being. The Via Mystica leads to the vision of God by allowing entrance to that hyper-essential darkness where “The hyper-essential stands revealed in its naked truth to those alone who have passed through the opposites of good and evil.” (8)

3. **Union with God:** “O God, the longer I gaze upon your face, the more acutely do you seem to turn the gaze of your eyes upon

me...Thus, when I meditate on how that face is truth and the best measure of all faces, I am expanded into a state of immense wonder..." (Nicolas of Cusa).

This union is so intimate that the soul becomes deified, and deification means a return to whence the soul first came, "The sacred thought in itself unlike any other being, nevertheless bestows a divine similitude on those that turn to it and strive to imitate those qualities...all similarity in the world possesses its quality through having a trace of the divine similarity and thus accomplishes the unification of the creatures." (9) Deification means becoming divine and not becoming God. The soul returns to God without being absorbed in God. From this union flows the concept of emanation, not God as God, but God ad extra. "It is not our purpose to reveal the hyper-essential being, its hyper-essential nature, but only to celebrate the emanation of the absolute divine essence into the cosmos of things." (10)

Thus, Dionysius distinguishes between the positive and negative ways to God. The positive leads to some kind of knowledge in an imperfect way. Whereas the negative way is the only way fitting about God, who is of his very nature unknowable. It leads the soul to total ignorance as it approaches God. It proceeds to Him by negation as it ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, progressively setting aside all that can be known to draw near to the unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance. Here we have an antimony of opposites; the negative is a corrective to the positive. The question is: does Dionysius admit to a synthesis of the two? Does he not say quite often that the negative way surpasses the positive?

Considering Louis Dupre's category of the mysticism of life in his "The Other Dimension," both Dionysius and Dupre would emphasize the negative way as a corrective to the positive way. Both would say that the positive way is, at best, preparatory for the negative way which leads to mystical union. It is because of God's

present otherness, that Dupre would favor the negative way because God is so overwhelmingly present that no name can apply. Dupre would say that for mystics, union with God is a state of love. (11)

Dupre and Dionysius speak about the negative way as declaring God beyond all predication, and to achieve this union with God, the soul must totally deny itself. In the process of purification, both would emphasize the negation of anything finite as the soul passes through the stage of purification. (12) At the level of illumination, there is an attempt to grasp the divine as it is. According to Dupre, this becomes a “divine reaffirmation of the finite.” (13) The human viewpoint is overcome, and the soul adopts a divine attitude toward creation which is positive. The sacred now takes over the profane and retains its opposition to it as a conquered moment. Therefore, divine transcendence ceases to mean negation of the creature and becomes elevation. As Dionysius says: “the soul returns to God without being absorbed in Him.... from this union flows the concept of emanation.....to celebrate the emanation of the absolute divine essence into the cosmos of things.” (14)

According to Dupre, transcendence is not above creation, but in creation. The creature is in God and God is in the creation. (15) It is as creature and not as uncreated essence that the creature manifests transcendence. For unlike the negative way, the mysticism of love refuses to consider God’s transcendence to the creature as ultimate. God does not negate, he asserts! His language about creatures is assertive. Therefore, to break the silence of negation about God is to reassert and to love creatures as God asserts and loves them. We participate in God’s generation and love – “One should love God mindlessly. By this I mean that your soul ought to be without mind or mental activities or images or representations. Bare your soul of all minds and stay there without mind.” (Meister Eckhart). That is why, as creatures, we can first be totally renounced and continue to survive in God’s love. Thus, a Christian attempt to be united with God by adopting the

attitude of Jesus Christ in whom he believes God to be personally present. (16)

Dupre says that union with God is the goal of the mystic. This union is a state of love. For in one's union with God, the self is lifted out of its lonely isolation and renews its primeval oneness in which all of reality is in harmony with itself. In and through variety, the mystics perceive the same glowing, all-pervading presence of God. An inner reality invites all creatures to enter confidently into each other's intimacy. (17)

In practical terms and language, God's assertion gives our spiritual life a mandate! The incarnation delicately spins a finely, balanced web of the human and divine, of activity and silence, of intellect and emotion, of sense and spirit, and of asceticism both active and passive. Our union with God says, "Go into the marketplace!" As Pope Francis says, "let us be poor and be with the poor." Build the Body of Christ from the stuff of the universe. Christ is the inner force of life. Make it live, make it come to perfection. Work, sweat, fast, hurt, pray, raise families and journey into the mystery of God's love. You are called to bring the whole work back to the glory of the Father. Jesus Christ is pulsing within the evolving, dynamic world to allow the world to be itself and to let humankind become fully human in the image of God. It is the cosmic people of God called to holiness. "We are fellow helpers with God, co-creators in everything we do. When Word and work are returned to their source and origin, then God accomplishes all work divinely. And there too the soul loses itself in a wonderful enchantment." (Meister Eckhart)

With your love, dig deep into the inner, hardened earth of reality. Take off your shoes, bow your head, open your heart and mind. The God whom you seek is awesomely, tremendously "being" in darkness and "becoming" into light before your faith-filled soul. As you cup your hands to drink from the cold, clear, free-flowing Presence, be refreshed by God's wet energies. "The outward work

will never be puny if the inward work is great. And the outward work can never be great or even good if the inward one is puny or of little worth. Inward work invariably includes all expansiveness, all breadth, all length, and all depth. Such a work receives and draws all its being from nowhere else except from and in the heart of God.” (Meister Eckhart)

Notes

1. William Johnston, **THE INNER EYE OF LOVE**. (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 198), p. 116.
2. “The Mystical Theology” II 1. **DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE; THE DIVINE NAMES AND THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY**. Trans. C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1920), p. 195. Hereafter referred to as MT.
3. MT 1,3. Op.cit., p. 193.
4. “The Divine Names” V, 1 and XIII, 3. **DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE: THE DIVINE NAMES AND THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY**, Trans. C.E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1920), pp. 131 and 188 – 189. Hereafter referred to as DN.
5. MT i.1 op.cit., pp. 191 and 192.
6. DN I, 4. Op.cit., p. 58.
7. MT III, 1. Op.cit., p. 198.
8. MT. I, 1, op. cit., p. 194.
9. MT IX, 6. Op.cit., p. 166.
10. DN V, 1, op.cit., p. 131.
11. Louis Dupre, **THE OTHER DIMENSION**. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1972), p. 523 and from a talk entitled,

**“Crisis in Western Spirituality,” given at Fordham University,
Bronx, New York on December 1, 1977.**

- 12. Ibid. pp. 526 – 532.**
- 13. Talk at Fordham, op. cit.**
- 14. DN V, I. op. cit., p. 131.**
- 15. Dupre, op.cit., p. 525.**
- 16. Talk at Fordham, op. cit.**
- 17. Dupre, op. cit., pp. 544 - 545**