

**THE DEPTH OF UNKNOWING:
Or, How to (Un)Know God according to
Pseudo-Dionysius and Raimon Panikkar**

Nindyo Sasongko

Abstract

What is the relevance of the sixth century writings attributed to Dionysius of Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius for twenty-first century Christianity? This article is an inquiry into the notion of divine unknowability within the Pseudo-Dionysian *corpus*. As a thinker who lived in an era in which great disputations over cardinal doctrines of the church had become *passé*, Pseudo-Dionysius seemed to have creatively used different concepts and phrases than those great thinkers before him. For Dionysius, the way to know God is to unknow (*agnōsia*) God, for God cannot be the object of human knowledge—God is beyond being. To posit God as being or to be existent means, therefore, an idolatry, since God is that which cannot be grasped by words or human concepts. To assess this apophatic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, I shall make use of the thinking of Raimon Panikkar who struggles against Western “strict monotheism.” Finally, I shall demonstrate the implications of the doctrine of the unknowability of God *vis-à-vis* modern debates on the existence of God and on atheism.

Keywords: Pseudo-Dionysius, *agnōsia*, Raimon Panikkar, apophatic, cataphatic, mystical theology, experience of God.

Abstrak

Apa relevansi tulisan-tulisan abad keenam yang diatributkan kepada Dionysius dari Areopagus atau Dionysius-gadungan bagi Kristianitas abad ke dua puluh satu? Artikel ini adalah sebuah selisik tentang ketak-terpermanai-an Allah di dalam kumpulan tulisan Dionysius-gadungan. Sebagai seorang pemikir yang hidup di masa ketika perdebatan sekitar doktrin-doktrin utama telah usai, Dionysius-

gadungan tampak telah secara kreatif memakai konsep-konsep dan frasa-frasa yang berbeda dari para pemikir terkemuka sebelum dia. Bagi Dionysius-gadungan, untuk mengenal Allah, seseorang harus “tidak-mengetahui” (*agnōsia*) Allah, sebab Allah bukanlah objek pengetahuan manusia—Allah melampaui ada. Dengan demikian, berpikir Allah sebagai ada atau berada merupakan sebuah pemberhalaan, sebab Allah adalah Yang tak tertangkap oleh kata-kata maupun konsep-konsep manusia. Untuk menimbang teologi apofatik Dionysius-gadungan, saya akan memakai pemikiran Raimon Panikkar yang gigih melawan “monoteisme-kaku” Barat. Akhirnya, saya akan menunjukkan implikasi doktrin ke-tak-terpermanai-an Allah pada perdebatan modern tentang eksistensi Allah dan tentang ateisme.

Kata-Kata Kunci: Pseudo-Dionysius, *agnōsia*, Raimon Panikkar, apofatik, katafatik, teologi mistik, pengalaman akan Allah.

“What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable.”
—Pseudo Dionysius (Epistula 3)

“Were God to be spoken of as object, God would become nothing more than an idol.”
—Raimon Panikkar¹

This article touches on the doctrine of the unknowability of God in the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and assesses his apophatic theology from an Indo-Asian perspective. Here I contend that to inquire of God is to “unknow” God; one can have positive knowledge and experience of God, but one must reject the view that such knowledge and experience will lead to true mystical experience of the divine. To elaborate the theme, I shall first sketch the theological background which shaped Pseudo-Dionysian theology. Secondly, I shall explain the apophaticism of Pseudo-Dionysius based upon his major writings: *De Divinis Nominibus*, *De Mystica Theologia* and *Epistulae*.² Thirdly, in assessing his theology, I shall make use of the

¹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 13.

² Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987); James McEvoy, ed. *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on De Mystica Theologia* (Paris: Peeters,

mystical thinking of Asian theologian and philosopher Raimon Panikkar (1926-2010). Finally, touching upon the current debates about the existence of God and the challenge of atheism, I shall point to some implications for contemporary theology and spirituality.

Claim and Controversy

A *corpus* of writings attributed to “Dionysius of Areopagite” (*Corpus Areopagiticum*) attracted theologians in the sixth century, when some thinkers from Nestorian Christianity cited parts of it to support their Monophysite view during a heated disputation over the nature of Christ. Their “orthodox” opponents refused the use of the quotations, arguing that no earlier Fathers of the Church had cited Dionysius’ works.³ The orthodox wing even doubted that the Fathers knew a Dionysian *corpus* existed.⁴ Later, John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor, two orthodox theologians, defended Dionysian theology. Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan suggests that John was “the first defender of Orthodox spirituality” who attempted to recover orthodox theology in the teachings of Dionysius. John wrote to Dionysius’ accusers to point out that their multiple charges against Dionysius were misleading. In his opinion, Dionysius should be seen as a spiritual writer rather than a *dogmaticus* or systematic theologian. For John, Dionysius was still loyal to the decisions of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon.⁵

Maximus the Confessor, another supporter of the Dionysian writings, held a more esteemed position as a theologian and saint both in the East and the West than did John of Scythopolis. He wrote that Dionysian spirituality had deeply affected his vision of the Christian life and of spirituality. Because of this defense, the heretic Dionysius was received as the orthodox Dionysius. From that time,

2008); and Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii: De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. Ceslari Pera, O.P. (Taurini: Marietti, 1950). In this article I shall use abbreviations as such: DN = *Divine Names*, MT = *Mystical Theology*, L = *Letters*.

³ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (rev. ed.; London: Penguin, 1993), 207; Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 1.

⁴ Janet P. Williams, “Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus of Confessor,” in *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. G. R. Evans (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 186.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Complete Work*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987), 16-17.

Dionysian spirituality influenced many medieval Catholic thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux and John of Scot.⁶

Some Protestant reformers, however, were resistant to the Dionysian *corpus*. Martin Luther and John Calvin came to know these writings early in their careers, and they shared the critical position of Desiderius Erasmus concerning their pseudonymous authorship.⁷ They concluded that the writings contained more pagan philosophy than Christian theology. In the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther wrote that “Dionysius is most pernicious; he platonizes more than he Christianizes.”⁸ Calvin was more moderate than Luther. He admitted that Dionysian theology might contain some good thoughts which should not be overlooked.⁹ Martin Bucer was most receptive to Dionysian theology. He believed that Dionysius was one of the “older” fathers who lived around the time of Cyprian, Gregory Nazianzen, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Cyril. He also quoted freely from the Dionysian *corpus*, especially to support his proposal for a simpler Eucharist and more communion centered worship.¹⁰ Despite these pros and cons, the Dionysian *corpus* was the only writing of the early Christian era which was widely translated, excerpted and on which commentaries were written in the medieval West. “Thus, humanist criticism and Protestant biblicism,” Froehlich writes, “did not remove the Dionysian *corpus* completely from sight. The writings were . . . known and . . . almost universally accepted in Protestant circles, [an thus] opened the way for a more historical though often polemical approach to the enigmatic texts.”¹¹

No one has been able to determine the author and the date of this *corpus*. It was ascribed to the Athenian “Dionysius the Areopagite,” a member of great council of the Areopagus in Athens and a convert through the preaching of the apostle Paul (Acts 17). Dionysius was believed to have gone to Paris to be the bishop of that city and there became a martyr. Modern scholars agree that this *corpus* was written by a pseudonymous Syrian author around 500 C.E.

⁶ Ibid., 23. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 344; Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 23; G. R. Evans, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20-21.

⁷ Williams, “Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor,” 187; cf. Bernard McGinn, *Foundation of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 158.

⁸ Karlfried Froehlich, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 44; cf. Williams, “Pseudo-Dionysius,” 192.

⁹ See *ibid.*, in which Calvin is quoted, “*Dionysium illum, quicumque fuerit, nemo negaverit multa subtiliter et argute in coelesti hierarchia disputasse*” (*Institutes* I.14.4).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Since the first quotation from this corpus was found in a writing dated 532 C.E., Rosemary Arthur suggests that the *corpus* was probably written around 530 C.E.¹²

Topos and Theology

One of the major themes in Pseudo-Dionysius's mystical theology is the question of union with God. Can human beings know about God? How can human beings have such knowledge? He offers two ways: *cataphatic* and *apophatic*, or positive and negative theologies.¹³ Paul Tillich has sketched the difference between the two in this way:

First, there is the way of positive or affirmative theology. All names, so far as they are positive, must be attributed to God because he [*sic*.] is the ground of everything; everything points to him. God must be named with all names. Secondly, however, there is the way of negative theology which denies that he can be named by anything whatsoever. God is beyond even the highest names which theology has given to him . . . he is “unspeakable darkness.”¹⁴

Before Pseudo-Dionysius, Christian theologians had a rather negative view of darkness. Darkness was seen as the huge gap between human beings and God, making it impossible for human beings to have access to the divine and to comprehend God.¹⁵ The Gnostics viewed clouds and darkness as ignorance and evil. For example, the gnostic *Gospel of Truth* states that, “Ignorance of the Father caused agitation and fear. And the agitation grew dense like fog, so that no one could see . . . [Error] dwelt in a fog as regards the Father”¹⁶ The Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* reflects this by stressing the contrast with the light which was Jesus: “. . . [Jesus] gave light exceedingly, there being no measure to the light which was his. And

¹² Rosemary A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008); Pelikan, *Emergence*, 344.

¹³ Lossky, *Mystical*, 25.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 92.

¹⁵ Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist*, 79.

¹⁶ *The Gnostic Scriptures*, ed. Bentley Layton (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 253.

the disciples did not see Jesus because of the great light in which he was, or which was his, for their eyes were darkened because of the great light in which he was.”¹⁷ Origen saw darkness as

a Hebrew way of showing that the ideas of God which men [*sic.*] understand in accordance with their merits are obscure and unknowable, since God hides himself [*sic.*] as if in darkness from those who cannot bear the radiance of the knowledge of him and who cannot see him, partly because of the defilement of the mind that is bound to a human “body of humiliation,” partly because of its restricted capacity to comprehend God.¹⁸

Gregory of Nyssa also held this theology, namely that darkness means ignorance of the divine. “Although the word presents to all equally what is good and bad,” writes the Nyssen, “the one who is favorably disposed to what is presented has his understanding enlightened, but the darkness of ignorance remains with the one who is obstinately disposed and does not permit his soul to behold the ray of truth.”¹⁹ Again, he writes, the “darkness of ignorance remains with the one who is obstinately disposed and does not permit his soul to behold the ray of truth.”²⁰

Pseudo-Dionysius not only seems to have had considerable knowledge of the thinking of the earlier doctors of the Eastern Church, but he probably also had read portions of the Gnostic writings. His use of “darkness,” however, was distinct from those of others. “Darkness” was his favorite word in many of his writings. Pseudo-Dionysius used two different words for darkness: *skótos* for that which is distinct from light, and *gnóphos* which has a range of meanings when articulated as “invisible darkness” (DN 869A), “brilliant darkness” (MT 997B), “mysterious darkness of unknown” (MT 1001A), and “the darkness so far above light” (MT 1025A). *Gnóphos*, however, can only be said to apply to God.²¹ This is because God’s darkness is “an excess of light” or “a superabundant brightness”; in *Letter 5* he describes the divine darkness as

¹⁷ *Nag Hammadi Studies IX* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 4-5, quoted in Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 12.

¹⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.17, trans. H. Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 330.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, eds. A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist, 1978), II.162.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II.265.

²¹ Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 86; cf. McGinn, *Foundation*, 175.

that “unapproachable light” where God is said to live. And if it is invisible because of a superabundant clarity [*aorátō ge ónti dià tēn huperéchousan phanōtēta*], if it cannot be approached because the outpouring of its transcendent gift of light, yet it is here that is found everyone worthy to know God and to look upon him [*sic.*]. And such a one, precisely because he neither sees him nor knows him, truly arrives at that which is beyond all seeing and all knowledge (*Letter 5, 1073A*).

Pseudo-Dionysian theology is thoroughly Neo-platonic.²² The basic question in this speculative theology is: How can human beings participate in the life of God? This Neo-platonic thinking can be found especially in his key terms such as “light,” “dazzling darkness,” “gift,” “excess,” “silence,” “transcendence,” “negative theology,” but also from the idea of cosmic participation in the divine life. The mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius can be summed up as: “The whole of creation is brought into being by God to show forth divine glory.”²³ God outpours Godself into creation (*exitus*), yet the whole cosmos also returns to the One (*reditus*). Concerning a Neo-platonic vision of the Good, Pseudo Dionysius explains that it

is not absolutely incommunicable to everything. By itself it generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenment proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it To those who fall away it is the voice calling, “Come back!” and it is the power which raises them up again. It refurbishes and restores the image of God corrupted within them We, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God (*Divine Names, 589B-589D*).

²² Philip Sheldrake, *History and Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 46-47; Diarmaid McCulloh, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York: Viking, 2013), 87-88; Louth, *Denys*, 20-24.

²³ Sheldrake, *History* 200, cf. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161. McGinn and McGinn explain the *exitus-reditus* concept as such: “Dionysius’s dialectical view of the relation of creation to the Creator revolves around the problem of how the unknown God always remains totally *identical* with himself, while still *overflowing* into differentiation in his effects (creation), in order eventually to regain identity by *reversion* of all things back into himself.” Bernard McGinn and Patricia F. McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroads, 2003), 174 (*italics theirs*).

God is, therefore, truly known through the whole creation but at the same time, no one has ever seen God. “So God will receive many names,” writes historian Philip Sheldrake, “and yet will ultimately remain above every name.”²⁴ God always surpasses everything that is, transcending everything finite. “God above God,” in Paul Tillich’s expression, is “above any special name we can give to even the highest being.”²⁵ God is the ever-beyond deity, the “Nameless One” (*anonymon autēn*; DN 596A). This is what theologians call “negative theology,” in which all Christian terms and concepts of God have to be broken down because of the principle that God cannot be named or described except by saying what God is not.²⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius asserts, “There is no speaking of [divinity], nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion or denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is beyond every assertion, . . . it is also beyond every denial” (MT 1048B). If one wants to say anything about God, one can only say nothing about God. Human beings can attain God only through unknowing.

Because of this, Trinity should not be expounded in a conventional set of beliefs. The language of unity and trinity disappears in the “abyss of God” (Tillich). The beyond-ness of God means that God transcends all numbers. The One is “a unity that transcends oneness (*hyperēnōménē henás*),” and because God is “principle and cause and number and order” who is above all things, including numbers, then, as Pelikan put it, “God determines all number.”²⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius writes that the transcendent unity

defines the one itself and every number. For it is the source, and the cause, the number and the order of the one, of number, and of all being. And the fact that the transcendent Godhead is one and triune must not be understood in any of our own typical sense. No. . . . no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being (DN 981A).

²⁴ Sheldrake, *History*, 201; McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian*, 183.

²⁵ Tillich, *History*, 92.

²⁶ Pelikan, *Emergence*, 346.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 347-48.

God is above “one” or “three.” When one believes that God is one, God is beyond the number one. This also applies to the three. Hence, that which is super-essential cannot be grasped in numbers.²⁸

The One beyond being can be approached by a human being only by “going beyond.” As Janet Williams explains about Pseudo-Dionysius, “God is beyond all that we can know, and we must strive for our fulfillment in him [*sic.*], doing so by going through and beyond all that he has made, taking from all that will nourish us, and then moving on by denying it.”²⁹ Thus, he introduces the concept of “unknowing” (*agnōsia*). The true knowledge of God is to “escape” from “knowledge of beings,” since the One is “beyond being.” One can never actually see God, but only “something of his [*sic.*] being and that which is knowable,” because God “is completely unknown and non-existent. He exists beyond being and he is known beyond the mind.” (L 1, 1065A-B). To have knowledge of the divine means to have complete unknowing. The Nameless One, the Dazzling Darkness, the Excess of Light, can be approached only through silence—the senseless activity.

In *De Mystica Theologia*, Pseudo-Dionysius calls this ascent “climbing higher” (*anagogy*). There are three means through which human beings can attain knowledge of the divine: the senses, rational understanding and mystical experience. If one can still speak about God, then one is still dealing with the intelligible, something inferior to the One. To proceed to a higher degree, one should negate one’s knowledge by progressively setting aside all which can be known, in order to approach the Nameless One. As Vladimir Lossky asserts, Pseudo-Dionysius encourages his audience to “renounce both sense and all the workings of reason, everything which may be known by the senses or the understanding, both that which is and all that is not...”³⁰ All that which “can be perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One.” (MT 1000D).

Pseudo-Dionysius, however, did not reject cataphatic theology. Praise and affirmation, belief and assent, are vitally important, yet human beings must immediately reject the thought that these activities are ways to the knowledge of God.³¹ For instance, if they say that God is Blazing Fire, they do not think that God *is* fire, and they also *know* that God is not fire. Cataphatic theology will always lead to apophatic theology in which God is

²⁸ Tillich, *History*, 93; McGinn and McGinn, *Early Christian*, 183.

²⁹ Williams, “Pseudo-Dionysius,” 191.

³⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 27.

³¹ Louth, *Denys*, 78.

unknowable and is not the object of knowledge. “The apophatic way is not an alternative to it but grows out of it and may be said to succeed it,” as Sheldrake suggests, “because apophatic theology leads human beings to union [*henōsis*] with God.”³² It is not merely an intellectual exercise, but an inward purification in which one can only be “speechless and unknowing” (*MT* 1033B).

Importance and Influence

Pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology was very influential in the medieval East and West. In the modern western world, his legacy continues to live, especially in Paul Tillich and in the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion.³³ Here I shall assess the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius through the mysticism of Raimon Panikkar. Panikkar was a Catholic priest and an important thinker in the areas of philosophy, theology, and religious pluralism. In his 1999 Gifford Lectures, Panikkar asserted that Pseudo-Dionysius established a milestone for the apophatic character of God in the three Abrahamic religions. Since Pseudo-Dionysius, all mystical theologians have developed divine negativity in their writings.³⁴ Although Panikkar does not use the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius as much as that of Thomas Aquinas in *Rhythm of Being* he acknowledges the impact of the eastern mystic on Thomas.

For Panikkar, the fundamental problem in Western civilization is the system of “strict monotheism.” The divine mystery is believed to be “a self-sufficient (solitary) and transcendent Supreme Being.” God is seen as “a Substance, a self-subsistent Entity.”³⁵ There are three philosophical themes which have been sustained in Western civilization: Being, Reality and God. How can God be understood as Being and, at the same time, as the ground of all entities? With Pseudo-Dionysius, Panikkar asks how it is

that we know God when he [*sic.*] is neither *noēton*, nor *aisthēton*, nor any particular being?” How is it possible, since God is not an object of the senses, or of reason? God is not any being among the beings (*tōn ontōn ónta*), “none absolutely

³² Sheldrake, *History*, 201; cf. Louth, *Origins*, 167; McGinn, *Foundation*, 174.

³³ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Tillich also admits that Pseudo-Dionysius has influenced his thinking, especially in *The Courage to Be* (Tillich, *History*, 92).

³⁴ Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 236.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

of the beings that are. God is not a being, not even the Supreme Being (Entity).”³⁶

Panikkar also supports *theologia negativa* for it attempts to refine the concept of God through “infinite *agnōsia*” or unlimited unknowing. “Our only adequate approach to the mystery of the Divine,” writes Panikkar, “is silence of all our faculties, not by a violent act of the will but by an experience of the utter emptiness of that God.”³⁷ This, however, cannot be utter indifference, for that leads to nihilism. Apophatic theology must accompany cataphatic theology. There is no absolute silence without words, and no absolute speech without pause.

The Sankrit word for God is also the word for “day” (*Dyan*) which suggests radiance, brilliance, light and divinity. Like the sun, God is not monopolized by a certain group of people or any religious system. Nor is God the object of any kind of thought. “God” is a symbol which both reveals and veils what is symbolized. A symbol is not universal if it is concrete and immediate. Every expression about the divine mystery is inadequate. That mystery nevertheless invites contemplation and relationship.³⁸

The names of God represent an aspect of the mystery, and human beings cannot say whether God is one or multiple. What does Trinity mean? With Augustine, Panikkar believes that “Who begins to count begins with mistake” (*Qui incipit numerare incipit errare*). With Thomas Aquinas, he believes that “Nothing can be called ‘three’ in the Trinity.”³⁹ God is neither one nor three. “One” is not a number but a “symbol of intelligibility.” This also implies a negation of multiplicity. God is thus neither one nor two, nor any multiplicity. To approach the Trinity, one must keep the search open. One must be conscious of the temptation to comprehend everything and the *neti neti* of apophatic theology.⁴⁰

To know who God is one must have “experience of God.” Panikkar uses words similar to those of Pseudo-Dionysius. One must attain the experience of nothingness, of emptiness, of absence, of non-being.⁴¹ Here Panikkar talks about silence which can also be

³⁶ Ibid., 236.

³⁷ Ibid., 131-32.

³⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *Experience*, 11-20.

³⁹ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 65. *Neti neti* is the conscious renunciation of trying to understand everything.

⁴¹ Panikkar’s “non-being” and “emptiness” are different to those of Tillich. For Tillich, nonbeing is the ultimate threat for humanity. “Emptiness and

found in Pseudo-Dionysius. Silence takes place at the moment when one positions oneself at the very source of being. If God is the source of being and thus is non-being, then entering into silence is not an escape from the world in which the ultimate and the relative are in tension. Silence is the way to discover the ultimate in the relative because the relative can be relative only in contingency with the ultimate—the relation which allows the relative to be silent from the ultimate viewpoint.⁴² Panikkar writes that “Without the silence of the intellect and the will, without the silence of the senses, without the openness to what some call “the third eye” . . . it is not possible to approach the sphere in which the word *God* can have a meaning.”⁴³ The third eye, or the spirit, is the capacity which makes human beings aware of reality which cannot be grasped by the senses and by reason.⁴⁴ Without silence of the senses and intelligence, this capacity will become torpid, and the joy of life will no longer be experienced by the human person.

For some Christians, this concept is difficult to understand. Panikkar believes, however, that this experience is practical and may appear when one becomes aware of a certain “something more” which has no basis. He is not advocating another-worldly esotericism. Rather, he sees this mystical experience as always linked to everyday reality: eating, drinking, sleeping, loving, working, hanging-out with a friend, giving counsel, doing stupid things, *et cetera*. “Without the links that unite us with all reality,” Panikkar asserts, “we are unable to have experience of God . . . it is precisely the contingency of being with, living with, since it is not the experience of an ‘I am’ but of ‘we are.’ In Christian language, we call it Trinity.”⁴⁵ One cannot learn how to have this experience, only to let oneself be grasped by it. It is neither a projection nor an objectivation but an openness to be surprised by God. It is not one’s experience of God but God’s experience of one and through one of which the other is conscious.⁴⁶

loss of meaning are expressions of the threat of nonbeing to the spiritual life” (Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 48.)

⁴² Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony: Essays in Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 46.

⁴³ Panikkar, *Experience*, 12-13.

⁴⁴ For Panikkar, the first eye is senses, the second is reason, and the third is the spirit (*Rhythm*, 73).

⁴⁵ Panikkar, *Experience*, 39-40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Polemic and Plea?

Pseudo-Dionysius and Panikkar agree that God is utterly unknown and non-existent—the God beyond being. In this, they do not support conventional atheism which asserts that God is not. They are rather striving to keep the Nameless One from being an idol. Like Pseudo-Dionysius and Panikkar, Paul Tillich also believes that if God is God, then God cannot exist as do the elements of creation, because God is the ground of being. To exist (*existere*) means to “stand out” or to emerge from something else. God is being itself, beyond essence and existence. Therefore to argue that God exists is to deny God.⁴⁷ The “existence of God” becomes a *contradictio in terminis* because existence is the realm of that which is created, whereas divine being is the source and ground of everything which exists. As Dan Peterson suggests, for Tillich, to assert that “God exists is to affirm that God is distinct from the source of being, that God depends on a reality other than God for God’s own existence, or that God is subject to something greater than Godself.”⁴⁸ If God “exists”—stands out as do all elements in creation, then God must have received that “existence” from something else. Two questions arise from this: that concerning the existence of God and that concerning atheism.

Rational Defense of the Existence of God

Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests that the main characteristic in Pseudo-Dionysian theology is a rejection of apologetics. Pseudo-Dionysius did not want to engage in polemic, because to do so can mean to descend to the level of the attackers.⁴⁹ In this, he was holding to the principle, as expressed in his words, that all which “can be perceived with the eye of the body or the mind” is inferior to true knowledge. Also, he wrote that

As far as I am concerned I have never spoken out against Greeks [philosophers, intellectual attackers] or any others . . .
 . [i]t is therefore superfluous for someone expounding the

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 236.

⁴⁸ Daniel J. Peterson, *Tillich: A Brief Overview of the Life and Writings of Paul Tillich* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013), 75.

⁴⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius/New York: Crossroads, 1984), 194.

truth to enter into dispute with this one or that one, for each says that his own bit of money is the real thing when in fact what he has may be a counterfeit copy of some part of the truth. And if you refute this one, then another one, and, again, someone else will eagerly argue about it (*Letter 7*, 1077C).

In answering any attacker, Pseudo-Dionysius presented his thought in such a way so that it is “properly established because of its own truth,” “stands firm and unrefuted against arguments of all others” (*Letter 7*, 1080A). He distanced himself from the polemics which characterized the three centuries before his time, during which the basic tenets of Christianity were hotly debated. While the theological thought-forms of his times are still used by Christian theologians, they do not usually lead to such controversies. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses it, now a theologian can use them without any fear of recrimination or aggravation.⁵⁰

Panikkar is of the opinion that any experience of God turned into a rational defense is prone to idolatry because God is a meta-ontological reality. “To want to justify God,” Panikkar writes, “to prove God’s existence or even defend God, implies that we are presenting *ourselves* as the very foundation of God. We are transforming ontology into epistemology, and the latter in a logic that would be above the divine and the human.”⁵¹ For Panikkar, every theodicy and every form of apologetics contains blasphemy. In asserting this, he recalls the Fourth Council of Toledo (638 CE) in which the concept of the Father as “a single source of divinity” (*mia pēge theotētos*) was adopted, and in which the adage “source and origin of all divinity” (*fons et origo totius divinitatis*) was decided.

Proof can only prove the rationality of the argument and not the existence of that which would be proved. So Panikkar writes:

The traditional “proofs of the existence of God” offered by Christian scholasticism . . . only prove the non-irrationality of the divine existence to those who already believe in God. Otherwise, how would they be able to recognize that the proof “proves” what they are seeking? It is obvious that what is proved depends on the *probans*—that which proves—and that the *probans* is a greater deal stronger and more powerful than what is proved.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid., 151.

⁵¹ Panikkar, *Experience*, 38.

⁵² Ibid., 16.

Each religious system is embedded in a particular culture; as a result, mediation of the Mystery differs between religions. It is necessary for each religion to make allowance for the essential insufficiency of its own expression. It is therefore possible that each religion defends its position while arguing about the greater or lesser adequacy of a theological expression, but does not forget that each interpretation of a sacred text is influenced by its cultural context, as well as the cultural context of the sacred text itself.

Can one prove the existence of God? No. Can one defend one's belief concerning the existence of God? Yes; but one must immediately renounce one's arguments because, knowing that God is always the "Beyond Being," the "Something More," "the "Nameless One," no human argument is sufficient to defend God's existence.

The Challenge of Atheism

Atheism has been a challenge to monotheism for millennia. Is atheism a foe of Christianity? Tillich, whose understanding of God as the ultimate concern was similar to that of Pseudo-Dionysius, was sympathetic to the critics of religion and their critique concerning the notion of some Divinity "out there." For Tillich, God is the source of everything that is and therefore does not "exist." God is not a Supreme Being or Entity whose existence can be the object of human search, the search caused by the never-ending hunger of humans for the infinite. In Tillich's words, "The fact that man [*sic.*] is never satisfied with any stage of his finite development, the fact that nothing finite can hold him, although finitude is his destiny, indicates the indissoluble relation of everything finite into Being-itself."⁵³

For Pannikar, atheism is still within the theism circle. Like Tillich, Panikkar also believes that "nowhere is the thirst for an ultimate point of reference stronger than in the modern atheist. It is a serious desire for rationality and intelligibility."⁵⁴ Atheists reject God the omnipotent and opt for reason—more humble (it does not know everything), more patient (it has to reckon with time), less demanding (it is not absolute)—as their guiding principle. Atheism simply refuses to believe in a personal, anthropomorphic divinity. In reacting to the dogmas of Christianity, modern western atheism has stressed principles of truth, especially those principles seen as crucial for human morality, as its dogmas. In this development, it might be

⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1.191.

⁵⁴ Panikkar, *Rhythm*, 166.

said that modern atheism was replacing theological monotheism with philosophical monotheism.

Atheism is a way of articulating the conviction that the usual view of God is inadequate, and thus it “helps to eradicate deficient view of God.”⁵⁵ In this sense, atheism is a respected partner which raises perplexing issues with which people of faith should also wrestle. “Far too often,” writes theologian Michael Raschko, “believers tend to absolutize the finite. They take finite human statements that express their belief in God and turn them into absolutes, statements which themselves become idols and false ultimates.”⁵⁶ Indeed, atheism helps believers to realize that the mature in faith will confront belief which has no place for the *apophatic* nature of the Mystery. Apophaticism enables believers to transcend all concepts within every sphere of speculation, and to be open to the “Something More” in which knowledge is transformed *into* a learned ignorance, doctrine *into* contemplation, and philosophical conception *into* awe.

Conclusion and Coda

Although some Protestant reformers resisted Pseudo-Dionysian theology, this brand of mysticism continues to influence prominent thinkers in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox circles. I have shown that it also lives on the thought of Paul Tillich and Raimon Panikkar. These three theologians wrote in different contexts: Pseudo-Dionysius in a sixth-century Neo-platonic Christian milieu, Tillich in the circumstances of post-World War II, and Panikkar in the current era. For them, God is the Unknowable; the proper way for human beings to approach God is through complete unknowing (*agnōsia*). This is not escape from the world. Rather, it is a “learned ignorance” which is *attained* through experience in everyday reality.

The unknowability of God is, therefore, good news. It is an invitation to renounce all knowledge of God, so that the human is united “with the One who is altogether unknowable; and in knowing nothing (*agnōsia*), he knows in manner that surpasses understanding.” (MT 1001A). In the words from the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello,

⁵⁵ Peterson, *Tillich*, 76.

⁵⁶ Michael B. Raschko, *To Hunger for God: A Christian Understanding of Human Nature* (New London: Twenty-Third, 2010, kindle edition), location 1921.

“How does one seek union with God?”

“The harder you seek, the more distance you create between Him [*sic.*] and you.”

“So what does one do about the distance?”

“Understand that it isn’t there.”

“Does that mean that God and I are one?”

“Not one. Not two.”

“How is that possible?”

“The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and his song—not one. Not two.”⁵⁷

About the Author

Nindyo Sasongko is a Mennonite minister on special assignment from Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia Kudus (GKMI Kudus), now pursuing a graduate degree in transforming spirituality at Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry, Seattle, Washington, USA.

⁵⁷ Anthony de Mello, *Writings*, ed. William Dych, S.J. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 73.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *In Librum Beati Dionysii: De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. Ceslai Pera, O.P. Taurini: Marietti, 1950.
- Arthur, Rosemary A. *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.
- Chadwick, Henry. *The Early Church*. Revised edition. London: Penguin, 1993.
- De Mello, Anthony. *Writings*. Edited by William Dych, S.J. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000.
- Evans, G. R. *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Froehlich, Karlfried. "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Complete Work*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist, 1987. 33-46.
- Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*. Edited by A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson. New York: Paulist, 1978.
- Layton, Bentley., editor. *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1987.
- Lossky, Vladimir. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976.
- Louth, Andrew. *Denys the Areopagite*. Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989.
- . *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- McCulloh, Diarmaid. *Silence: A Christian History*. New York: Viking, 2013.
- McEvoy, James., ed. *Mystical Theology: The Glosses by Thomas Gallus and the Commentary of Robert Grosseteste on De Mystica Theologia*. Paris: Peeters, 2008.
- McGinn, Bernard. *Foundation of Mysticism*. New York: Crossroads, 1992.
- McGinn, Bernard and Patricia F. McGinn. *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters*. New York: Crossroads, 2003.
- Origen, *Contra Celsum*. Translated by H. Chadwick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953.
- Panikkar, Raimon. *Invisible Harmony: Essays in Contemplation and Responsibility*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

- . *The Experience of God: Icons of the Mystery*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- . *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lecture*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- . "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Complete Work*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist, 1987. 11-24.
- Raschko, Michael B. *To Hunger for God: A Christian Understanding of Human Nature*. New London: Twenty-Third, 2010. Kindle edition.
- Sheldrake, Philip. *History and Spirituality*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995.
- Tillich, Paul. *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- . *The Courage to Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. San Francisco: Ignatius/New York: Crossroads, 1984.
- Williams, Janet P. "Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus of Confessor," in *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*. Edited by G. R. Evans. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 186-200.