

The Encyclopedia of Religion on Dionysius the Areopagyte

Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief (MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1987)

One of my favorite starting points on any topic even remotely related to religion is this encyclopedia, which has been around forever it seems (don't let the date of the latest edition give you the wrong impression), and represents a fairly comprehensive and balanced treatment of most everything to do with religion.

So, on the question of the teachings of *Dionysius the Areopagyte* (or *Pseudo-Dionysius*), I went to Volume 4: pages 356 through 358, and read that Pseudo-Dionysius lived about 500 A.D. The article was written by Donald F. Duclow.

Why did I want to read about Dionysius the Areopagyte? Because I was fascinated by the fact that several of my favorite Christian mystics were said to have been influenced by writings attributed to this man, whom they thought to have been a contemporary of Paul, not a sixth-century person. These mystics' revelations on the nature of the soul and of God, which deeply impressed me, reflected this man's theology, or so I read. Since this plays into my notion that mystical revelation perhaps mirrors ones own deep-seated expectations, it was imperative for me to find out what expectations existed in students of Pseudo-Dionysius' writings.

In Acts 17:34 it is stated that Paul converted Dionysius the Areopagyte. Writings under this name appeared in the early sixth

century. Their authenticity was questioned by some, but the work . . . "came to be accepted as both apostolic and orthodox, and assumed nearly canonical status and authority in Eastern and Western Christendom." So, it is important to note, the mystics of the Middle Ages influenced by these writings accepted them as essentially being reflections from the mind of God.

I gather from this article that there are three treatises involved under the authorship of Pseudo-Dionysius: *Divine Names*, *Celestial Hierarchy*, and *Mystical Theology*.

I recognize some of the proclamations of the mystics in these (excerpted) words from Duclow:

. . . In itself the divine nature is beyond being . . . yet God becomes manifest in all being as its cause. God is both utterly transcendent and present in all things. This paradox underlies Dionysius's affirmative and negative theology. Affirmative theology focuses on divine causality and knows God through God's self-manifestations. It traces the causal procession from God's unity, through the divine ideas, or forms, to celestial hierarchy and thence to the sensible world; Conversely, negative theology retraces the procession of beings in a return that moves from the sensible world, through the intelligences and forms, and to divine unity. Thus Dionysius emphasizes the dissimilarities in sensible symbols and the limits of all intelligible divine names. His work *Mystical Theology* negates all language about God because divinity cannot be known in its transcendence. For Dionysius, therefore, God is both nameless and praised in all names.

Duclow traces the origins of such thought to Platonic and Neoplatonic influences. He credits Dionysius with exaggerating Greek patristic uses of these Hellenic philosophical ideas in reinterpreting Christianity. He is the only "Greek father" (meaning early theologian) to be "fully and widely welcomed in the West."

From this it is rather obvious to me that such notables as Meister Eckhart and his informants Sister Katrei and Marguerite Porete, were fully aware of and believing in the truth of these ideas. What made some of their ideas heretical, probably much to their surprise given the reverence for Dionysian thought, is that they carried the implications of that Dionysian thought to the Church itself. They said in essence that all its names for God, all its rules and its liturgies fell short: reality is so much greater, that to focus on these things as if they were or somehow controlled that reality was idolatry. In a very real sense this realization made them Free Spirits, free from the illusion that the Church in a sense possessed God and controlled access to God.

An example of the typical attribution of Dionysian thought to Western mystics occurs in Kenneth Scott Latourette's *A History of Christianity, (Volume 1: to A.D. 1500*, Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1975) . On pages 541 and 542 of that book, both Meister Eckhart and John Ruysbroek are mentioned as having been deeply influenced by the Dionysian writings. Of Eckhart he says:

He held that in the human soul there is a spark, a light, which is of the same nature as God and that nowhere is God so really God as in the soul. It can be seen how he laid himself open to the charge of erasing individuality in men. In 1329 Pope John XXII branded as heretical seventeen propositions

drawn from his works.

As I discuss in my pages on Marguerite Porete, there is a movement afoot to rehabilitate these teachings of Eckhart's, and the current Pope, John Paul II, has actually cited Eckhart in one of his homilies!

So, what does an unquestionably orthodox interpretation of Dionysian thought look like? Latourette (p. 540) describes what may have been such an instance:

In the Abbey of St. Victor the writings ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagyte had a profound influence. The house was a famous centre not only of scholasticism and hymnody but also of mystical piety. The philosophy and theology of St. Victor were shot through and through with it. The Victorines looked upon the universe as a book written by the hand of God and as a mirror in which the thought of God is reflected. They taught that that thought is expressed in the Scriptures and that these are to be read as allegories. To discover the mind of God, the method of dialectical logic is not enough and may even be misleading. It may be sought and reached through intuition and mediation. This approach is crowned by contemplation with its insights into truth and by ecstasy. The divine light which shines through contemplation enables us to know truth which cannot be attained by the path of reason and which may even be contradicted by reason.

Verily, I like these Victorines!