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The mystical theology as a path of man for the divine Knowledge in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor

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Abstract. In early Christianity the term mystikos referred to three dimensions, which soon became intertwined, namely the biblical, the liturgical and the spiritual or contemplative. The biblical dimension refers to "hidden" or allegorical interpretations of Scriptures. The liturgical dimension refers to the liturgical mystery of the Eucharist, the presence of Christ at the Eucharist. The third dimension is the contemplative or experiential knowledge of God. The link between mysticcal theology and the vision of Divine was introduced by the early Church Fathers, who used the term as an adjective, as in mystical theology and mystical contemplation. Gregory's of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite and Maximos the Confessor truly get to know God not by apprehending him with human's understanding, but through of mystical theology. The reasoning powers must enter into a passive stillness, allowing the highest faculty in the human person to possess God with a knowledge that exceeds understanding. This knowledge is a darkness that is beyond light.
Keywords: Mystical theology, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor**,** Knowledge of God, affirmative and negative theology.

[es] La teología mística como camino del hombre para el Conocimiento divino en los escritos de Gregorio de Nyssa, Areopagita de Dionisio y Máximo el Confesor

Resumen. En el cristianismo primitivo, el término mystikos se refería a tres dimensiones, que pronto se entrelazaron, a saber, la bíblica, la litúrgica y la espiritual o contemplativa. La dimensión bíblica se refiere a las interpretaciones "ocultas" o alegóricas de las Escrituras. La dimensión litúrgica se refiere al misterio litúrgico de la Eucaristía, la presencia de Cristo en la Eucaristía. La tercera dimensión es el conocimiento contemplativo o experiencial de Dios. El vínculo entre la teología mística y la visión de lo Divino fue introducido por los primeros Padres de la Iglesia, quienes usaron el término como un adjetivo, como en la teología mística y la contemplación mística. Gregory's of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite y Maximos the Confessor realmente llegan a conocer a Dios no mediante su comprensión humana, sino a través de la teología mística. Los poderes de razonamiento deben entrar en una quietud

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pasiva, permitiendo que la facultad más alta en la persona humana posea a Dios con un conocimiento que excede la comprensión. Este conocimiento es una oscuridad que está más allá de la luz.
Palabras clave: Teología mística, Gregorio de Nyssa, Dionisio Areopagita, Máximo el Confesor, conocimiento de Dios, teología afirmativa y negativa.

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1. Introduction: The mystical Theology in Eastern Christianity

In the beginning of this treatise we are going to present in a few words how Plato and Plotinus understood the mystical theology and how they influenced Christian fathers. The latter perceive the terms of the greek philosophy and adjust them to the Christian teaching. Andrew Louth explains that:

> "Mystical theology, or perhaps better, a doctrine of contemplation, is not simply an element in Plato's philosophy, but something that penetrates and informs his whole understanding of the world. Plato sees the world in which we live –a world of change and conjecture and opinion– as a world in which knowledge is impossible. Knowledge must be certain, and the object of knowledge must be immutable, eternal, and nothing in this world satisfies those requirements. The recovery of true knowledge of Truth and Beauty, of what alone is Real, is the object of philosophy. Such knowledge in its perfection is impossible in this life, so philosophy is a preparation for dying and being dead"[3].

For Plotinus "the truth of God's Word is not something the human intellect can analyze and the three basic principles of Plotinus' metaphysics are called by him 'the One' (or, equivalently, 'the Good'), Intellect, and Soul[4].

These principles are both ultimate ontological realities and explanatory principles. Humans have the power to obtain a good knowledge of all reality, including divine things. Plotinus' One is beyond being and nothing can be said of it literally, not even that it is, but he also calls it Good. It is above all the other Forms and is beyond being.

Christianity is unique. It is not a religion, which was "invented" by a man. It is one of a kind. It is the singular reality of God's activity to restore mankind from their fallen condition through His Son, Jesus Christ. Christianity is not the propagation of a philosophy. It is the teeaching of the supernatural revalation of God to man. It is

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3 A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), http://ix-oyc.net/data/Fathers/525.pdf. Chr. Terezis, *Plato – Aristotle: to a reconciliation,* Thessaloniki, 2011, p. 68-122; Chr. Terezis, "Aspects de la notion de mal chez Proclus et chez Denys l' Aréopagite. Une rencontre", *Byzantion*, 70 (2000), p. 491-506.

4 Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.1; 5.9, *Plotini opera*, vol. 2, (Leiden: Brill, 1959), (p. 260-427), esp. 260-280; 389-427.

not the performance of religious procedures. It is not the perpetuation of an organizational program. Christianity is the reception of a Person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God Himself, into one's being and behavior. Into Christianity the believer can obtain the knowledge of God through the mystical theology of the prayer, of the faithful. In all other religions the human tries to reach the God; in Christianity the God comes to the man. The abyss that existed between the God and the man after the exile of the latter of the paradise, was disappeared with a formidable way, by the incarnation of the Word of God. Although God could save man and restore His relation with him with a thousand ways[5], He chose Word's incarnation, passion, crucifixion and resurrection to save his favourite creature, man; "because God is love"[6].

The term "Mystical Theology" in general refers to a direct and immediate experience of the sacred, or the knowledge derived from such an experience. In Christianity this experience usually takes the form of a vision of, or sense of union with, God; Mystical Theology is usually accompanied by meditation, prayer, and ascetic discipline. It uncovers an understanding of the inner integrity of mystical consciousness and the difference between knowledge through direct experience and theological expression. All theology is mystical, inasmuch as it shows forth the divine mystery[7]. The mystical theology seeks to describe an experienced, direct, non abstract, unmediated, loving, knowing of God, a knowing or seeing so direct as to be called union with God. It has as goal the theosis. Theosis, a term often interchangeably used with divinization, is a multi-faceted concept initially formed during the early centuries of Christianity[8]. The Christian mystical theology attests to a spiritual, mystical from of knowing God through "touching", "hearing", "tasting", "smelling" and "seeing" the Ultimate Divine Being[9]. The Christian theology begins from the fact of God's revelation to people[10].

All the fathers of the Church, in their answers to the different heretical statements or to the raised questions from greek philosophers, provided a limited language about God when they had to speak about the incomprehensibility of God, the theology and the economy about God[11]. Generally, the term mystical theology was appeared definitely through the influential texts of Dionysius Areopagite and mainly

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5 Cyril of Alexandria, *That Christ is One*, Sources Chréttienes 97, 754[21] (=PG 75, 1321C).

6 1 Jn 4:8, transl. By E. Artemi.

7 Vl. Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, p. 7.

8 N. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009, p. 12: "Theosis is our restoration as persons to integrity and wholeness by participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit, in a process which is initiated in this world through our life of ecclesial communion and moral striving and finds ultimate fulfillment in our union with the Father- all within the broad context of the divine economy".

9 H. D. Egan, SJ, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition*, Oregon, 1984, p. 11.

10 Vl. Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction,* trans. I. Kesardoci-Watson, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978, p. 17.

11 Vl. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York: St. Vladimir's, Crestwood, 1985, p. 15: "The distinction between *oikonomia* and theolog*ia* ... remains common to most of the Greek Fathers and to all of the Byzantine tradition. Theologia... means, in the fourth century, everything which can be said of God considered in Himself, outside of His creative and redemptive economy. To reach this 'theology' properly so-called, one therefore must go beyond ... God as Creator of the universe, in order to be able to extricate the notion of the Trinity from the cosmological implications proper to the economy". E. Artemi, *Isidore's Pelousiote triadological teaching and its relation to Cyril's of Alexandria teaching about the Triune God,* Athens 2012, p. 327- 333. Al. V. Nesteruk, *Light from the East: Theology, Science, and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, p. 56.

in work *Mystica Theologia,* but its context existed in the writings of other church fathers as a mystical contemplation that permitted a human being to comprehend the God's existence as the "Divine Darkness", as the "gnofos" by way of unknowing[12]. The divine darkness leads the believer to the enlightenment. It shows the encounter with God not as an act of comprehension but as a union beyond understanding. By this meaning, we can find the context of Mystical Theology and not the certain word mainly in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, too.

In Orthodox theology, the gnoseology of God, the Mystical Theology is symbolic. A distinction is made between the "essence" and "energies" of God. We can obtain knowledge of the divine uncreated energies, and not of the divine essence. God is unintelligible. The unintelligibility of God must be accepted by any human mind[13]. God is infinite and incomprehensible and everything that is comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility. But all that we can affirm concerning God does not show forth God's nature, but only the qualities of His nature[14].

By pointing from the ontological to gnoseological opinion we can observe through the theology is profane that the human soul longs for God. This longing can only be satisfied through the mystical unity with God. This recognition of God is reached through inner cleansing, enlightenment and unity. The recognition of God, to live with God, is the highest form of bliss according to fathers. The way to God can be described with the terms of darkness (becoming nothing) and light (bliss). First a person must get rid of the inner dependences and attachments to material things, then he or she must go through the darkness of dissolving the ego and then wakes up in God's light.

2. The Knowledge of God in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa[15]

Gregory of Nyssa is regarded as exponent of the negative theology, and of the mystical tradition in Christianity. The supreme antinomy of the Triune God, unknowable and knowable, incommunicable and communicable, transcendent and immanent is the primary locus of his apophaticism. Moreover, the negative theology of the Gregory of Nyssa is balanced by his acute sense of the revelation of God ad extra,

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12 H. D. Egan, SJ, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism,* Minessota, 1996[2], p. XXI.

13 E. Artemi, "Gregory Nazianzen's trinitarian teaching based on his Twentieth. Theological Oration -La doctrina trinitaria de San Gregorio Nacianceno basada en si Quinta Oración Teológica", in *De Medio Aevo* 4 (2013/2), (127-146), 139, http://capire.es/eikonimago/index.php/demedioaevo/article/view/92. A. Versluis, *Dionysius' Mystical Theology*, chapter 1, *footnote 1*, www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html: "Unknowing, or agnosia, is not ignorance or nescience as ordinarily understood, but rather the realization that no finite knowledge can fully know the Infinite One, and that therefore He is only truly to be approached by agnosia, or by that which is beyond and above knowledge. There are two main kinds of darkness: the sub-darkness and the super-darkness, between which lies, as it were, an octave of light. But the nether-darkness and the Divine Darkness are not the same darkness, for the former is absence of light, while the latter is excess of light. The one symbolizes mere ignorance, and the other a transcendent unknowing –a super-knowledge not obtained by means of the discursive reason".

14 E. Artemi, "The Divine Gnosiology of Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* ISSN 2348-3164 (online) Vol. 3, Issue 1, (January - March 2015), 11-19, esp. 12 Available at: *www.researchpublish.com*.

15 This part is from the article of Eirini Artemi, "Man's "knowledge" and "ignorance" for God in the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa", *Mirabilia* 19 (2014/2), (42-61), 43-48.

equally predicated of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit[16]. Father, Son, and Spirit are not divine names per se, but revealed titles that indicate the relations between the three divine persons. Gregory of Nyssa underlines that a real knowledge of God is not to be found in the created world, but was careful not to make the cognitive knowledge, even if necessarily limited, seem unimportant[17].

Gregory speaks about the unknowable and incommunicable of God with many and different ways in his writings. He demonstrates the presence of God in the world through examples, arguments and images. He explains how our soul should try to become purified for being able to realise the divine truth. In the *Moses' life* and in *Contra Eunomium*, the holy father explains that the human beings cannot understand the "invisible", "timeless", "ineffable" of God, they make images of Him which reveal Him[18]. In opposition to the Eunomium's teaching that the nature of God was absolutely comprehensible, Gregory explains and underlines as well the incomprehensibility and infinity of God and thereby gives the human being to a life of continual conversion in virtue, to an everlasting assimilation to God: "the perfection of human nature consists... in its very growth in goodness"[19].

Gregory affirms that God is unknowable - or at least that the "ousia" (being) of God is unknowable. Gregory finds theological justification for this in the concept of God's infinity. God is eternal and beyond the time. This eternality results in God being of infinite expanse[20]

> "But if the divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the infinite"[21].

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16 M. Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: the place of Macarius-Symeon in the eastern Christian*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 57.

17 J. Winters, "Saying Nothing about No-Thing: Apophatic Theology in the Classical World", [Bahai Library Online 1994], http://bahailibrary.com/personal/jw/my.papers/apophatic.html. Cf. A. Strezova, "Knowledge and Vision of God in Cappadocian Fathers", Article published on: 10-9-2010, http://oodegr.co/english/filosofia/gnwsi_8ewria_kappadokes.htm

18 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II, Werner Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni opera,* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 2.1, 102^{1-10}, trans. in English by Stuart George Hall. The translation exist in Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium II,* an english version with supporting studies, Lenka Karfíková, Scot Douglass, Johannes Zachhuber eds, Leiden- Boston 2007: "When God was yet unknown to the human race because of the idolatrous error which then prevailed, those saints made him manifest and known to men, both by the miracles which are revealed in the works done by him, and from the titles by which the various aspects of divine power are perceived. Thus they are guides towards the understanding of the divine nature by making known to mankind merely the grandeur of their thoughts about God; the account of his being they left undiscussed and unexamined, as impossible to approach and unrewarding to those who investigate it".

19 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, I, 10, Sources Chretiennes 1, ch. 2, 31^{1-6} (=PG 44, 301C), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978. Cf. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac,* Sudney, 2011, p. 8.

20 B. E. Daley, SJ., "Bright Darkness' and Christian Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa on the Dynamics of Mystical Union", in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S. J*., ed. Michael Himes and Stephen Pope, (Crossroad - New York, 1996), p. 219. Cf. D. Carabine, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God", in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey, Four Courts Press, (Dublin, 1992), p. 87.

21 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, I, Werner Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni opera,* Leiden: Brill, 1960, 1.1, p. 169^{5-8}. Originally translated for the Nicean and Post-Nicean Fathers Series II Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff. Accessed at http://ccel.org.

It is possible through His sanctifying grace to be known His glory, holiness and magnificence. The knowledge of God is beyond man's power. God promised that only those who are pure of their heart can have a vision of God[22]. This is one of the basic conditions for the gradual reduction of man to the divine being and his equation of His attributive projections. God is by nature beyond our sight, but He is visible in His activities "energeiai", being perceived in the characteristics "idiomata" that surround Him. So, it is better for a man to speak for the deeds of God, but when he is going to speak about His essence, then a man should be remain silent.

God is not "object" of knowledge, but of admiration. According to the poet's words: "how majestic is your name in all the earth!"[23]. Gregory's aim is to show that the beings of all the members of the Godhead are infinite in goodness and power and life without distinction. The "ousia" of God has no "levels". God in his nature is singular, simple, without opposite. It cannot degrade over time and cannot change or lose its perfection, as even Eunomius argues. In light of this, how can someone compare an infinite goodness in the Son to another infinite goodness in the Father and say that one is lesser and the other greater? Can one infinite good be lesser than another infinite good? Of course, not. In this way Gregory challenges the teaching of Eunomius that the Father and the Son are both perfect in goodness and yet the Father is superior to the Son[24].

God's essence cannot be approached by man. The latter can feel the divine grace and glory: "Let us not be ignorant of God's nature which we recognize as his own wisdom and power and which we our minds comprehend"[25].

As God's infinite nature cannot be fully conceived by the human soul, so God does not seek to reveal Himself completely to those who seek Him. Rather, he reveals just enough to enlarge the desire of the soul for more so that the soul might ever press in closer and closer on its infinite path upwards. In Gregory's own words: "We can conceive then of any limitation in an infinite nature; and that which is limitless, cannot by its nature be understood. And so every desire for the Beautiful which draws us on in this ascent is intensified by the soul's very progress towards it. And this is the real meaning of seeing God: never to have this desire satisfied"[26].

The man's desire for the knowledge and the vision of God is constantly satisfied and yet never satisfied. "Moses sought to see God and this is the instruction he receives on how he is to see Him: seeing God means following Him wherever He might lead"[27].

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22 Vl. Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, p. 81.

23 Psalm 8,9, translation in english in New International Version

24 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 1.1.1901-18, Originally translated for the Nicean and Post-Nicean Fathers Series II Vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff. Accessed at http://ccel.org. Cf. A. Bottiglia, "Gregory of Nyssa's Infinite Progress: A challenge for an integrated theology", *Greek Fathers CHS 662 JZ*, http://westernthm.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/nyssa_on_infinity.pdf (2010), 4.

25 Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologeticus on Hexaemeron*, PG 44, 72C, translated by www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/.../0330-0395

26 Gregory of Nyssa, *Apologeticus on Hexaemeron*, PG 44, 72C, translated by www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/.../0330-0395

27 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, I, 9, SC 1, ch. 2, p. 23[1-3, 8-9], (=PG 44, 301A), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

The knowledge of God sometimes has the same meaning with the ignorance for God and the vision of God in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. The divine darkness leads to the enlightenment. It shows the encounter with God not as an act of comprehension but as a union beyond understanding[28]. He speaks for the vision of God expressed in terms of darkness rather than the prevailing light imagery[29]. This relation between dark and light, knowledge and ignorance of God, the holy father Moses' vision began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness. Gregory explains about the ignorance of God that "divine is there where the understanding does not reach"[30]. That knowledge is cognitive is perhaps the first assumption with which one must do away, if he is to properly understand St. Gregory of Nyssa's concept of the divine darkness[31]. Yet it is an assumption so basic to modern scientific thought that its influence hardly gives consideration, it is taken entirely as a base fact in the general arena of learning. Yet it is this very idea which Gregory addresses: the entire way of knowing with which we approach the knowledge of God. It is a knowing that goes beyond the confines and limitations of cognition, with its inherent inability to comprehend the transcendent[32]. It is a knowing that plunges into the negative, into the darkness of that place 'where the understanding does not reach,' and there finds the height of true knowledge. Gregory's concept of mystical knowing is best expressed in his image of the divine darkness: a symbol that is perhaps one of his greatest gifts to the realm of Christian thought[33]. It is presented most clearly in his famous text, The *Life of Moses*, and it is primarily from that text that this brief examination shall be made[34].

According to Gregory of Nyssa the knowledge about God is based on human mind and cannot be the correct guide for the "vision" of God, but the ignorance of the divine nature is based on the human soul. The man searches for the God and through his ignorance- the darkness of his mind concerning God, he can discover

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28 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, 6, p. 202, transl. By Casimir McCambley, Brookline: Hellenic College Press 1987.

29 M. Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 111. Cf. D. Ang, *The model of paradox in Christian theology: perspectives from the work of Henri de Lubac,* Sudney, 2011, p. 10.

30 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, 6, p. 181. transl. By Casimir McCambley, Brookline: Hellenic College Press 1987.

31 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch.1, p. 95, (=PG 44, 327B), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978: "This is the true Knowledge of what is sought: this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by kind of darkness". Daniélou insists that Gregory gives new meaning to the term "darkness": "In Gregory of Nyssa, and especially in his later works, as the *Life of Moses,* and the Commentary on *Canticle of Canticles,* the term "darkness" takes on a new meaning and an essentially mystical connotation. It expresses the fact that the divine essence remains inaccessible even to the mind that has been enlightened by grace, and that the awareness of this inaccessibility constitutes the highest form of contemplation. Gregory's originality consists in the fact that he was the first to express this characteristic of the highest stages of mystical experience", Cf. J. Daniélou, "Introduction" in Herbert Musurillo, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings,* repr. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, p. 27.

32 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC1, ch.1, p. 46, (=PG 44, 314B), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

33 Ar. Papanikolaou, *Being With God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine–Human Communion*, Indiana: Notre Dame, 2006, p. 18

34 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch. 2, p. 157, (=PG 44, 357C) transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

the divine truth[35]. The human self-knowledge regarding the extent of cognitive capabilities is a crucial prerequisite for understanding the infinity of the God. Only then the finite human being can see the infinite God. The indwelling of the Trinity is within the human person. And of course with the term Trinity, it is meant the divine attributes of God and not His own being. As the godhead dwells within the soul, so is the soul able to relate to the person the knowledge of it, in a manner of knowing that is no longer sensed. The soul acts as a mirror, which projects into one's knowledge the very revelation of God. The contemplation of God is not affected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind: "For no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, nor does it belong to those things which usually enter into the heart of man"[36].

This is the beginning of the knowledge of God with the heart—by the intimate presence of God Himself. Yet it is only faint, and is still blurred, as one would expect within a cloud. The soul must still be purified, and must become ever more accustomed to this new way of knowing. It must, indeed, shed its reliance upon cognition, and embraces the seeming groundlessness of an 'ineffable knowledge.' The person "must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perceptions, which are, as it were, wedded to our nature as its companion. When he is so purified, then he assaults the mountain"[37].

Generally, the ignorance of God can be equivalent to the darkness. God is the light. The separation of man from the God brought darkness to the mind and the heart of the human being. Vladimir Lossky underlines with a lyrical way that if God is known as light, the loss of this knowledge is darkness; and, since eternal life consists in "knowing the Father and His Son Jesus Christ", absence of knowledge of God ends in the darkness of Hell. Light is the result of accompanying the union with God, whereas the dark reality can overrun human consciousness only when human consciousness dwells on the borders of eternal death and final separation from God[38]. Thus the obvious sense of darkness seems to be, above all, pejorative[39]. If a man accepts his ignorance for the eternal God, He can detect the real knowledge of Him. The human soul will capture the God vision, only with its purification. Gregory analyses that only the purified man at heart can see the God[40].

Gregory teaches that only if the darkness: "and the ignorance of God on the Mount Sinai will be changed into the light of true knowledge of Mount Tabor, man will be able to have the vision of God, the glorious face of God incarnate and the eternal uncreated light of the Triune God"[41].

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35 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium,* II, trans. in English by Stuart George Hall.; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC1, ch. 2, p. 176-78, (=PG 44, 370C), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978

36 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC1, ch. 2, p. 157 (=PG 44, 357C), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:9. Cf. Is. 64:4

37 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC1, ch. 2, p. 157 (=PG 44, 357C), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

38 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch. 2, p. 163, (=PG 44, 363C), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

39 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch. 2, p. 164, (=PG 44, 365A), transl. in English. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

40 Gregory of Nyssa, "The sixth oration of Gregory Nyssa into the beatitudes", *Koinonia*, 45 (2002) 167-174.

41 Gregory of Nyssa, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York: St. Vladimir's, Crestwood, 1985, p. 31.

Also, he says that the soul that truly loves God desires to be united with Him, man tries to find this union through the vision and knowledge God. He underlines that our true knowledge of God is that we do not and cannot know because that which we seek is beyond our cognition. By its very nature the Divinity is higher than knowledge and comprehension[42]

3. The Knowledge of God in Dionysius' Areopagite writings

Dionysius' works might be described as the exposition of what man can know of God and how, knowing him, he can name God. He is interested in proceeding, not according to the words of human wisdom, but in terms of Scripture[43]. The knowledge of God is then gained through interpretation of the symbolic hierarchies. Dionysius supported:

> "We must lift up the immaterial and steady our eyes of our minds to that outpouring of Light, which is so primal indeed much more so, and which comes from that source of divinity, I mean the Father. This is the Light, which, by way of representative symbols, makes known to us the most blessed hierarchies among the angels. But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination so as to come to the simple ray of Light itself"[44].

The knowledge of God should be understood, as the knowledge of God's attributes and His modes of being, the direction from the "heaven" to the "earth" and not the opposite one:

> "… it came down from the highest to the lowest categories, embraced an ever-widening number of conceptions which increased at each stage of the descent, but in the present treatise it mounts upwards from below towards the category of transcendence, and in proportion to its ascent it contracts its terminology, and when the whole ascent is passed it will be totally dumb, being at last wholly united with Him Whom words cannot describe"[45].

The presupposition of man's knowledge of God is the self –revelation of God; and the presupposition of the self– revelation of God is His incomprehensibility. The term *Revelation* signifies two things; that God's knowledge is impossible and also the will of God to be known and His ability to make Himself known, and the attribute of man to receive revelation[46].

So the most important part of his works might be described as the exposition of what man can know of God and how, knowing Him, he can name God. He is interested

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42 E. Artemi, "The sixth oration of Gregory Nyssa into the beatitudes", *Koinonia*, 45 (2002) 173-174.

43 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 585-587, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html

44 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 585-587, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html.

45 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Mystica Theologia*, 3, PG 3, 1033BC, transl. Clarence Edwin Rolt, London: Macmillan, 1920.

46 Th. Henry Louis Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015, p. 12.

in proceeding, not according to the words of human wisdom, but in terms of Scripture[47]. In the search of knowledge of God in terms of what Scripture has said, however, he will also appeal to the efforts of philosophers. The most striking point about Dionysius is his insistence that the object of his concern is wholly beyond the ability of man to comprehend. The language that Scripture uses to speak of God cannot express with any degree of adequacy what he is; a fortiori the attempts of men to speak of God must fail. His thought on this subject represents a division of theology which was to have a profound influence[48]. God is considered Omniscient beyond all human understanding and description and therefore can only be expressed through symbols, names which are found in the Scriptures. One can approach the truth of God through contemplation of the Divine Symbols. The symbolic theology is a human construction and attempts to capture a variety of secular ways of the divine infinity. The conception of God is akin to the One, or the Good[49]. So through the symbols, he attempts to understand God as One and as Good without any success in an advanced degree.

Dionysius supports the Godhead is beyond the lifeless as well as beyond the living. For this reason, Dionysius underlines that any affirmations of the Godhead are not opposed to our negations, but that both must be transcended: even the negations must be negated. The negative names mentioned in all three instances of God. He is not one Being among others, but in His ultimate nature dwells on a plane where there is nothing whatever beside Himself. The only kind of consciousness the human being may attribute to Him is what can but be described as a Universal Consciousness[50]. The God is is absolutely superior to the whole created world. He does not distinguish Himself from the human race; for, being they caught up on to that level people should be wholly transformed by Him. And yet they distinguish between themselves and Him because of their lower plane of finite being they look up and see that ultimate level beyond them[51].

For Dionysius the Mystical theology is "like that ladder set up on the earth whose top reached to Heaven on which the angels of God were ascending and descending, and above which stood Almighty God"[52]. He underlines that the God, the One who is the principle of simplicity which is the source of all beings. Generally, the way that Dionysius speaks about the God who is the source of perfection and of all beings with

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47 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 596A-D, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html. Cf. R. McInerny, "A History of Western Philosophy, vol. II, part I: The Age of Augustine", Jacques Maritain Center, http://www3.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/hwp203.htm [access 19.9.2016]

48 ibidem.

49 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 597B, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html.

50 E. Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, London: Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library -SPCK, 1920, p. 5. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 596B, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html: "Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is".

51 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 596B, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html.; Dionysius the Areopagite *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 593CD, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html.

52 Dionysius the Areopagite, Preface to *De Mystica Theologia*, PG 3, 997AB, transl. Clarence Edwin Rolt, London: Macmillan, 1920.

the same similar manner with Plotinus[53] and Proclus the Philosopher[54], and Dionysius' teaching about the God in Trinity and His energies is a radical ad hoc readjustment of the Neoplatonist philosophers' ideas concerning the One and the intelligible universe and generally cosmos[55]. These three men were lining in the same historical period and this had as result to employ common expressions or expressive forms.

It is following that the interactions are observed. However, even though when Dionysius uses expressions or phrases of Plotimus and Proclus, he manages to crates a christian reading of them. Generally, in his "Mystical Theology" the Areopagite underlines the union with the divine being in terms of an upward journey into the silence of the divine darkness that transcends all knowledge[56]. Sergio La Porta argues that "by abandoning all sense perception, mental activity, and psychological identity, the traveler becomes completely united with that which is unknown. Like Gregory of Nyssa before him, Dionysius presents Moses' ascent up Mount Sinai as the biblical prototype for this mystical ascent"[57].

The father Dionysius uses an example very common to Gregory of Nyssa; the symbol of "darkness" with the meaning expressed in Exodus 20:21. The people didn't come near to mountain, remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. God is not called "darkness", but appears to dwell in darkness because of our inability to grasp His essence or inner-nature. In other words, the darkness is in us, and not in Him.

This is in accordance with another important father of the Church, John Chrysostom. He states that people cannot behold God's nature or essence, but He chooses to manifest Himself in ways and types or forms that the human mind can realize. All

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53 Plotinus taught about the One as the source of Being (tÕ öv), Life, and Mind. Plotinus, *Enneades* 1, 8, 2; Cf. Chr. Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite. An Introduction to the Structure and the Content of the Treatise On the Divine Names*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2006, p. 86-87. Cf D. Birjukov, "Hierarchies of Beings in the Patristic Thought. Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite", in *The Ways of Byzantine Philosophy,* ed. Mikonja Knežević, Contemporary Christian thought series no. 32, Alhambra, California: Sebastian Press, 2015, p. 83.

54 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 589BC, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html: "We learn, for instance, that it [the One] is the cause of everything, that it is origin, being, and life. 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. It is the sacred stability which is there for them when the tide of unholiness is tossing them about. [...] Source of perfection for those being made perfect, source of divinity for those being deified, principle of simplicity for those turning toward simplicity, point of unity for those made one.... And so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is. Truly he has dominion over all and all things revolve around him, for he is their cause, their source, and their destiny". Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, 1, PG 3, 596C, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html. Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite*, De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 589BC, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html.; Dionysius the Areopagite*, De Divinis Nominibus,* 1, PG 3, 596C. Chr. Terezis*, Searches to the ancient Greek Philosophy*, Patra, 2002, p. 163-165. Proclus, *The elements of theology*, p. 160-161, ff, A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary, by E.R. Dodds.

55 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus,* 2, 4, PG 3, 640D, transl. by Jeanne M. House, http://www.reversespins.com/dionysius.html. Vl. Lossky, "La théologie négative dans la doctrine de Denys l' Aréopagite", *Revue de Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 28 (1939) 204-221. Vl. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York: St. Vladimir's, Crestwood, 1985, p. 13-29, 31-43.

56 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Mystica Theologia,* 3, PG, 3, 1033C, transl. Clarence Edwin Rolt, London: Macmillan, 1920. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Mystica Theologia,* 4, PG 3, 1045D-1048B, transl. Clarence Edwin Rolt, London: Macmillan, 1920.

57 La Porta, "Two visions of Mysticism: The corpus dionysiacum and the Book of Lamentation", *Revue théologique de Kaslik, 3-4* (2009-2010), 243-257, p. 252.

these reveal that these testimonies express the condescension to the weakness of human nature, which requires something that the eye can see and the ear can hear. The man's capacity cannot perceive the Divine Nature itself who is simple, incomposite, and devoid of shape. So God has to help the man to comprehend some things for Him. God pours out God-self excessively into human beings, which, in turn, is drawn erotically back into God. The souls that become fertile to this love, manage to be

> "clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself"[58],

and be unified with God (theosis). By this way, the human souls are filled with the primordial light of God. It provides to them the ability of comprehending ecstatically the things concerning God[59].

God is not known, only through knowledge of believers for Him that comes from the intellect and is unseen, but also through ignorance for Him. Although there is spiritual comprehension of Him, understanding, knowledge, contact, sense perception, opinion, concept, naming and so on, nevertheless he is neither comprehended, nor explained, nor named. He is nothing existing, but he is also seen in anything existing. He is 'all in all'[60] and yet he is nothing anywhere. He is seen in all by all and yet he is seen in nothing by anyone. With good reason we say this about God, and on the basis of all existence he is praised as in harmony with all of which he is the cause[61].

Dionysius explains that when the mind is stripped away from its idea of God the human modes of thought and inadequate conceptions of the Deity, it enters upon the

> "Darkness of Unknowing" wherein it "renounces all the apprehensions of the understanding and is wrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible… united…to Him that is wholly unknowable"[62].

To sum up the knowledge of God according to Dionysius the Areopagite, we will employ the passage of Lossky:

> "The God of Dionysius, incomprehensible by nature, the God of the Psalms: "who made darkness his secret place", is not the primordial God-Unity of the neo-platonists. If He is incomprehensible it is not because of a simplicity which cannot come to terms with the multiplicity with which all knowledge relating to creatures is tainted. It is, so to say, an incomprehensibility which is more radical, more ab-

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58 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, 3, PG 3, 165A, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.

59 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, 8, PG 3, 212BC, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.

60 1Cor. 15:24, transl. by E. Artemi.

61 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, 2, PG 3, 363-366, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987. Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, 8, PG 3, 412BC, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.

62 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, 8, PG 3, 412BC, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.

> solute. Indeed, God would no longer be incomprehensible by nature if this incomprehensibility were, as in Plotinus, rooted in the simplicity of the One"[63].

4. The Knowledge of God in Maximus' the Confessor writings

Maximus the Confessor uses the term "gnosis" many times in his writings. Most of them the word has the meaning of the knowledge of God or for God or divine knowledge. He explains that the comprehension of the divine mode of being can be managed through the grace of God. The latter enlightens the mind of the believer. The clear mind can "grasp" the divine truth[64]. This light which is the light of the Lord's Transfiguration belongs to the mystical theology according to apophasis, it remained uncircumscribed in space and unperceived by the senses[65]. The mind needs a preparation in order to accept the light of the divine nature. This clearness of the thought has to do with the virtues. The believer tries to adopt or to practice the virtues of human nature and to abandon the passions. This has a reward in the attempt for the union of God. The reward of self-control is dispassion, and the reward of faith is spiritual knowledge. Dispassion engenders discrimination, and spiritual knowledge engenders love for God[66]. These help man to clarify his mental power and to have the correct view, "vision" of beings and facts[67]. This kind of perception characterizes relative or natural knowledge and the authentic or supernatural one.

An important source for knowing of God is the Holy Bible. God reveals Himself to us as our Maker, our Sustainer, our Ruler, our Lawgiver, our Judge and our Savior. He is the source of life on earth and the source of eternal life. God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, we can know Him through His Creation: ourselves, nature, and all of creation. All of this we can observe. Apostle Paul tells us,

> "For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead"[68].

The Scripture teaches us two ways of knowing God, two kinds of knowledge of divine things; one is the *relative* knowledge, which has as pillars human reason, ideas and conceptions[69]; and the other is the *genuine* knowledge, the *authentic* one; this is

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63 Vl. Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, p. 33

64 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Charitate*, 4, 4, PG 90, 1051-1054; 3, 99, PG 90, 1045-1046, trans. by G. Eustace, H. Palmer, Ph. Sherrard, and K. Ware.

65 Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguorum Liber*, 10, PG 91, 1168A, transl. by E. Artemi.

66 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Charitate*, Text from Gerald Eustace Howell Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, trans. and eds, *The Philokalia*: *The Complete Text*, vol. 2, (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1979), 68-69.

67 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Charitate*, 1, 79, PG 90, 977C; 1, 87, PG 90, 980C; 2, 76, PG 90, 1008CD; 3, 1, PG 90, 1017B; 3 37, PG 90, 1097C, trans. by G. Eustace, H. Palmer, Ph. Sherrard, and K. Ware. Maximus the Confessor, *Letter* 2, PG 91, 392-408, in the *On Love* in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, Routledge 1996, p. 85.

68 Rom. 1:20, trans. in New International Version.

69 Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium,* 60, PG 90, 621CD, transl. by Paul Blowers and Robert Wilken, St. Vladimir's Press, 2003.

> "gained only by actual experience, apart from and beyond human reason and ideas. This authentic, experiential knowledge gives us a direct perception of God through participation in his life by grace"[70].

Additionally, it could be said that another way for the knowledge of God can be based on the logic of man, rational knowledge. This rational knowledge of God uses analogies from creating beings in the intellectual contemplation of God. Similarly, "conceptual knowledge" means all the simple knowledge of God drawn from created beings. Moreover, to know God is not to know about Him, but to be united to him, and to be united to him one must be like him. But God is infinite, while humans are evidently finite. For this the "immediate perception" involves actual experience, through participation, in the supernatural attributes of God[71].

For Maximus, the knowledge of God is used in relation to the Incarnation. Only God can make himself known, as he does in the person of his Son incarnate among us[72]. Faith is a freely given gift of God. Also, Maximus the Confessor's work, *Chapters on Knowledge* states that God is "incomprehensible" and "not discernable by any being on the basis of any natural representation"[73]. This begins a long apophatic listing of what God is not "insofar as it is possible for us to know" what he is not[74]. So then, Maximus understands knowledge of God to be possible. He stresses supreme gnosis as a "supreme ignorance of the supremely Unknowable". God is the transcendent, completely incomprehensible God who is totally beyond all images and concepts. As far as it involves God, the rational knowledge is inadequate for Him. It must be completed by supernatural revelation, fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the Pentecostal gift of the Holy Spirit. For God is known only to a certain extent through His activities[75]. The knowledge of Himself in His essence and personhood remains inaccessible to all angels and men alike, and He can in no way be known by anyone[76].

God reveals Himself as Trinity. The revelation of the Absolute who is at the same time, 'One ousia or essence and Three persons or hypostases'[77].

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70 Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium,* 60, PG 90, 621CD, transl. by Paul Blowers and Robert Wilken, St. Vladimir's Press, 2003.

71 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Charitate*, 3, 2, PG 90, 1017B ; 2, 21, PG 90, 992A; 2, 95, PG 90, 1016C, trans. by G. Eustace, H. Palmer, Ph. Sherrard, and K. Ware.

72 Jn 1:18 trans. in New International Version: "If it was for us that the Word of God in His incarnation descended into the lower parts of the earth and ascended above all the heavens; while being Himself perfectly unmoved, he underwent in Himself through the incarnation as man our future destiny. Let the one who is moved by a love of knowledge mystically rejoice in learning of the great destiny which He has promised to those who love the Lord", Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Ducenta. Ad theologiam Deique Filii in carne dispensationem spectantia*, 2, 24, PG 90, 1136B, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware.

73 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Ducenta.* 1, 1, PG 90, 1084, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware.

74 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Ducenta.* 1, 2, PG 90, 1084A, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware.

75 "We do not know God from His essence. We know Him rather from the grandeur of His creation and from His providential care for all creatures. For through these, as though they were mirrors, we may attain insight into His infinite goodness, wisdom and power". Maximus the Confessor, *Capita de Charitate*, 1, 96, PG 91, 981C.

76 Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Theologica et Oeconomica*, 1, 76, PG 90, 1212A.

77 Ibidem, 2, 1; PG 90, 1224AB.

> "There is one God because there is one Divinity, a Unity unoriginate, simple, beyond being, without parts and undivided. The same Unity is a Trinity, also unoriginate, simple and so on"[78].

> As Vladimir Lossky notes:
> "the Incomprehensible reveals Himself in the fact of His being incomprehensible, for His transcendence is firmly established in the fact that God is at the same time "both monad and triad"[79].

In Maximus' thought the human mind can obtain comprehension of God only with its ascent. By this way, it manages the union of itself with the unknowable God in a knowing and at the same time unknowing vision of God. Jaap Durand analyses the writings of Maximus and supports that:

> "the intelligence is impelled by wisdom to come to contemplation and by contemplation to knowledge, by knowledge to the unceasing knowledge and by this unceasing knowledge to truth, which is God"[80].

Generally, through God's creation the human being knows that He exists. Through the Scriptures the human being knows what God is like. Through the Son he can have a personal relationship with God.

Another way that is presented by Maximus for the acquaintance of God is the participation in the liturgical life. There, the holy Trinity bestows upon the believers the Revelation of the heavenly mysteries. The christian enables to enter into the impenetrable depths of God's mystery[81]. In Liturgy and in Holy Eucharist, man succeeds the intratrinitarian communion and unites himself with the God. In the Church the believer has the privilege to unite himself with God, so to know God. This knowledge of God and the union with Him culminates in the communion of the blessed and vitalized mysteries. As Saint Maximus says, by the Holy Communion, the man claimed to be God by grace. This means that the liturgy leads man to the path of deification, namely the lifting of the final unity and identity with God[82]. As it is shown above this thought of Maximus, during the Divine Liturgy, the faithful follows a spiritual initiation route and elevation from the imperfect to the perfect, from earth to heaven, from the human to the angelic state and eventually into god. Through the knowledge of the Lord's teaching (Gospel), the engagement with the angels for God's glorification (Trisagion), awareness of God's benefactions to humans (Great Eisodos-Creed), the man abandons the "Earth's spirit", realizes the adoption of God and achieve union with him (Holy Communion) and captures the knowledge of God as far as His energies.

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78 Maximus the Confessor, *Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice*, First Century, 1-6, 164-165.

79 Vl. Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, p.69.

80 J. Durand, *The Many Faces of God. Highways and byways on the route towards an orthodox image of God in the history of Christianity from the first to the seventeenth century*, Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2007, p. 56.

81 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia* 16, PG 91, 693CD.

82 ibidem.

To sum up, Maximus' teaching concerning man's knowledge of God is a synergy of creature and Creator. A man obtains the natural and the supernatural knowledge of God, because of God's natural and supernatural revelation. His holy uncreated light makes the human mind fertile to accept the seed of the holy knowledge. The natural knowledge of God can be revealed by the vision of the creation, of the universe. That general manifestation of God –whether recognized as such or not– in and through nature, as distinct from his special revelation in the incarnate Christ and inspired Scriptures. The supernatural knowledge is revealed through Christ's incarnation. However, that knowledge of God dim or incomplete to which humanity has access by means of natural revelation, and apart from special revelation. Maximus connects the knowledge of God with the Holy Divine Mass and Holy Communion. In the church, the holy Spirit helps the believer to "see" and "know" God. Without His contribution people cannot come to the knowledge of God, but only by the Spirit. Finally, Maximus argues that the vision of God, the deification of the believer, the union of man with Him and the knowledge of God are closely bound together. All these cannot be understood as distinguished parts. Breaking this unity takes man further away from knowledge of God[83].

5. Conclusions

Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor agree that the only real knowledge of God is not to be found in the created world, but were

> "careful not to make the cognitive knowledge, even if necessarily limited, seem unimportant. They insist on the absolute transcendence and unknowability of the Trinity, while emphasizing the reasonable accuracy of words as verbal signifiers"[84].

According to them the Mystical Theology shows the way to believers how they could know God through His Light[85], although He remains completely transcendental and unapproachable in His essence. By this way the mystical theology can be related to the Supernatural one. Supernatural theology has for its foundation principles accepted by faith which rests on the authority of God Himself, who has declared them to us by Divine revelation.

The common place of these three fathers' teaching about the knowledge of God is that the human language cannot express the antinomy of transcendental Christian God revealing Himself in this world as creator and redeemer[86]. To know God is not to know about him, but to be united to him, and to be united to him one must be like

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83 ibidem.

84 E. Clapsis, *Orthodoxy in Conversation: Orthodox Ecumenical Engagements*, Brookline – Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000, p. 42. J. Winters, "Saying Nothing about No-Thing: Apophatic Theology in the Classical World", *Baha'i Library Online* 1994, http://bahai-library.com/personal/jw/my.papers/apophatic.html. A.Strezova, "Knowledge and Vision of God in Cappadocian Fathers", 10-9-2010, http://oodegr.co/english/filosofia/gnwsi_8ewria_kappadokes.htm

85 J. A. McGuckin, *Sages Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Byzantine Spiritual Tradition,* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001, p. 129.

86 A. Louth*, Denys the Areopagite*, London: Geoffrey Chapman Press, 1989, p. 90.

him. But God is infinite, while humans are evidently finite. The fathers note that the knowledge of God can be obtained by the transition from cataphatic to apophatic man. Then the transcendence to the human language will help man to overcome and difficulty that the man will have to perceive God.

On these grounds, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor confess God as radically other and unknown. They explain that if man really attempts to know God,

> "aside from the spiritual prerequisites of purification and enlightenment, he must come forward stripped of any meaning of knowledge and only then will he be able to see "without eyes" and know "without knowing" the one who exists beyond any sight or knowledge"[87].

The fathers employ the *apophasis/ negative theology* to support that the divine nature remains beyond any description, any place and time. For this reason, Gregory of Nyssa speaks about the gnofos, the unapproachable light which reveals the invisible things about God and in it God stays[88]. *Negative theology* or a*pophasis* is not strange generally to Christian teaching. In fact, much of the distinctive vocabulary and conceptual moves of Christian *apophasis* come from Platonic ideas for God[89]. Finally, although we didn't refer to the influence of platonism and neoplatonism to these fathers, it is undoubtfully known that Gregory, Dionysius and Maximus adopted many terms and ideas for this kind of philosophy and attach them to Christian theology, in order to express the truth for one and at the same time Triune God.

An important consequence of fathers' belief in the infinity of God is their belief that God, as limitless, is essentially incomprehensible to the limited minds of created beings[90]. Their theology was thus apophatic. They presented that God should be defined in terms of what we know He is not rather than what we might speculate Him to be. This God is an unknown God being called all beings into existence and differentiates them. He is unknown in His essence, but He can reveal Himself to the believers who try hard to unite themselves with Him. Gregory, Maximus and Dionysius underline the relation of knowledge of God in church because of the holy

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87 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch. 2, $23^{1-3,\ 8-9}$, transl. in english by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978. Dionysius Areopagite, *De mystica theologia* 2, PG 3, 1025AB. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad sanctissimum presbyterum ac praepositum Thalassium,* 25*,* PG 90, 333CD. G. Martzelos, "Kataphasis and Apophasis in the Greek Orthodox Patristic Tradition", ed. Norbert Hintersteiner, *Naming and Thinking God in Europe Today: Theology in Global Dialogue*, vol. 1, New York, 2007, p. 256.

88 Dionysius Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus*, 1, PG 3, 585-587; 2, PG 3, 636-680; Dionysius Areopagite, *De mystica theologia* 1, PG 3, 997-1025; Dionysius Areopagite, *Epistulae,* 5.1.1, PG 3, 1073-1077. Maximus the Confessor, *Ad Thalassium,* 64-65, PG 90, 716C–736B. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Theophilum adversus Apollinaristas* PG 45, 1273BC; Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *In inscriptiones Psalmorum*, PG 44, 532A-D; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC 1, ch. 2, $31^{1-6,}$ transl. in english by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*,SC 1, ch. 2, $23^{1-3,\ 8-9}$, 157, 164, transl. in english by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*,SC 1, ch. 1, 46, transl. in english by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, 6,202, 181; Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi*, PG 46, 913CD.

89 Ch. M. Stang, "Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite", in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Julia A. Lamm, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013, p. 161.

90 *In Life of Moses*, Gregory writes: "..every concept that comes from some comprehensible image, by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the Divine nature, constitutes a idol of God and does not proclaim God", Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, SC1, ch. 2, 164, transl. in english by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguseon, New York, 1978.

Liturgy and the holy Eucharist. They present systematically their vision about the ascension of man and of the universe towards God. The divine liturgy is the important key to man's transformation and opens his mind to accept or to find the knowledge of God. All these are succeeded by the symbols;

> "Indeed, the symbolic contemplation of intelligible things by means of visible realities is spiritual knowledge and understanding of invisible things through the visible"[91], Maximus says.
> Moreover Dionysius underlines that

> "Similarly the divine sacrament of the synaxis remains what it is, unique, simple and indivisible and yet, out of love for humanity, it is pluralized in a sacred variegation of symbols. It extends itself so as to include all the hierarchical imagery. Then it draws all those varied symbols together into a unity, returns to its own inherent oneness, and confers unity on all those sacredly uplifted to it"[92].

All fathers support that only God can make himself known, as he does in the person of his Son incarnate among us. All agree that the enlightened mind of God can help man to understand the Creator, the God of Christians.

> "This light or effulgence can be defined as the visible quality of the divinity, of the energies or grace in which God makes Himself known"[93].

God is found, according to them, in His essence not seen and unknown. They employ the apophatic terminology for the ungraspable nature of God. This "grasping knowledge" is accomplished beyond all concepts by the sole mediation of faith[94]. The real being is only God, in accordance with fathers is the one that exists in nature, and not as a result of someone else. Only God is self existed while a created world exists as a result of God's creative power. In order to maintain this existence of the creature the man must remain connected to the real essence existence, the God. And it is the continuously manifesting quality of God.

As sum up, we could say that the fathers have many similarities when they referred to the knowledge of God and how a man can "see" and "know" Him. There are many similarities between these fathers' theology and neoplatonist philosophy, especially that of Plotinus[95]. Gregory, Dionysius, Maximus have some common themes with Plotinus as: i) the transcendent reality is ineffable, unnameable and unknowable. Man can know that God exists, but not what He is. ii) the use of the negative theology- negative vocabulary. Plotinus explained that the One created everything, including itself and it acts as the goal for all else. The One is unknown and eternally perfect. These Christian fathers have similar thoughts by the way that

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91 Maximus the Confessor, *Mystagogia* 16, PG 91, 693CD, transl. by George Berthold, *Maximus Confessor Writings,* New Jersey 1985.

92 Dionysius the Areopagite, *Celestial Hierarchy*, PG 3, 329 A, transl. by Colm Luibhed, with annotations by Paul Rorem, Paulist Press.

93 Vl. Lossky, *The mystical theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood -New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994, p. 221.

94 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, 6, 183.

95 J. J. Cleary, ed., *The perennial tradition of Neoplatonism*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997, p. 188-194.

they perceive God. God and the One could be seen as one in the same because of what they are seen to embody. Both are seen to be the most perfect and the biggest yet most unattainable goal. God gives Christians a role model and give them something to work towards. The One and God would give hope and purpose to all those that believed in them. The only difference is that the One to Christians is God who is guiding humans. The latter can know him with the purification of their mind and through the sacramental mysteries in church.

Finally, there is no doubt that these three Christian fathers, whom we dealt with, have an extensive knowledge of the Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy. Nevertheless they retain their independence and provide the expressive shapes of an ancient Greek philosophy to a clear Christian philosophy.

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