

Into the Agora

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1 At the Areopagus

In the late AD 50s, some twenty years after his miraculous experience of divine light and conversion to Christ, St Paul stepped for the first time onto mainland European soil to proclaim the Gospel.

It is tempting to set this date as the advent of an eastern religion in the West: the sect of Jews who for less than a decade had been called by the name "Christian." Yet to pretend that Paul's upbringing had been strictly "oriental," to translate the geographical divide of the Bosphorus into a cultural one between East and West, would be an oversimplification. A native of cosmopolitan Tarsus, a city to the north of Cyprus on the east Mediterranean coast in what is now Turkey, Paul was already a man of overlapping identities: a Jew, certainly, but also a Roman citizen who had served the Army, who spoke Latin and Aramaic, but whose native tongue - and so his native way of thought - was Greek. Thanks to Alexander, Greek was the lingua franca of the Roman Middle East, just part of the greater Roman Empire of which Paul was a citizen. Living in this city ten miles upriver of the Mediterranean and six miles south of the main trade route to Syria and Asia Minor, Paul would have known the full diversity of the Empire from the earliest age, seeing the people and hearing the many languages of the traders from all over the Empire and beyond, including those who brought in the riches of North Africa and Asia. But to communicate, whether they came from Gaul or the Ganges, they would need to speak Greek, the language which gave us the very word and concept of "Europe." The East-West binary which so occupies us today would have seemed far less obvious to Paul, and even the binary of Jew and Greek was one more formal than obvious in cultural reality. Jews like Paul spoke Greek, thought in Greek, wrote Greek, and even studied the Scriptures and worshipped in Greek.

While many Jews lamented this elision of their culture, more often they enjoyed living with it and the freedoms it brought. There were certainly those who feared that the Jewish way of life would be diluted to nothing. Some, as we know from Maccabees, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Scriptures, sought to extricate themselves from the Greek way of life, either by isolating themselves in communities such as that at Qumran, or like Judas and the Zealots by taking up arms against the Roman oppressors. But Paul's approach was different. As far as he was concerned, the Spirit which had opened the mouths of the Apostles and the ears of their hearers at Pentecost, that the Gospel might be known in the languages of all people, was the same Spirit of light that had opened his eyes and breathed to him the voice of the Lord at Damascus, and he had been chosen to play a special part in its work. Instead of isolating the Jews from the Greeks, he would make the Greeks into honorary Jews. He saw the potential of Christ's person and his Gospel to bring to reality the messianic prophecies of the Jewish scriptures, which foretold the day when people of all nations would gather to worship the one God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Moses.

So when Paul stepped into Athens in the late 50s, he did so not as a stranger, not as a foreigner, but as a fellow-citizen of an extraordinarily diverse empire, who spoke the language of the people as his own tongue. Moreover, an educated and literary man, he spoke not only the language in its bare, utilitarian sense, but was versed also in its philosophical and cultural debates and conventions. In both senses, he went ready to speak the language of the philosophers, in the home of the philosophers: Athens.

He went first, naturally enough, to his kinsmen, his fellow Jews, and started to debate with them in their synagogues; but no stranger to controversy, he took his conversation also into the Agora (Acts 17:17). Generally translated as "marketplace," this can have misleading implications for those of us

raised with the modern European mindset of a clear division between public and sacred space, or even between the mercantile and political realms.

We have consciously to remember, whenever we read texts from the ancient world, that secularism is a modern invention, and particularly in the case of the Agora: this was where, for centuries, Athenian men had come to spend their mornings in trade, certainly, but also in philosophical conversation, political decision-making and, vitally, in worship of the gods. To them, as to the ancient Jews, it would have seemed perverse to separate such realms: for how could anyone trade without any political implications, without building or breaking social bonds, relationships and hierarchies of patron and petitioner? And what folly, or worse still hubris, it would be to engage in any such transactions without divine blessing. All of these dealings gave birth to and indeed necessitated philosophical questions and discussion about what life was for and how it should best be lived. The notion that this should be an arbitrary matter for the individual to decide, and that commerce could be undertaken in isolation from social, moral, or spiritual considerations would have flown in the face of all reason: still less that the government should exist only to oil the tracks of such transactions. In the Agora, there was no division between politics, business and worship for leisured men, and the idle discussion of these things while their slaves toiled. Far from being some isolated street preacher of the modern sandwich-board "doom is nigh" type, by speaking in the Agora, Paul was taking part in the Athenians' everyday activity.

Nonetheless, Paul's words drew the attention of the authorities. He was summoned to the Areopagus (Acts 17.19), a rocky outcrop to the West of the Acropolis. On this hill named after Ares, the God of War, was the ancient law court of Athens, where Paul would proclaim the God of Peace.

If there was an irony to this, then it was well at home, for this was where the father of professional irony had in 399 BC been sentenced to death. Socrates, accused of corrupting the young by teaching disrespect for the gods, could have avoided his fate. His friend Crito offered to bribe the gaolers for his release, and argued that this would be just, since Socrates was innocent of the charge against him. But Socrates replied, in the dialogue which bears Crito's name, that justice required him to obey the law even if it demanded his death. Now this was far from an arbitrary assertion. The law for Athenians was as sacrosanct as it was for Jews. The Attic analogue for Moses was Solon, the legendary lawgiver supposed to have established the city's rules on the very Areopagus where Socrates was tried, and Paul would be tested 450 years later.

It is no coincidence that both Solon's law and Moses', Socrates' and Paul's, were bequeathed in high places, whether the Areopagus or Sinai. For both were seen as divine gift, and certainly by the time of Paul, when Judaism and Greek wisdom mingled and supported one another in their convictions, both were seen as fundamentally in harmony with the laws which, by divine governance, were woven into the cosmos, into the movement of the planets, the laws of mathematics, into the very growths and surgings of nature itself.

The essential harmony of divine and natural law was one professed by Socrates himself, or at least by Plato's version of him. When we read in Acts 17:18 the philosophers' description of Paul as an "idle babbling" who "seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities," we may be tempted to read into it later European sentiments of cultural superiority or even racism; but this would be anachronistic and miss two key references. First, the word translated as "idle babbling" is in the Greek of Acts *spermatologos*, referring to someone who, bird-like, picks up the "seeds of words," scraps of ideas and conversations, in the Agora. Both this, and second, the critique of "proclaiming foreign divinities" were allegations made against Socrates. Luke is deliberately portraying Paul as a new Socrates, challenging the people of Athens, as his predecessor had, to turn to the natural law of the One and the Good.

As well as the reference to Socrates, we would also miss a wider cultural point. The word "foreigner" in Greek does not carry the negative connotations that we might associate with it in later European contexts. The word *xenos*, which plays a part in the Greco-English compound "xenophobia," means simultaneously stranger, guest and host. Each of these senses of the word is apposite to the contemporary Greco-Roman attitude towards gods from other lands. For centuries,

during the ages of Greek empire, the divinities of the Egyptians had been assimilated into the Greek pantheon. Long before, the Pythagoreans who exercised such influence on Plato had reputedly studied the wisdom of the Indian sages. But in Paul's day, not only the Egyptian deities, but also those of the Celts, Persians and others besides, whilst no doubt foreign in their origin, now served as both guests and hosts in the colonised realms of the Roman Empire. Paul's new foreign divinity might therefore expect to be met with interest before hostility or derision.

Nor even was Paul's proclamation of monotheism new or controversial. The "divinities" whom the philosophers in the Agora assumed he must be preaching about were not "gods" in the Jewish sense of the word "God" at all, but *daimones*, spiritual beings of the lower and created order. Socrates certainly maintained the existence of these, but part of the reason he fell into trouble with the law was that he sometimes seemed to suggest a single God above and beyond them, rather than merely a more powerful instantiation of the same species.

By Paul's day, philosophers who did the same no longer suffered Socrates' fate. The Stoics were among them. They too acknowledged the capricious divinities of the Greek pantheon, but insisted that beyond all those was a single God, whom Epictetus would only a generation after Paul even address in a hymn as "Father." It was by this Stoic God's divine Logos, the principle of reason and order, that the universe was sustained, and the purpose of life was to discern and live in harmony with that divinely-imbued law of nature. Signalling his sympathy with the Stoics, Paul quotes at them one of their own poets, the fourth century BC astronomer Aratus, with a line that no less a theologian than S. Augustine would pick up some centuries later: "in Him we live and move and have our being." The reasoning mind which gives the order to the universe in which we dwell is that of the one God from whom both Jews and Greeks originate: for, as Paul continues to quote the poet, "we too are his offspring."

So here is Paul, standing before the council of the Areopagus, the seat of judgment where Socrates had been condemned, a court in which there was no separation of the political from the theological, and where crimes against the gods might be tried as much as crimes against man. He was brought by sympathetic company to protest against the worshipping of the idols in the city. Yet he does so not as an outsider, but as a Greek-speaker, not in fear of condemnation, but as Roman citizen and as such protected under imperial law. And so, he can get away with a decidedly ambiguous opening gambit: "Athenians," he says, "I see how *deisidaimonesteroi* you are in every way!" Now this word, typically translated "religious," really means "fearful of the daimones," the spirits or pagan gods. Taken at face value by a loyal polytheist, it would be a compliment; but to the Stoics and Epicureans, and to any Platonists loyal to the memory of Socrates, it would be understood quite differently. Hidden behind the praise was the accusation of superstition.

Yet Paul almost immediately pulls out the barb, for among the idol-bearing plinths of Athens, the plethora of statues to the deities of every aspect of life, of fertility and war and childbirth and commerce, he did find one that was pleasing: an empty plinth, dedicated to an "Unknown God" (Acts 17:23).

On Paul's next words rest an entire tradition of Christian philosophical engagement which flourished for a millennium but has continued only more sporadically to exercise influence in the Church until the present day. Rival interpretations of these words represent the great breach between a mainstream philosophical-theological nondualism upheld in the West by the Church of the first millennium and to this day in the ascetic spirituality and mystical theology of the Eastern churches, as opposed to the newer, dualistic ideas of the late Middle Ages which would lead to the Reformation, the Enlightenment and modernity:

Ho oun agnoountes eusebeite, touto ego katangelo humin.

"That which you worship unknowing, I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

A common modern Protestant reading of this sentence, including that of the great Karl Barth, is to hear Paul accusing the Greek philosophers of utter ignorance. Without the gospel he proclaims, they know nothing at all. Non-Christian religions are quite simply false, with no truth whatsoever to offer.

Worse still, if Barth is to be believed, the closer they seem to Christianity, the more deceptive they really are - an accusation he particularly levelled against Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism.

Were this so, we might expect the listeners in the Areopagus to stop listening there and then. But in fact, they keep listening, and I think that this is because Luke has Paul speak to them in their own philosophical terms, a tongue in which he was bilingual. And the use of the language here is precise: *agnoountes* is a participle, not the adverb "ignorantly," not the noun phrase "in ignorance," but a verbal adjective indicating *process*: it is, precisely, *by the act of unknowing* that the Athenians give proper honour (which is the meaning of *eusebeite*) to God.

It is, after all, not at any allegation of ignorance that the wise Greeks scoff or take exception: it is at Paul's profession of the physical resurrection and of final judgment by a mere man. History shows that the pagan philosophers, for all their wisdom, would never accept that the Logos could be made flesh, though the Platonist Iamblichus would come close to this by advocating a principle similar to the Incarnation for all human souls. Yet it appears from this passage an unbiblical assertion to make the Bible itself the sole vehicle of the knowledge of God. Rather, there is a proper acknowledgement of the limits of our knowledge of the God whom the Jewish Scripture themselves proclaim unknowable, which leads, paradoxically, to true knowledge of Him; and at least to some extent, this (un)knowledge is accessible in philosophies which lack the full revelation of God in Christ. Didn't Socrates say that he who is wisest is the one who knows he knows nothing?

Not all of the philosophers scoff at Paul. There are some, unnumbered, who join Paul and want to hear more. They would not have done so if he had not spoken their language, both literally and metaphorically. He went out not to those whom he knew would be unsympathetic, not into some anachronistically secularised and so hostile public square, but strategically, deliberately, to the Agora, a philosophically and spiritually active place where he wagered he might encounter people who spoke enough of the same language to hear and to understand what he had to say. He did so from within the synagogue, within his own community, but went out to find allies where he could, and if possible, to bring them with him.

Even those who could not bring themselves to assent to the ultimate conclusions of Christian revelation ended up more sympathetic with him than they started. Others went all the way: they crossed over and were baptised into the Church. Among them was Dionysius the Areopagite. Five centuries later, he would provide the pen-name for a theologian of almost unparalleled influence, who would follow Paul in working in both Christian and Jewish tradition, and take the motif of divine unknowing to such an extreme that we do not even know who he was himself.

2 Whoever he was...

For centuries, it was widely believed that the theologian who took Dionysius' name was the very Athenian philosopher who had followed Paul. Certainly, S. Thomas Aquinas seemed to think so. Seeing Dionysius as only one generation removed from Apostles themselves, he treats the writings ascribed to him as second only to the Scriptures, citing them more extensively even than Augustine or even his beloved Aristotle, whom Aquinas admired enough to call simply the Philosopher. Yet doubts had been cast on Dionysius' authorship far earlier on, even as his writings emerged on the Christian theological scene in the sixth century; and by the time of the Reformation, it was so suspect that Luther could dismiss him as "that Dionysius, whoever he was."

By Luther's day, scholars were equipped to read Greek and Hebrew texts in the original. We now have far more of those texts available to us than the humanists and Reformers had, and more sophisticated historical approaches to them. Nonetheless, scholars of Dionysius could now be far more confident in dating him much later than the Apostolic age. His work showed a clear reliance on and even word-for-word citation of pagan Neoplatonic philosophers: in particular, Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus. Plotinus had lived in the third century, Iamblichus the third to fourth, and Proclus the fifth. So, the writer who called himself "Dionysius" could not possibly have lived in the first century, unless one rather perversely insisted that those three pagan philosophers were actually

quoting him - which would seem unlikely, since nobody at all seemed to mention him until the first half of the sixth century.

So was Dionysius, as Luther suggests, trying to claim for himself a pseudo-apostolic authority for corrupting the pure gospel with alien, Platonic ideas? Or worse, as Rosemary Arthur suggests, was he a coward and a heretic, hiding behind the name to protect himself from orthodox authorities?

I hope to show that there is far more to Dionysius' pseudonymity than mere pseudery. His adoption of the ancient saint's name is a practice consistent with both Christian and Platonic traditions, and moreover, he creatively weaves this practice into his spiritual strategy of mystical unknowing.

Dionysius was undoubtedly a Platonist, and among his pagan peers, pseudonymity was an established practice. The Syrian Iamblichus, whose name means "God reigns," wrote his *De Mysteriis* under the Egyptian pseudonym of Abamon, not as some cunning disguise, but to place himself in the line of Pythagoras and Plato, who had themselves claimed to be influenced by Egyptian (as well as Indian) wisdom. The *De Mysteriis* was an important work to Dionysius, who developed from it his own distinctively Christian sacramental theology, which would in turn exercise such a great influence both on the Eastern churches and on the mediaeval West. So first, his adoption of the pseudonym can be seen as a nod to Iamblichus and an assertion, even as a Christian, of his role in the universal philosophical quest for truth in which the Platonists claimed their part.

Nor was pseudonymity an unknown practice in Christian circles. Think of those letters bearing St Paul's name which were not written by him, or for that matter the entire Johannine corpus. The Reformers made the mistake, as we are wont to do, of applying modern notions of authorship and even intellectual property to texts of the ancient world where entirely different assumptions prevailed. To write in a great saint's name was not to plagiarise, to accrue to oneself their honour, or to pull the wool over the reader's eyes, but to honour the saint by one's words. In this spirit, emeritus Pope Benedict writes that the author who called himself Dionysius "did not want to glorify his own name ... but rather truly to serve the Gospel, to create an ecclesial theology, neither individual nor based on himself."

By his act of pseudonymity, Dionysius reveals himself as the inheritor of two discrete traditions of pseudonymous writing, Pythagorean-Platonic and Christian. But it is in his specific, creative application of this practice, strange as it may seem to modern sensibilities, becomes a call to us into a particular way of relating to God.

The Areopagite's writings are most famous for what is called their apophatic method of apprehending the divine, to be later known in the Latin tradition as the *via negativa* or Negative Way. This path insists that the only way to reach full knowledge of God is by systematic meditation on God's unknowability, finding Him by walking into the divine darkness of unknowing. In contrast with more the cataphatic spirituality of the Positive Way, which focuses on what can be said and known of God, the apophatic way consists in recognising the limits of anything we, as mere finite creatures, can say or understand about our infinite Creator. Dionysius was by no means alone in his apophatic emphasis, shared to varying extents by earlier fathers of the Eastern tradition, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Origen, but also in the West by no less a theologian than Augustine. In the West, their thought would inspire the spiritual teaching of the Benedictines and later, St John of the Cross, St Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhardt, the writer of the Cloud of Unknowing, the Carthusians and many others; and in the East, this spirituality would become practically universal, perhaps epitomised by the Hesychast tradition of silent meditation. While cataphatic spiritual systems abound in the West, like those of later Franciscans, St Ignatius and the majority of the Reformation communities (Quakers being a notable apophatic exception), they were practically unknown in the East until exposure to more recent Western influence.

The adoption of the name of Paul's disciple shows the "Pseudo"-Dionysius' commitment both to the apophatic way of his Platonic masters and to its proper application to the God of Christian revelation. Like the historical Areopagite, this new Dionysius discerns in Jewish wisdom the fulfilment of the apophatic theology of the Platonists.

Dionysius' liturgical concerns throw further light on his pseudonymity and what it might mean for us. In the *Mystical Theology*, he takes us from the Areopagus to another mountain, Sinai, making Moses's ascent a metaphor for the spiritual journey of negation and deification, becoming ultimately one with God. At the highest peak of unity with the divine, he describes how one becomes neither oneself nor someone else, finding one's identity solely in God: that state of self-crucifixion where, in the Apostle's words, it is "no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

The noted Dionysian scholar Paul Rorem concludes that the *Mystical Theology* describes an intellectual method, even technique, for union with God, echoing earlier criticism by Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott that the Areopagite's way is essentially one of elitist, private mystical ascent. This would accord with the more familiar stream of Plotinus' sometimes more world-denying Platonism and its emphasis on escaping from the body through purely intellectual meditation.

This was once a common suspicion, and is unfortunately not much alleviated by the most popular English translation of Dionysius by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem. Protestant scholars, they tend to focus more on Dionysius' intellectual interpretation of Scripture, but at the expense of a vital key to understanding his work: namely, theurgy.

3 Theurgy: Or "whose work is it, anyway?"

Theurgy literally means "divine work," and gives the intellectual and spiritual basis for Dionysian sacramental theology. In a nutshell, it can be described as God working through the liturgical action of the Church. Unfortunately, it has not enjoyed an exclusively good reputation in Christian circles, ending up being written off as "magic" by the more rationalist religious thinkers who have achieved prominence since the Reformation. The prioritisations of scripture over reason, faith over works and grace over nature are indicative of a binary worldview where the supernatural and natural realms are mutually exclusive, and any speculation about the former relegated to realms of irrational "mysticism;" the difference between Reformation rejection of relics and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and modern rejection of the miraculous altogether, is only one of degree. For the Reformers, inheriting the late mediaeval doctrine of voluntarism, God can be known by his will alone. For moderns, whose historical-critical approach to Scripture has removed any confidence in the Bible as a consistent revelation of that will, if God exists at all, then he is safely inscrutable in his heaven, not troubling this world, so that this world need not trouble much with him. The notion that humans might invite his action into this realm seems like little more than make-believe, with a suspect whiff of sorcery.

Iamblichus was the father of the theurgic strand of Platonism in which Dionysius stands. Even in his day, theurgy was not universally accepted by his fellow pagan philosophers. Some resisted it, on the grounds that mortals should not be able to manipulate the wills of the gods by their rituals. What's more, they pointed out, much of Plato's own thought denigrated the material realm as inferior to the spiritual, a dualism even further exploded by the influential Aristotle, for whom the divine and the material had completely different purposes and trajectories. Iamblichus resisted such dualism. Metaphysically, he went further even than Plotinus in understanding the divine soul as entirely incarnate in the material realm. Because of this participation of the spiritual in the material, he could argue that theurgy was absolutely not a matter of mortals manipulating divine energy using matter, but rather, divine energy working through matter to lift the material realm closer to perfection.

In Iamblichus' metaphysics, Dionysius found the closest philosophical parallel to the core Christian belief of the Incarnation, and in theurgy, the realisation of the salvific potential of such an incarnational metaphysics. Here was, as it were, the chink in the pagan Platonists' armour: for the adherents of Plotinus were committed to a purely spiritual 'undescended' remainder to the soul, unsullied by participation in the material realm, and so could never countenance the kenosis of the Divine Logos becoming flesh in a human person. Nor, then, could they countenance the working of the Divine Spirit through materials such as water, bread or wine. For Dionysius, the latter followed naturally from the former, and in Iamblichean theurgy, he had found the ideal Platonic interface

between what Iamblichus presented as universal wisdom and the specific revelation of God in Christ.

4 From Mars Hill to Mount Sinai: Moses as Model of Communal Mysticism

I've asserted that through his theurgical take on the sacraments, Dionysius teaches not a private but a communal mysticism. Let's look at an example of this in practice in the *Mystical Theology*.

Dionysius frames this work as a letter to Timothy, himself a bishop or, to use the Dionysian term, 'hierarchy,' which is to say, the Eucharistic president par excellence; and elsewhere, Dionysius identifies Moses as the "type" of the ideal hierarchy or bishop. This indicates that, like Moses, the bishop represents not only himself in some solo spiritual practice, but approaches God as a representative of the ecclesial body of the new Israel, the Church.

In the *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius describes Moses' ascent into the divine darkness, binding together the supposedly individualistic apophatic way with specific allusions to the communal Christian liturgies. First, Moses has to be purified before ascending the mountain, recalling baptism, which Dionysius describes by the same word, 'purification,' in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Moses is then separated from the unpurified, as we know happened in early church communities during the Eucharist when the catechumens (baptismal candidates) were dismissed before the Canon. As Moses ascends, he hears 'trumpets,' a direct reference to what Dionysius elsewhere describes as the 'trumpet-calls' of the sacraments to which the uninitiated are deaf. Next, he sees 'many lights,' as the newly baptised would see on leaving the dark of the baptistery, generally separate places from the main body of ancient churches and often dark caves, on joining the congregation in church for the first time. Only then can he ascend to what Dionysius calls the 'summit of the divine ascensions,' which represents the elevated altar of a traditionally (that is, Eastward) ordered church, the proper place of the priestly celebrant. It is there that one can find the 'holiest and highest of the things we can see or conceive of': surely the 'holy of holies' of the eucharistic elements of bread and wine made the body and blood of Christ, called elsewhere by Dionysius the 'chief' or 'crowning point' of all the sacraments. It is not through lone meditation, but through these holiest of things that God's 'unimaginable presence is shown.' Then and only then (καὶ τότε), says Dionysius, can Moses break free from the visible and conceivable and plunge into the 'essentially hidden darkness of unknowing,' such that, like St Paul, he becomes 'neither himself nor someone else.'

So, Dionysius, far from positing a dualistic escape of the individual's mind from his body, gives an emphatically Christian method of negative ascent which is inextricable from the communal action of liturgy and the role played within it of material things. The tabernacle in which Moses beholds the place where the invisible God dwells becomes the sacrament of the Eucharist for Dionysius. Yet the sacrament itself is not merely a handy tool or prop, even a finger pointing at the moon; precisely *as* a material thing, is *necessary* to propel Moses to that realm beyond being, where sacraments shall cease. Matter itself has a role in the economy of salvation.

5 Into the Agora

Dreher's Benedict Option calls Christians to form intentional communities with a common life focussed firmly on God in prayer, and quite rightly insists that these be ecumenical. The Areopagite Option goes further. Just as orthodox Christians of varying stripes will find that they have more in common than that which divides them, if the example of the Areopagite is anything to go by, an example which we should remember was set by St Paul himself, then we will find that we have more in common with traditional adherents of other faiths than we have with the sea of liberal secularism that threatens to drown us.

The history of the Christian faith is much wider than just European. By the time the gospel had reached Britain, it had already reached the edges of China, spread along the Silk Road by Nestorian missionaries who encountered Persian and Indian religions on the way. Platonism gave them the concepts to engage with the advocates of these sophisticated intellectual and spiritual systems in a

mutually intelligible language. The origins of Christianity are bound up, via both its Jewish and Greek inheritance, with the wider quest for spiritual truth which until very recently occupied the finest minds not only of Western Christendom but of the entire world.

For all the growth of Christianity in Europe, before St Paul set foot in Athens, he was in Antioch, where the followers of Jesus had first been called Christians, fleeing there around AD 35 from Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen, in which Paul himself had taken part.

Antioch had the financial benefit of marking the beginning of the Silk Road, making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The Romans knew well that wealth lay in the East, not the West: a dreary outpost like Britain was certainly not seen as a plum posting. Only when Christian monks smuggled silkworms back down the Road to Byzantium in AD 552 could the West break its dependency on the sericulture of the East. Yet the mission of these monks, their several generations of forebears, and the hundreds of thousands of converts they won from Antioch to China is practically forgotten by western Christians as much as by secularists, most of whom still labour under the delusion, perpetuated in school text books, that Christianity is a “western” religion.

The West has a poor memory of the past outside its bounds. Recent popular histories including Peter Frankopan’s *Silk Roads* books and Gerard Russell’s *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* encourage the West to reflect on its exceptionalism, showing how it is really only in the last few hundred years that Europe ceased to be a fairly insignificant sideshow in world history. Yet the sense that western thought is the default position is far too deeply engrained to be revised overnight. This Eurocentricity begins not with Christian exceptionalism, but specifically with *western* Christian exceptionalism. Eusebius’ early fourth century *Ecclesiastical History*, focussed on Rome, overlooks the vast swathe of contemporary Christianity which existed and flourished outside the Empire, in the East. The existence of anything further east than Constantinople was relegated to the periphery of an intra-imperial West-East binary. The use of Greek as the lingua franca of the Church’s fifth-century controversies over the nature of Christ led to losses in translation where the Syriac and Aramaic Christians were concerned, and these misunderstandings led ultimately to schism. Despite the fact that their tradition was grounded in the Semitic languages and culture of Jesus and his Apostles themselves, the Churches of the East were marginalised and forgotten in the annals of both Latin and Greek Christianity.

And yet, by the time Pope Gregory sent St Augustine to Canterbury, the Syriac Church had already spread east as far as China. Where the western missionaries went out to poor pagan peoples with no written records of any systematic philosophy behind their practices and devotions, the eastern church was spreading through lands of great wealth and highly sophisticated philosophies which had been refined for centuries in writing: they lived and preached from the start among Zoroastrians, Manichees and Buddhists, and later would become a minority under Muslim rule. To engage with these philosophies convincingly, they needed to speak philosophical languages themselves, and they found that the tradition of Plato and Aristotle helped them find common enough ground to have meaningful interactions.

If time allowed, I could give examples from the Chinese works of Bishop Alopen, and the 8th century multilingual Nestorian Stele of the priest, Qing-Qing. Neither quote Dionysius directly, but both are dripping with shared Platonic assumptions, and the ascetic theology of the Eastern Churches shows similar marks. It may come as a surprise to hear that the court of 7th century China viewed Christianity in a more positive light than much of 21st century Europe and, increasingly, America does. The fact remains that Christianity was eventually suppressed in China. Yet, for hundreds of years, it did not merely survive, but flourished as part of a vast, international Christian community. We have evidence of Uighur Christian texts translated into Chinese by an Indian scholar in the eighth century, and by the end of the millennium, over 500 Christian texts were translated from Syriac into Chinese. In AD 872, a merchant in Basra reported the Emperor I-Tsung showing him a picture of Jesus. As far as Tibet have been found 9th century inscriptions, churches, crosses, and Christian manuscripts in Persian, Syriac and Turkish. Writings of the Arab cosmographer al-Masudi (d. 956) reveal that in AD 850 in Kashgar, a city in the far west of China, Christians, Jews, Muslims and

Zoroastrians lived together with Buddhists and Taoists. Kashgar is now in the Uighur Autonomous Region, where native Muslims are being imprisoned and persecuted by the Communist state for their belief in the same "Allaha," in Syriac, whose belief was once proclaimed by Bishop Alopen and welcomed by the Emperor.

Islam is mentioned only twice in the Benedict Option, and both times in relation to acts of terrorism. Conservative Christians in America particularly tend towards an entirely negative view of Islam, fuelled of course by the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and by the conflicts in the Middle East which have emerged from (or, one might argue, contributed to) them. In Europe, the attitude is more ambivalent. A comment from one of Michel Houellebecq's typically male, middle-aged and disgruntled protagonists perhaps sums it up well:

"It's sad, the shipwreck of a civilisation, it's sad to see its most beautiful minds sink without trace – one begins to feel slightly ill at ease in life, and one ends up wanting to establish an Islamic republic."

This more European style of angst about Islam shows a double fear that Islam threatens our liberties, along with the dawning suspicion that many of its reasons for doing so may be right. No doubt, we must protest with all our strength against the murder and forced conversion of Christians in fundamentalist Islamic regimes, the violence against homosexuals and apostates, and the repressive controls over women in certain Muslim countries. But even if such Wahhabistic interpretations are in vogue today, we would be fools to believe that this represents the historic spiritual and intellectual heritage of Islam. When Christians see Muslims settling together in tight communities with well-disciplined, devout families, when we hear the power and beauty of the mu'azzin's call to prayer and the austere beauty of Islam's artistic and musical heritage, we should find something to admire and to emulate.

In our Muslim communities, many of us in Europe can find a sympathetic Areopagus practically on our doorstep. The irony is that many Muslims came to Europe seeking not the ideologically purged public squares of secularism, but the Agora-like space where they might practice their faith among friendly, God-loving neighbours. Muslim parents often send their children deliberately to Christian schools because they believe that at least there, God will not be a dirty word. They are often disappointed. I wonder how long it will be before Muslim schools will be a better option for Christian parents.

The great error of the West, whether in its Christian or its new secular history, has been its exceptionalism: the idea that whether because of its religion or its science, it is superior to the cultures of the rest of the world. As we sink into the barbarism of a real Dark Age, where the autonomy of the individual is the sole measure of all things, and as we see the intellectual and religious heritage of the West deliberately erased by the very people who were appointed its guardians - namely, the academy and the Church - we should wake up to the fact that it is we who have been out of kilter with the majority of the world's people for the majority of the world's history. Most people in the world continue in traditional religious adherence.

The first word of the Rule of St Benedict is the command, "listen:" a vital imperative greatly augmented by the theology of the Areopagite, who finds in non-Christian wisdom a common search for truth. The Areopagus for us today may be the mosque, the gurdwara or the temple. There, like Paul, we will find friends, and the language of the Areopagite will help us to speak and, more importantly, to listen.

6 Conclusion: Pseudonymity as spiritual practice

Let me conclude by stressing that a common metaphysical language should not imply a relativisation of the Gospel. Dionysius' pseudonymity reinforces the communal dimension of his thought, but also its Christian particularity. Not merely an homage to S Paul or even to Iamblichus, his self-effacement takes us into the heart of Christ himself, and so into the inner life of the Trinity. In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius highlights the great paradox of the Divine Fullness of God self-emptying into Christ, and yet being unaffected in its eternal plenitude. This is by no means some philosophical

Platonic gloss on the gospel, but the living out of one of the oldest and most profound meditations on the nature of Christ in the New Testament: the "Christological hymn" of *Philippians* 2:5-11, in which Christ is described as "emptying himself of divine glory" and taking on "the form of a slave." This description of the divine act of "self-emptying," or *kenosis* in Paul's and Dionysius' Greek, comprises one of the earliest Christian understandings of who Christ is and how God works in him.

But why does God empty himself in this way? At this question, Dionysius the Christian departs dramatically from pagan Platonic precedent. For while Proclus would heartily agree that created beings are drawn to God by their desire or love for him, he would firmly reject Dionysius' conclusion: that God is drawn out of himself because of *his love for us*. It is, for Dionysius, only because God is love that he empties himself at all: first, in the ongoing act of creation, but then in the Incarnation of Christ, and conclusively in his Crucifixion. It is out of God's love for humanity that Christ, the Divine Logos, comes down and takes on himself our nature. It is precisely the one whom Dionysius calls the "philanthropic Christ" - that is, Christ as lover of people - who draws the created order into the uncreated heart of divine love. It is in his self-emptying of glory for the sake of love that we find our truest identity and so become saints.

One with the Communion of Saints in Christ, "Dionysius" shares their identity, and so might well take any of their names, as Catholic Christians take a saint's name at Confirmation. But his particular choice of name is instructive: his loses himself to find a shared identity with that Greek philosopher who was converted by Paul's approbation of "worship by unknowing." By taking the name of Dionysius, it is as though he baptises Platonic apophatic theology and so, writes Pope Benedict, is able "to put Greek wisdom at the service of the Gospel, to foster the encounter of Greek culture and intelligence with the proclamation of Christ."

The first challenge to those who would walk the Areopagite's path is his very pseudonymity. It is a call to absolute humility, to walk the Way of the Cross with no concern for one's own glory, but to put all earthly pride and approval aside for the sole aim of aspiring to mystical oneness with God in love - and not as a solitary pursuit, but in the company of others and through honouring God with the very matter which he has made.

The Negative Way is a profound antidote to the culture of celebrity which has infected even the Church: obviously to celebrity preachers and megachurch personality cults, but also to the clericalism and veneration of the clergy which has led to such infamous abuse of station. It means a move away from church as a platform for wannabe gurus, political activists or cod therapists. It means an end to ego among lay volunteers who see their domain, whether the kitchen cupboard or the flower rota or the home group, as a way to exercise the authority they once had at work before they retired or never had in work at all. It means a revision of what a friend calls "Breakfast Television" church, where the charismatic priest talks over a table to the "audience" like the host of a cookery programme (no reference intended to archbishops living or dead).

But it does not mean isolation. On the contrary, it means finding oneself by dying to self, and the paradox of living in and through and with the material world, and yet in Christ alone. Dionysius and his spiritual successors show us how to pursue this with other seekers of truth in a way which resists exceptionalism, but without sacrificing particularity.