Negative Theology: Its Use and Christological Function in Late Antiquity and Subsequent Developments

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Abstract: This article discusses the historical development of negative theology from its formulations in early Christianity to its later forms in Medieval Neo-Platonism. First analyzing how in early Christian thought negative theology was often used for a Christological purpose, the article goes on to discuss the implications of the Neo-Platonic notion of God as beyond being. While primarily applying a historical methodology, the article concludes by encouraging a rediscovery of the Christological orientation for negative theology found in its early Christian formulations.

Keywords: negative theology, Christology, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Neo-Platonism

In simple terms, negative theology can be defined as any discourse that speaks indirectly about God by saying something about what God is not. More broadly, negative theology may be understood as any discourse that seeks to talk about God by "un-saying" the concept of God itself, as implied in the frequently used synonym "apophatic" theology.[1] To this extent, negative theology may be understood as a linguistic or epistemological phenomenon, since it says something about how theological language and thinking work, but it obviously also has ontological underpinnings that regulate its use. The oneness and infinity of God, for example, has often played an important role here, just as the more or less clear distinction between God and creation that runs through much of Jewish and Christian thought.[2]

While these connections between ontology and negative theology are rather rudimentary, what is just as important, are the purposes or intentions that guide the use of negative theological language.[3] If in general the meaning of words is determined by context, this is true in particular for a kind of language that by its use of negations speaks only indirectly about its object, its meaning being dependent on what it denies. Moreover, as we shall see in the following, for many authors in the tradition,

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[1] Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 1–2.
[2] Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.
[3] Palmer, "Atheism," 236.

negative theology was not applied for its own sake but was only instrumental in establishing a larger picture. Seemingly similar instances of negative theology cannot, for this reason, simply be taken out of context and compared as if they were just saying the same thing.

This should be kept in mind while contemplating the history of negative theology. According to a typical narrative, negative theology in its Christian forms was a product of the influence of Neo-Platonism upon Christian theology in the early Middle Ages.[4] However, it is probably more accurate to say that there were parallel developments in late antiquity or even that negative theology developed in more complex conversations between Jewish, Christian and Neo-Platonic thought.[5] Recalling the eclectic milieu of 2nd century Alexandria, where much of negative theology originated, it should not be a surprise that negative theology does not depend on the principles of one philosophical school or religious tradition. By its very nature, negative theology cannot easily be defined or pinned down to a system of thought, but being always evasive and wary of definition, negative theology escapes any attempt at reducing it to a certain set of principles.

Nevertheless, it should be possible to formulate historical typologies of negative theology based on its use in different contexts. The following seeks to show how negative theology had a range of origins in late antiquity, but also that for early Christians, negative theology was, in many cases, applied for a primarily Christological purpose. With the development of Neo-Platonic forms of negative theology, a notion of God as beyond being or even "nothing" was introduced that gradually reshaped the original concerns of negative theology. While being far from a comprehensive overview of how negative theology developed, the following seeks to trace some of the differences between "classical" Patristic negative theology and its later forms. Along the way, the implications of negative theology for moral philosophy are discussed as well.

1. The Hidden God Revealed

While there may be a polygenesis of origins for negative theology as a philosophical discipline, at least one main root can be traced to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. There is no systematized negative theology here, but numerous statements do point to the strangeness and incomprehensibility of God. This is no place to list all biblical claims that may be taken as expressive of negative theology, but perhaps most important is the story of Moses who had to enter the "thick darkness" on Mount Sinai

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4 Jüngel, *God as the Mystery*, 223.
5 Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 10–11.

(Exod 20:21), a story that was often taken up in the subsequent tradition as containing profound philosophical insights into the ineffable and incomprehensible nature of God.

That Moses did not see the face of God, but only God's back, was taken by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC–50 AD) and early Christian apologists to express the fact that God is essentially ineffable, and can be known only by revelation through God's Logos. Philo, whom Andrew Louth called "the father of negative theology,"[6] argued that when God refers to himself as "the one who is" (ὁ ὤν) in the Septuagint translation (Exod 3:14), the point is that God as "being" (τὸ ὄν) surpasses human understanding.[7] God is not "beyond" being, as he would become in later negative theology, but, according to Philo, as absolutely the most fundamental being, God cannot be comprehended or put into words unless God reveals himself.[8]

Important is also the claim made in Isaiah about God who "hides himself" (Isa 45:15). This expression would become the basis for the notion of the "hidden God," the *Deus absconditus,* who is inaccessible to human thought and can as such only be known as revealed. Examples from the biblical wisdom literature may be added to this – the generally skeptical attitude of Ecclesiastes, or the Book of Job, when Elihu remarks poetically that "an awesome splendor surrounds God" and adds that "the Almighty is not to be found" (Job 37:22–23). The latter claim is paralleled in the New Testament, when God, in the First Epistle to Timothy, is said to dwell in an "inaccessible light" which "no human has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:10).

In most cases, the purpose or intention of such descriptions in biblical texts is not of a speculative nature.[9] On the contrary, these types of statements about the inaccessibility of God are made so that human beings may stop their speculations and instead turn their attention to doing what is right. This is perhaps clearest in the First Epistle of John, where it is said that "No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God remains in us, and His love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12). One can have no purely theoretical knowledge of God, but one knows God as one participates in the love of God in practice. This, of course, should not be confused with a post-Kantian anti-dogmatic pragmatism, recalling that the same epistle also has something positive to say about the divine nature of Christ (1 John 1:18). As it shall be demonstrated, the balance between a positive Christology and a healthy negative theology becomes important in subsequent orthodoxy.

It is not because negative theology does not also have precursors in Greek philosophy, but while Plato talked somewhat moderately about the difficulty of comprehending and communicating God to everyone, Philo, as famously argued by

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6   Louth, *The Origins*, 19.
7   Philo, *Mut.* 7–14.
8   Philo, *Somn.* I,184.
9   Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 13.

Harry Wolfson, may very well have been the first to describe God in absolute terms as ineffable or *arrêtos*.[10] This notion of God's ineffability recurs in later Neo-Platonism, perhaps influenced by Philo, but it was already a basic theme in early Christian thought in the 2nd century.[11] Here, the essential ineffability and incomprehensibility of God served in the polemics against Pagan idolatry as a means of establishing the need for revelation if human beings are to know God. Fundamental to this concern was what Robert Sokolowski has called "the Christian distinction" between God and everything else, a distinction that runs through all concepts of God in early Christian thought.[12] Radicalizing themes from Philo, early Christians emphasized that God, being the creator of everything, is radically different from created being and as such incomprehensible to the human mind.

Of note is Justin Martyr (c. 100–165), who argued that God the Father, who is "ungenerate" (a term with somewhat philosophical connotations), does not have a name, since whoever names something is in some way the "elder" of what is named.[13] This "Philonic principle," as it has been called, clarifies that one only knows God as revealed.[14] Names like Father, God, Creator, Lord, and Master, are not really names for God, but words that are derived from the good works and functions of God (ἐκ τῶν εὐποιϊῶν καὶ τῶν ἔργων προσρήσεις), argued Justin.[15] This is also the case for the name Christ, that while being a name for God's eternally begotten Son, still contains what Justin called an "unknown significance" (ἄγνωστον σημασίαν).[16] One only knows God as revealed through the Son.[17] In other words, there are clear limits to what one can know about God, but, in a dialectical manner, becoming aware of these limits is also what makes it possible to have some knowledge of God after all. It is, as argued by Tertullian (c. 155–220), our very inability to grasp God that gives human beings an idea of God, which is why God is known paradoxically as "at once known and unknown."[18]

Such notions of God's incomprehensibility were often applied for a polemical purpose. For example, in the *Epistle to Diognetus* it is made clear against the "philosophers" that no human being has seen God or made God known.[19] God is "invisible" which is for the author, as in the New Testament epistles quoted above, arguably a way of talking about God's general inaccessibility to the human mind. God has, however, been revealed through his Son. Faith in God through the Son is the medium, so to

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10   Plato, *Tim.* 28c. Wolfson, *Philo,* 111.
11   Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 75.
12   Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.
13   Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,1.
14   Mortley, *From Word to Silence,* 133.
15   Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,2.
16   Justin Martyr, *Ap. Sec.* 6,3.
17   Justin Martyr, *Ap.* 63.
18   Tertullianus, *Apol.* 17.
19   *Ad Diog.* 8,5–6.

speak, by which human beings can know God after all. A similar argument was made by Aristides of Athens (d. c. 134), who connected such claims to the notion described above, that God, as creator, is unrelated to anything created and, as such, can have no name.[20] As in the *Epistle to Diognetus* and earlier examples of a Christian use of negative theology, this again concludes in ethical claims about the purity and love that characterizes Christian relations based on faith rather than Pagan superstition.

2. Not Without the Wood of the Tree

The notion of God as essentially hidden and ineffable but revealed through his Logos in Christ, reappears in Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) at the verge of the 3rd century. It has sometimes been argued that Clement was the first Christian to apply negative theology systematically, in part because he derived his analytic methodology from Platonist philosophers such as Alcinous and Numenius.[21] Clement may also be an early example of how Plato's arguments about the infinity and incomprehensibility of the One, in the dialogue *Parmenides*, were translated into a theological context.[22] It should be clear, however, that while Clement may be said to anticipate developments in later Neo-Platonism, he usually does so to establish an argument similar to that made by other Christian apologists of his time.[23] The ineffability of God the Father is what makes necessary the revelation of God through the Logos. As Karl Barth argued in his *Church Dogmatics*, when God was considered incomprehensible by theologians such as Justin and Clement in the second century, the point was that human beings cannot exercise towards God the activity which characterizes human relations to other living creatures (Gen 2:19).[24] What can be learned from early Christian theology about the incomprehensibility and ineffability of God should be seen as expressive of the fact that God is neither the goal nor the origin of human speech, but that God by his revealed word has given human beings the capacity to speak about God.[25]

In fact, as Clement argued in the fifth book of the *Stromateis*, God the Father can only be known through the Son. The "grace of knowledge" is from God the Father through the Son.[26] This was the point when Moses begged God to show his glory (Exod 33:18) but learned that he could not see God face to face. God cannot

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20   Aristides, *Ap. Pr.*
21   Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 75. Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse*, 90.
22   Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 19.
23   Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 227–229.
24   Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 187.
25   Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 190.
26   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,5.

be taught by human beings or expressed in speech, says Clement, but God can be known "only by His own power" (ἢ μόνη τῇ παρ' αὐτοῦ δυνάμει), another way of saying that one only knows God through the revealed Logos. God is remote "in essence" (κατ' οὐσίαν), but near in virtue of his power, says Clement elsewhere.[27] The Tree of Life allegorically depicts the Logos. As Clement poetically puts it, "It was not without the wood of the tree that He came to our knowledge. For our life was hung on it, in order that we might believe." (ἐκρεμάσθη γὰρ ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν εἰς πίστιν ἡμῶν).[28] Even if one resists the temptation to see this as an obscure reference to the cross, it is clear that for Clement one only knows God through revelation.

When Clement at one point argues that human beings have "no natural relation"[29] (φυσικὴν σχέσιν) to God, this is obviously not to exclude the possibility of relating to God altogether, but neither is the point that one can only know God by dissolving all differences in a radically negative theology. The point, rather, is that it is through the Logos that one knows the otherwise unknown God. One knows the Father through the Son and vice versa, apprehending "the truth by the truth," since the two go together.[30] Clement, again in the fifth book of the *Stromateis,* presents some important observations about how the process of abstraction (akin to Alcinous') leads to a negatively defined knowledge of "the almighty," knowing "not what He is, but what He is not" (οὐχ ὅ ἐστιν, ὃ δὲ μή ἐστι).[31] Although these claims may be read as standing on their own, they are arguably not unrelated to his subsequent claims, quoted above, about how Moses learned that "the grace of knowledge" about God is only through the Son.[32]

Although Clement, with his eclectic attitude, often makes dispersed and sometimes unrelated claims, his observations could plausibly be read as an argument about how negative theology culminates not in complete ignorance or silence, but in the revelation of God through the Logos. This is only made more plausible when Clement a little later on in the fifth book of the *Stromateis* argues how "the One" (τὸ ἕν) due to its indivisibility and infinity cannot be named, but then adds: "It remains that we understand, then, the Unknown, by divine grace, and by the Word alone that proceeds from Him."[33] This is how Paul's preaching on Areopagus about the unknown God is to be understood, Clement adds, i.e. as infinite, God is unknowable, but God can be known through grace and the Logos revealed in Christ.

Keeping in mind Clement's polemical context, it should also be remembered how these claims run parallel to his arguments against various forms of Gnosticism.

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27   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* II,5,4.
28   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,72,4.
29   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* II,74,1.
30   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,1,3–4.
31   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,4.
32   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,71,5–72,1.
33   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,81,6–82,4.

Clement's theory of the divine Logos, although clearly inspired by Philo, should be understood in relation to his beliefs in the incarnation of the Logos in Christ. As Eric Osborn puts it, Clement's claims in his *Excerpts ad Theodotus* remove any abstractness from the notion of the logos.[34] To the extent that negative theology is wielded in order to draw attention to the need for the revealed Logos in Christ, negative theology may be said to be wielded for the sake of Christology, even if of a highly philosophical nature. While taking over some Gnostic vocabulary, Clement clearly rejects the form of gnosis that only the elect few have of God. God has to some degree revealed himself to all people through his Logos that became flesh, in some sense even from the beginning, albeit indirectly and in parabolic form, in Pagan culture and philosophy. This does not, then, mean that there is a knowledge of God that precedes the revelation of the Logos, but only that the Logos was already at work before its incarnation in Jesus Christ.

Even if Philo and Clement may have been influential on Christian thought, negative theology did not play so prominent a role in subsequent Alexandrian theologies, like those of Origen and Athanasius. The reason was perhaps that it was at this point associated with strains of Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, but also the argument made by the Arians that God the Father is essentially "other" (ἀλλότριος) to everything else and, as such, unknown even to the Son.[35] That the Son is, however, unique in knowing God, was an important part of the argument made by Nicene orthodoxy against Arianism. While probably agreeing with the Arians about the ineffability of God, Athanasius argued that God's ineffability is exactly what makes human beings know the Father only through the Son.[36] As emphasized by Thomas F. Torrance, Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310–367) made a similar claim when he argued that since "no one knows the Father but the Son," we should let our "thoughts of the Father be at one with the thoughts of the Son," who is the only revelation of God to us.[37] The perfect knowledge of God is to know that even if we must not be ignorant of God, we cannot describe God, says Hilary.[38] We "must believe, must apprehend, must worship," since "such acts of devotion must stand in lieu of definition." While negative theology was as such applied in a polemical context against Arianism, its conclusions were doxological.

That negative theology also had a homiletic use with an ecclesiological impact is clear from such orations as Cyril of Jerusalem's sixth catechetical oration: "Of God we speak not all we ought," says Cyril, but "in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge." As with Hilary, this Socratic acknowledgment of ignorance leads to a call for devotion: "Therefore magnify the Lord with me, and let

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34 Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria,* 210. Clemens Alexandrinus, *Exc.* 19–20.
35 Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 62–66.
36 Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 76. Athanasius, *Con. Ar.* 1,33.
37 Hilarius, *De trin.* II,6. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52.
38 Hilarius, *De trin.* II,7.

us exalt His Name together – all of us in common, for one alone is powerless."[39] To this extent, negative theology at this point not only highlighted the need for a relational Christology, but it also had a communal perspective. These were the fundamental concerns that were taken over by later apologists for Nicene orthodoxy.

3. Silence and Luminous Darkness

For the Cappadocian theologians, as is well known, negative theology became an essential element in the defense of Nicene orthodoxy against Neo-Arianism. A simple explanation for this shift may be the fact that Neo-Arians, such as Eunomius of Cyzicus, did not now appeal so much to the "otherness" of God the Father, as to what may be called a theological rationalism that took theological language to be descriptive of God's essence or nature. Much has been said about the entire Cappadocian debate with Neo-Arianism, but, for now, it suffices to say that Cappadocian theology, to a large extent, was formulated as an alternative to such rationalism. While Eunomius insisted that God can essentially be defined as "ungenerate," the Cappadocians insisted that the divine essence is incomprehensible and beyond definitions. What should also become clear from the following is how Cappadocian negative theology simultaneously reaffirmed the need for a Christological foundation.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), in his first theological oration, made it clear that the prerequisite for doing theology is silence. In order to talk about God, one must first stop and listen to God (cf. Ps 46:11). We need to be silent (σχολάσαι) to know God and judge rightly, says Gregory.[40] In his second theological oration, it becomes clear that the limitations of theology are related to the nature of God.[41] God is essentially hidden from human beings, like the mercy seat that was hidden behind the curtain according to Exodus (Exod 26:31–33). Even the most exalted, heavenly things are far more distant from God than they are from human beings. Like many others, Gregory took the story of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai as an expression of this fact. Moses did not get to see the face of God but had to stand in a cleft in the rock so that he could only see God from behind when God was passing by. This, in Gregory's interpretation, signifies the fact that in order to know anything at all about God, one needs to stand firmly planted in the Logos of God who became incarnate for us (τῷ σαρκωθέντι δι᾽ ἡμᾶς θεῷ Λόγῳ). Again, one knows only God through the Logos revealed in Christ, allegorically depicted as a "rock." This knowledge, moreover, does not offer an abstract insight into God's hidden nature. One

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39 Cyrillus Hierosolymitanus, *Cat. ad Ill.* 6,2.
40 Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 27,3.
41 Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,3.

may have an instinctive knowledge of God from what can be seen and deduced from creation, but this does not mean that some form of natural theology makes it possible to bypass revelation.[42] Language may point indirectly to God, but it does not make it possible to grasp the nature or essence of God. The trinitarian doctrine of God is not an abstract theory of God's being, but, says Gregory, the divine unity of distinctions is rather the paradox (ὁ παράδοξον) that illuminates reasoning about God.[43]

It is arguably this sensibility to the paradoxical that comes to expression when Gregory famously claims that we are "saved by the sufferings of the impassible."[44] The God who cannot suffer nevertheless suffers in Christ. This should, of course, not be too hastily taken for a paradox in the sense of a Kantian antinomy or a Kierkegaardian absurdity. Nevertheless, for Gregory, the driving force in theological reasoning must be the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, and the union of divine and human natures in Christ. Negative theology is, so to speak, a preliminary reminder that theological reasoning should form organically around this mystery rather than being deduced from an abstract philosophical concept of God. The "starting point," says Gregory, must be the fact that God cannot be named, which is why God can only be talked about in relational terms.[45] Since no mind or language can embrace "God's substance in its fullness," says Gregory, "our noblest theologian is not one who has discovered the whole." Theological reasoning, in other words, never reaches a comprehensive system of thought.

To use a perhaps somewhat anachronistic term, one might be tempted to say that Christian theology is fundamentally dialectical theology.[46] Theology is, as Gregory of Nazianzus puts it, characterized by contradictory arguments more than any other philosophy. Theology is a philosophical discipline, then, but one that is particularly prone to bumping up against its own limits: "The slightest objection puts an end to the discussion and prevents it from continuing," says Gregory, adding that it is "like suddenly pulling on the reins of galloping horses, which then turn around, startled by the shock."[47] This is what the Ecclesiast realized when the more he immersed himself in theology, the more he realized how derailed his thoughts had become. When one nevertheless attempts to achieve a final comprehension of God, this is when idolatry occurs. Idolatry, as Gregory describes it, results from a kind of fatigue that occurs when one's mind gives up its attempts at grasping God. Instead of accepting their own inability to grasp God, people create their own gods from comprehensible things.[48] In other words, idolatry occurs when dialectical thinking

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42   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,6.
43   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,1.
44   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 30,5.
45   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 30,17–18.
46   Steenbuch, "Frelse og forsoning," 4.
47   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,21.
48   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 28,13.

is given up in theology and, instead, an attempt is made to put theology into a complete system of thought.

It seems to be this view of the limits of theology that appears in the saying that "concepts create idols – only wonder comprehends anything," a citation sometimes attributed to Gregory of Nyssa in popular theology.[49] While this saying does not exactly appear in Gregory's works, it may be based on a claim made in his *On the Life of Moses.* Here Gregory explained that "any concept that comes from a comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God and does not proclaim God."[50] The point from Gregory of Nazianzus is affirmed, then, that idolatry occurs when one thinks to have finally grasped the nature or essence of God. What Moses learned from God's manifestation in the burning bush was that none of the things that can be apprehended by sense or contemplated by understanding have any intrinsic being.[51] God possesses existence in his own nature, but even the person who "in quietude" (ἡσυχίας) studies philosophical matters will barely apprehend the true being (τὸ ὄν). Non-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν), on the other hand, is that which has no self-subsisting nature (ἑαυτοῦ τὴν φύσιν).[52]

The technical details of Gregory's negative theology are elaborated upon in his polemical works against Eunomius. The primary theme of these is, however, Christological, as is clear already from Gregory's introduction. "The rock must be Christ," says Gregory, which should arguably also be kept in mind when Gregory at one point against Eunomius concludes that the aptest response to having learned how widely the divine nature differs from human nature is that people "quietly" (ἡσυχίας) abide within their "proper limits" (τοῖς ἰδίοις ὅροις).[53] This attitude should not be confused with quietism. On the contrary, since one cannot finally comprehend God, one needs to keep on talking about God. This is why, Gregory, like Basil, defended the human ability to make up new names for God through the process of conceptualization or *epinoia*. Theological language, whether based on tradition or Scripture, is fundamentally hermeneutic (ἑρμηνευτικὸν) as it does not grasp (περιέχειν) the divine nature (τὴν θείαν φύσιν).[54]

Again, theological language is relational, but it must also be Christological. People do not have an abstract concept of God as Father, but "those who hear the name of the Father, receive the Son along with Him in their thoughts," as Gregory puts it against Eunomius.[55] Neo-Arians, on the other hand, only got a "bare" or abstract notion of God's name if God is defined simply as ungenerate. Silence, then, is the only

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49   The author has not been able to trace the origins of this attribution, which is, however, quite widespread.
50   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,165.
51   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,24.
52   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,23.
53   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Con. Eun.* II,1,96.
54   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ad Abl.* 3,1,42–43.
55   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ref. conf. Eun.* 100.

proper response to such an abstract notion of God, but one can and should talk about God as revealed through Christ. This Christological orientation is arguably just as important as the much-celebrated distinction between God's incomprehensible substance and God's comprehensible activities in Cappadocian thought.

4. Theology of the Gap

The Cappadocians did not limit themselves to negative theology, but often they also expressed a sweeping anti-essentialism about created nature as well. As Basil argued in a polemic against Neo-Arianism, since people do not know anything about even the physiology of the minutest ant, they should not, as Eunomius had done, brag about their knowledge about "the things that are" (τῶν ὄντων).[56] To this extent, negative theology had something to say about creation as well. What Scot Douglas has called the "theology of the gap" in Gregory of Nyssa's thinking is largely due to the need for establishing a negative theology that wards off any attempt at comprehending the nature of God, while at the same time bringing into view the inescapable changeability of created nature.[57] It is this fundamental ontological condition that results in a theological epistemology, where human language and thinking about God cannot be enclosed in a final system.

This clear ontological and linguistic distinction between God and creation was expressed frequently in Gregory of Nyssa's polemics against Eunomius, for example when he argued that the created and the uncreated are as opposed to each other as their names (σημαινόμενον) are.[58] As Gregory puts it elsewhere, there is a "wide and insurmountable interval" (πολὺ γὰρ τὸ μέσον καὶ ἀδιεξίτητον) that separates (διατετείχισται) uncreated from created nature.[59] Thus, what Sokolowski called "the Christian distinction" between God and everything else, is confirmed.[60] For Gregory, as he explained in a sermon on Ecclesiastes, this is because creation itself is the gap or *diastema* that divides the created from the uncreated, but this also means that creation is "contained within itself" and as such subject to change as a basic condition.[61]

Obviously, there is also a more positive side to Gregory's often celebrated spiritual or, if one prefers, "mystical," theology, that, as Martin Laird has argued, can just as

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[56] Basilius Magnus, *Ep.* 16,1.
[57] Douglass, *Theology of the Gap*, 4–6.
[58] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Con. Eun.* I,1,504.
[59] Gregorius Nyssenus, *Con. Eun.* II,69–70.
[60] Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 198.
[61] Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Eccl.* 412,6–14.

well be described as a mysticism of light as one of darkness.[62] This should not, however, make us overlook the clear negative conditions for theology as such. The limits imposed on created nature by negative theology have implications for theological ethics as well as anthropology. Gregory of Nyssa's first sermon on the Beatitudes is a good example. Having first acknowledged that beatitude consists in assimilation to God, Gregory goes on to lament the utter impossibility of imitating the impassible nature.[63] It is this basic aporia that is solved by the gospel. God, by humbling himself in becoming human, has now made it possible to have fellowship with God after all. It is not by fleeing from creatureliness but, on the contrary, in humility that human beings can relate to God. To this extent, negative theology puts a limit on human aspirations, but this limit also becomes the starting point for a new possibility of participation in God as proclaimed by the gospel.

This should also be kept in mind when Gregory of Nazianzus could so frequently talk about deification. "Let us become gods for his sake," exhorted Gregory in a paschal homily, adding that we should do so, "since he became human for our sake."[64] Since Christ gave himself for us, we should "become everything that Christ became for us." Obviously, Gregory is not here making a point about negative theology, but his line of thought is similar to that of Gregory of Nyssa above. Human beings are not to become like God in his impassible and incomprehensible essence but should become what God became for human beings. Deification or *theosis*, then, is not about escaping the conditions of created nature, but about becoming truly human as God was truly human in Christ.

Of course, such an argument could be made without using negative theology, but one may at least say that negative theology can serve as a hermeneutical tool that helps avoid misunderstandings about what it means to imitate the incomprehensible God who is only known as revealed in the incarnated Logos. Although Gregory of Nyssa in his work on Moses anticipates later developments in negative theology when talking about the "luminous darkness of God" (λαμπρῷ γνόφῳ), his point was arguably not that spiritual progress culminates in a diffuse ignorance, but that having experienced the infinite goodness of God, one is to realize that God can only be known by following the Logos.[65] This is what Moses learned when he was placed in a cleft of a rock, and only could see God from behind, namely that seeing God consists in following God wherever he leads.[66]

As should be clear by now, from the inceptions of Christian theology, negative theology was rarely a distinct or separate venture, but it played a relative role that

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[62]   Laird, "Gregory of Nyssa," 592–616.
[63]   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Or. Beat.* 1,4.
[64]   Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 1,4–5.
[65]   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,163. God's goodness is infinite and as such cannot be defined, but this certainly does not mean that God is beyond good.
[66]   Gregorius Nyssenus, *Vit. Mo.* II,243–252.

guided the development of Christian dogma. It did so in a diversity of apologetical and polemical contexts. As these contexts changed, negative theology also took on new expressions. A rather constant core emerges, however, namely that the ineffability of "he, who is" (Exod 3:14) is what necessitates the revelation of God by the divine Logos if human beings are to know God at all. In other words, negative theology in classical Christian orthodoxy was subordinate to Christology, if not in all cases, then at least in many of the most important and influential applications of negative theology.

5. God Beyond Being

So far, it has been observed that negative theology from Philo and early Christian thought was to a large degree centered on the Mosaic notion of God as "he who is." As the creator, God is ineffable, but God can be known as revealed by the divine Logos. It would seem, then, that nothing in the above suggests the more radical idea that God is in some way "beyond being" or perhaps even "nothing" as would become the case in adaptations of Neo-Platonic ideas. There are precursors for this notion in Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates described "the good" as "beyond being" (ἔκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), and the thought experiments of the *Parmenides* about "the One" that is uncomposed and, as such, without being.[67] These came to play a significant role in Middle and Neo-Platonism from the 2nd century and on, but their role in Christian theology was rather marginal until much later.

This is true even if Clement of Alexandria grappled with the idea that theology is dealing with an aporia, such that even "being" is little more than an imprecise term that is gropingly used in attempts at describing God. If God is "the One" (τὸ ἕν), as mentioned above, then God must be infinite (ἄπειρον) and as such without names, including "being."[68] This did not, however, lead Clement to systematically describe God as, for example, "beyond being" or "nothing" in his works. Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), for example, may also have described God as the good "beyond all beings" (ὁ ὑπερέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας), but this hardly amounted to an understanding of God as beyond being altogether, let alone "nothing."[69]

The roots of a more radical understanding of God as somehow "nothing" may be traced back to so-called gnostic theologies such as that of the Alexandrian theologian Basilides (d. c. 140 AD). As Hippolytus relates, Basilides (may have) held that the seed of the world was created by the will of the "not-being God" (οὐκ ὢν θεός).

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[67]   Plato, *Resp.* 509b8–10. Plato, *Parm.* 137c–142a.
[68]   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* V,81,3–6.
[69]   Athanasius, *Con. Gen.* 2,5–13. Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 75–76.

This "not-being God" is "not even ineffable."[70] As has been suggested by some scholars, this latter claim may have been a polemic against Philo's Jewish philosophy, where God was said to be ineffable.[71] To Basilides, Philo may have been right in describing the Jewish creator God as "ineffable" but, above this God, resides a superior God who is not-being and not even ineffable. At any rate, the notion of God as not-being seems clearly opposed to the description of God as "he who is" (ὁ ὤν) in Exodus. If it is true that the notion of God as not-being was really developed in opposition to Jewish philosophy, then it may seem that this notion carried with it a certain anti-Jewish tendency. To this extent, such a radical version of negative theology would have been rejected by Christian apologists, like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who emphasized the continuity between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.

Like the Christians, Plotinus (204–270) rejected Gnosticism but stressed that the source of being is itself beyond being. While Plato's point in the *Parmenides* seemed to be that the One cannot really be anything if it really is one, for Plotinus the One was a principle "beyond being" like the good in the *Republic*, from which everything else derives its being. While Plotinus does not elaborate on the idea that the One is nothing, he comes close, for example when talking about "the marvel of the One," which is "non-being" (μὴ ὄν).[72] Plotinus' disciple Porphyry went further as he described the One as "non-being beyond being" (τό ὑπέρ τό ὄν μὴ ὄν).[73] In this way, as described by Conor Cunningham, Plotinus, and the subsequent tradition develops a "meontology" in which non-being is the highest principle.[74] Plotinus, even if opposed to the Gnostics, ends up utilizing their logic, Cunningham argues, so that "that which is" becomes subordinate to "that which is not."

While most Christians resisted such "meontological" notions, there are examples that negative theology in its Neo-Platonic form could be wielded in defense of Christian orthodoxy. This was the case when Marius Victorinus (290–364) argued against Arianism that God is before being (προόν) and as such non-being (μὴ ὄν) in the sense of being (ὄν) beyond being.[75] Arianism, which held the Son of God to be a created being, may be right in saying, then, that the Son came from "out of nothing," but this nothing is the divine nothing and not the nothing out of which creation was created.[76] This shows how a Neo-Platonic notion of God as beyond being could also be used for a Christological purpose, making it clear that it is not necessarily opposed to such a notion. In general, however, Christian orthodoxy landed on a more moderate note, still insisting that God is being, rather than beyond being. Seeing

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70   Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7,20,3.
71   Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 85–87.
72   Plotinus, *Enn.* VI,9,5. Plotinus more frequently describes matter as nothing.
73   Porphyrius, *Sent.* 26. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 690.
74   Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism,* 5.
75   Marius Victorinus, *Adv. Ar.* 1,49. Marius Victorinus, *Ad Cand.* 12,7–10.
76   Stępień – Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God*, 82–83.

that this was the case should make us wary of claiming too strong an influence of Neo-Platonic thought on Christian theology at this point.

As once argued by Harry Wolfson, the use of negative terms for God by Philo expressed "the unlikeness between God and all other beings."[77] It appears that something similar was the case in Christian forms of negative theology that were even more keen on upholding the Christian distinction between God and everything else.[78] Neo-Platonic thought, however, was, as argued by Cunningham, "unable to posit an ontological difference," since the One cannot create anything different from itself, but can only reproduce itself in every emanation.[79] This is why in Neo-Platonism, negative theology, as argued by Raoul Mortley, became an instrument for abstracting differences so that the continuity between levels of being could stand out.[80]

Even if there are obvious similarities between Judeo-Christian negative theologies and Neo-Platonic forms, then, these are hardly due to Christians taking over a Neo-Platonic "system" of thought in its entirety. In fact, as has so often been argued, Neo-Platonism was not so much an ontological system to be adopted as an attempt to describe how the soul can be united with the One, i.e. attain so-called *henosis*. In what Plotinus poetically described as "the flight of the alone to the alone," negative theology became a tool for abstracting all distinctions and discursive thoughts that keep the soul from becoming united to the One.[81] With Plotinus's programmatic exhortation to "remove everything" (ἄφελε πάντα), negation became a central tool in subsequent Neo-Platonism, where the aim was to overcome all distinctions made by discursive reasoning.[82] Proclus (412–485), for example, emphasized that ultimately negations must also be negated if a move is to be made beyond the discursive approach to the One.[83]

It was as such that the Neo-Platonic tradition would most famously be merged with Christian theology in the works of Dionysius, as best exemplified by the small book *On Mystical Theology*. Here, the story of Moses who encounters God in the cloud on the mountain (Exod 20:21) became a narrative of what Dionysius famously described as the "darkness of ignorance" (τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας).[84] God exists beyond all positive and negative descriptions, including being and non-being. God may, of course, be described as "the one, who is," as in Exodus, but God is also not "he who is." God is beyond being as well as non-being and, as such, God is hyper-being. This does not mean that God is also beyond good and evil, but God

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77   Wolfson, "Negative Attributes," 145.
78   See also Wissink, "Two Forms of Negative Theology," 118.
79   Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism,* 6.
80   Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, 53.
81   Plotinus, *Enn.* VI,9,11.
82   Plotinus, *Enn.* V,3,17.
83   Proclus, *In Pl. Par.* VII,53k–76k.
84   Dionysius Areopagita, *De myst. theol.* 1,3.

is identified by Dionysius with the Platonic good "beyond all being" (ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα).[85] These hyper-phatic developments in negative theology meant, however, that God would eventually be conceived of as beyond difference itself, making it urgent to avoid the pantheism that is allegedly implied. For example, John Scottus Eriugena (815–877), the Irish monk who translated Dionysius into Latin, explained how God created everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), but since God, who is beyond being, is in a sense "nothing" himself, creation out of nothing can be understood as God creating the world out of himself.[86] This does not mean that creation and God are identical, but because God is beyond being, creation can be in God without being identical with God.

6. Pure Nothingness

The Dionysian tradition pioneered by John in the Latin West had a profound influence in subsequent centuries. This was not least the case in the preaching of Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), whose famous call to ask God to "deliver us from God" is a good example of how a reinforced theological meontology would have repercussions in moral thought.[87] God as revealed seems to be the author of both good and evil, since these are necessary conditions for creation, but in himself, God is beyond both good and evil.[88] This was apparently also why Eckhart could provocatively say that "God is not good" and that God is "unlovable" since God is "above all love and lovableness." The exhortation to quietude that follows from this line of thought reflects the need to remove all distinctions between God and the human person. God must cease to be an object of thought so that God can act spontaneously through the human person.[89] While this portrays traditional Neo-Platonic concerns, Eckhart's outlook may also have been the result of having adopted a univocal ontology while simultaneously wanting to avoid making God into an object that can be distinguished from other objects.[90] To put it shortly, if God is something, then human beings must be nothing, but if human beings are something, then God must be nothing. In order to relate to God, then, human beings must become nothing, like God.

Before Eckhart, Marguerite Porete (1250–1310) had described how the soul must be annihilated in order to be in a "pure nothingness without thought."[91] A similar

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85   Dionysius Areopagita, *De div. nom.* 4,3–7.
86   John Scottus Eriugena, *Per.* 3,675c.
87   Eckhart, *Pr.* 52.
88   Eckhart, *Pr.* 83. Moss, "The Problem of Evil," 38–43.
89   Eckhart, *Pr.* 52.
90   Moss, "The Problem of Evil," 35–37.
91   Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* 95.

concern is apparent in Eckhart's preaching, and like in the case of Porete it is clear that there are moral philosophical implications, albeit rather negative, in Eckhart's thought. One can only be united with God in what John Caputo has called "the suspension of all teleological attitudes." God can only be loved as not-God, says Eckhart, in a kind of exalted ignorance. This is not a "way" or a method to be followed but a matter of allowing oneself to sink into oneness with God, as Eckhart dramatically puts it, "as out of something and into nothingness."[92] This perhaps also explains why for Eckhart love was not the highest virtue. In his treatise on "detachment" (*abegescheidenheit*), Eckhart explains how like most other virtues, love has some regard for created things. God, however, can only be known in a radical detachment, since only such detachment comes close to nothing.[93]

It may be argued that this exemplifies how Neo-Platonic meontology threatens to tip over into an almost "nihilistic" denial of all positive values.[94] The fear of moral libertinism at least seems to have been among the reasons for the papal condemnations of such mystics as Porete and Eckhart.[95] At any rate, in comparison to earlier forms of negative theology, the alleged suspension of teleology seems to run counter to, for example, Clement's proleptic understanding of faith or Gregory of Nyssa's epektatic notion of what it means to follow the Logos. In both cases, negative theology served to underscore the need to relate to God, not in God's infinite essence, but in the revealed Christ. It is true that Clement, not completely unlike Eckhart, could often emphasize how imitation of God consisted in needing as little as possible, seeing, in Stoic terms, how self-sufficiency (αὐταρκείας) was to be "the first principle of salvation."[96] It is equally true, however, that while the complete likeness to God's ineffable nature was not possible, for Clement, imitation of God consisted just as much in entering communities of love in imitation of the reciprocal relations established by the divine Logos.[97] While there can be no participation in the divine nature, God can be imitated by following the commands of the revealed Logos.[98]

In the case of Gregory of Nyssa, it is true that he could, for example in his homilies on the *Song of Songs*, also emphasize the need to distinguish between one's true self and its surroundings by using a sort of abstractive method.[99] This hardly pertained, however, to an Eckhartian attitude of detachment. Gregory argued in these homilies, much like in his book on Moses, that God is seen by always following (ἀκολουθεῖν) after God, and that the contemplation of God's face consists

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92   Eckhart, *Pr.* 83.
93   Eckhart, *Von Abe.*
94   Steenbuch, "På sporet af 'intet'," 129–130.
95   Clement XIII, *In Agro Dominico*, nos. 4–5.
96   Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paed.* II,3,39,1.
97   Avila, *Ownership*, 45.
98   E.g., Clemens Alexandrinus, *Paed.* I,6,26,3; Clemens Alexandrinus, *Strom.* VII,14,88,6.
99   Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 63.

in unceasingly following the Logos.[100] The differences between this approach and later Neo-Platonic attitudes to faith in Christian theology, like that of Eckhart's, should probably not be exaggerated, but it should be clear that for someone like Gregory, imitation of God did not consist in becoming "nothing" in a state of detachment, but in imitating the incarnated Logos in Christ. Like God, human beings are not essentially "nothing" but infinitely more than what can be described in finite terms.[101]

When Eckhartian themes popped up again in the reformation period with Anabaptists such as Hans Denck, the emphasis on the need to "become nothing" so that God can "become something," was paralleled by an emphasis on the experience of the inner word.[102] As the magisterial reformers, such as Martin Luther, increasingly saw it, this pertained to a denial of the external, preached word focused on the crucified Christ. As argued by Luther, one should not seek to deal with God in His hidden majesty, since the *Deus absconditus* only brings terror and uncertainty, but God should be sought in his revealed Word.[103] When Moses could only see God from behind, the point was, Luther argued in his lectures on Exodus, that God's mercy is only seen as revealed in the divine Word.[104] Considering how Luther's theology to some extent rested on a nominalistic ontology, it can hardly be seen as a return to some form of "classical" version of negative theology, with its Platonic underpinnings, even if similar themes of divine incomprehensibility, as shown above, were applied in order to draw attention to the need for revelation. While having retrieved these concerns, Lutheran theology at the same time radicalized the Christological function of negative theology to the point of barring all possibilities of a "mystical" union with God in a silent "nothing" beyond the preached Word.[105]

Final Remarks

While it would be a step too far to say that the influx of Neo-Platonic thought in later Christian theology resulted in a subversion of an original Christological concern, the "mystical" predilection for the "darkness of ignorance" may at least seem to be partly at odds with the Christological orientation that placed negative theology in

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100   Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Cant.* 356.
101   Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 33.
102   Denck, *Schriften*, 33,15–24.
103   As Jürgen Moltmann (*The Crucified God*, 299–309) has described it, with his "theology of the cross," Luther made a reversal of negative theology, which was now no longer man's negative way to God, but God's negative way to man.
104   Luther, *Werke*, 157.
105   See, however, Mjaaland, *The Hidden God*; Alfsvåg, "Luther," 101–114.

a subordinate and preliminary position to revelation. Today it may perhaps even be argued that the roots of so-called "nihilism" can be traced to the notion of God or the good as somehow beyond being associated particularly with Neo-Platonic meontology.[106] It would be going too far to trace all developments of negative theology beyond the reformation period in, for example, Jacob Böhme and F.W.J. Schelling and its culmination in forms of "nihilism" in modern philosophy and theology. It may be noticed, nevertheless, how the notion of God or the good as somehow beyond being is today expressed in philosophies preoccupied with difference and negation.

Such post-modern parallels to earlier negative theology are often hostile to classical notions of participation that are, as in Levinas and Derrida, seen as almost violent attempts at reducing "the other" to "the same" in a grand ontological scheme of "being."[107] Instead, the good should be sought in "the other," and as such outside or beyond being as in Plato's *Republic*, or even in non-being. As Cunningham argues, the Derridean notion of *différance* is "the trace of the Plotinian One, which is non-being."[108] If, nevertheless, *différance* is not exactly negative theology, as Derrida himself assured, it only holds the more true that negative theology in such ontologies has been transformed into a secular negativity that easily spills over into a denial of all positivity to the point of ridding itself of its theological origins.[109] If in post-modern negative theologies, "GxD" (sometimes spelled this way) is reduced to sheer negation, such a notion is hardly distinguishable from what Walter Benjamin described as a "methodical nihilism" and its perpetual negation of the status quo.[110]

Contemporary negative theology has often been formulated on a nominalist or Post-Kantian basis that absolutizes the distinction between the transcendent God and the knowing subject.[111] The result is not rarely a fideistic skepticism about classical participatory ontologies that runs through much of the contemporary attitude to faith and reason. If, however, as argued recently by Timothy Troutner, theology is to move beyond what Martin Laird has described as its "apophatic rage," among the requirements for reclaiming negative theology is that it be given "a distinctively Christological shape."[112] Seeing how Christology was central to early Christian formulations of negative theology, this should be kept in mind to balance negative theology with classical orthodoxy. Such a Christological orientation does not cancel out negative theology by making it only a step towards positive theology. God always remains a mystery, as observed by Maximus the Confessor in the 6th century, but

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106 Steenbuch, "På sporet af 'intet,'" 138–139. In the case of Eckhart, see Godínez, "The Deity's Nothingness," 73–86.
107 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.
108 Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 160.
109 Derrida, *Differance*, 88.
110 Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment." Steenbuch, *Negative Theology*, 85–94.
111 Troutner, "The Eclipse of the Word."
112 Laird, "Whereof We Speak," 1–12.

God's natural hiddenness is expressed exactly to the extent that it is made more hidden through revelation.[113]

The danger of collapsing the distinction between God and creation in a common nothingness (as hinted at by Cunningham) may be avoided by a renewed appreciation for the Christian distinction between God and everything else in classical theology. The classical notion of participation, on the other hand, is necessary for avoiding confusing this distinction with a radically secular evacuation of God into sheer transcendence. God is essentially hidden, not because God is absent, but because God is radically present as the reality in which created beings participate in a manner known only to God, as Denys Turner once remarked.[114] There is a need for a Christological concern for God's "immanent transcendence" which, more than simply being a destabilizing figure, is realized as a positive mystery in the incarnate Christ.[115] The beatific vision of God is not, *pace* Turner, "the end of [the] story"[116] culminating in the darkness of union, but the ever-new beginning that takes place as one encounters the trinitarian God in preaching, acts of worship and love toward others. As argued by Karl Barth, the incomprehensibility and infinity of God are not abstract ideas, then, but qualities that draw their true meaning from the goodness of God who has made himself our Father in Jesus Christ.[117]

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[113] Maximus, *Cap.* 1,9.
[114] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 264. Maximus, *Cap.* 1,7.
[115] Sandbeck, "God as Immanent Transcendence."
[116] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 150. Troutner, "Beyond Silence," 918–919.
[117] Barth, *Prayer*, 25.

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