



GOD AND HIS BIBLICAL ALTER EGO: ON TWO TYPES OF MONOTHEISM AND THEIR RELATION TO WAR AND PEACE

Riccardo Campa

Jagiellonian University in Krakow

riccardo.campa@uj.edu.pl

ABSTRACT

The three Abrahamic religions have an ambivalent relationship to war and peace. On the one hand, God is viewed as a merciful peacemaker. On the other hand, peoples embracing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have often been involved in holy wars and religious persecutions. While David Hume argued that polytheism is inherently more tolerant than monotheism, here it will be argued that it is not monotheism as such which generates endless conflicts, but the specific idea of God propagated by the Old Testament. To make his point, the author addresses the issue of the ambivalence of Christianity. Yahweh asks the Israelites to exterminate non-believers and members of other ethnic groups, including women and children, while Jesus Christ exhorts his followers to avoid confrontation by loving their enemies. However, while the two aforementioned persons of the Christian godhead are apparently different, they are merged in the Trinitarian conception of divinity. The article, therefore, presents four main strategies adopted within Christianity to deal with the alleged moral discrepancy between the first and the second person of the Trinity. Finally, the author narrows the focus on the idea of the Unknown God and the related tradition of negative (or apophatic) theology, arguing that this form of monotheism is more productive of religious tolerance. A series of examples illustrate the presence of this idea in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, as well as within early, mediaeval and modern Christian doctrines.

KEYWORDS: Unknown God, Yahweh, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Christianity

1. PREMISE

Organized wars against conspecifics occur in several species of the social type, such as bees, wasps, ants, monkeys, and humans. Chimpanzees (*Pan*

troglydites) – which most believe to be peaceful animals – often engage in wars of conquest (Mitani et al. 2010). Smaller or larger groups of male monkeys compete for territories, killing any conspecific who dare to trespass borders. The goal of combatant male chimpanzees is to gain access to more resources, especially food and females. The sole fact that we share 98.8% of our genes with chimpanzees and show behaviors not too dissimilar from theirs leads us to think that our propensity for war may have a genetic substrate. Still, we certainly surpass our “cousins” for a greater ferocity and inventiveness in crafting means of destruction. Besides, our species have created sophisticated symbolic systems to justify or curb such violent activities.

Culture is no less important than genes, as it can amplify or play down instinctual behavior. We know there are more or less warlike human societies. Faced with the Sparta that went down in history for its warrior virtues, we also have records of more peaceful matriarchal populations that settled in Europe before the break-in of Indo-European nomadic peoples (Bachofen 2007). And, today, against a country like the United States of America, which sets aside more than seven hundred billion dollars a year for military spending, there is a country like Costa Rica, which abolished the army in 1949 to invest more resources in health and education. In short, there may also be a genetic propensity for war and raiding, but culture has shown to have a significant role in regulating this instinct, and, within cultural systems, religions play a special role. To put it metaphorically, there are religions that throw water on the fire, while others pour gasoline over it. More specifically, inside monotheisms, there are ideas of God that appease warlike instincts, while others provide moral justification for holy wars and religious persecutions.

As a matter of fact, today, we live in a world in which religion seems to divide humans rather than unite them, contradicting the very meaning of its etymological Latin root “*religio*” (bond, what binds together). Of course, the current situation is not unique in history. Suffice it to recall the conflicts between Pagans and Christians in conjunction with the decline of the Ancient World, those between Christians and Muslims during the Middle Ages, or those between Catholics and Protestants at the dawn of the Modern Era. Even when faith was not the main cause of a conflict, monotheistic religions have not done much to curb the warlike instinct of peoples. The massacres of World War I and World War II involved nations who, at least nominally, identified as Christian. Brothers in faith clashed with each other, while their cousins in faith, the Jews, were subject to detention and extermination.

Coming to our days, in Nigeria the Islamic fundamentalists of Boko Haram have been responsible for numerous massacres against compatriots who embrace the traditional animist cult or the Christian faith. In the Middle East, a religious war between Jews and Muslims has superimposed on the political

conflict between Israelis and Palestinians for the control of the territory, if only because on 19 July 2018 Israel officially became a confessional state by adopting a 14th law entitled “Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People,” and the frame of reference of Hamas is Islam. Not only in different regions of the world are there clashes between peoples of different faiths and beliefs, but even peoples sharing the same religion are torn apart within them. Once again, in Europe, we are witnessing a war between brothers in faith and ethnicity, Russians and Ukrainians, while the Arab world is ravaged by a bloody war between two souls of Islam. The last victim of the conflict is the population of Yemen, mostly Shiite, who ended up under the bombs of their rich Sunni neighbor, Saudi Arabia.

The Catholic Church itself seems to be riddled with deep wounds of a political and doctrinal nature. The situation is certainly not comparable to actual wars, as the disagreements within the Church of Rome remain on a purely doctrinal level. However, it is peculiar that a considerable number of prelates and believers today publicly reject the ideas of the Vicarius Christi himself, Pope Francis, on issues such as ecology, immigration, the relationship with other religions, the doctrine of the family, and the role of women in the Church, even questioning the legitimacy of his pontificate. In particular, an accusation of heresy was brought against the Pope by a large group of university professors, theologians, and churchmen through a letter appeal written in many languages and published on the websites of traditionalist Catholics (Benevento 2019). In turn, Pope Francis revoked Vatican privileges to conservative Cardinal Raymond Burke (Pulella 2023). Here too, rather than uniting, monotheism seems to divide, and reciprocal accusations of heresies are endemic.

In his *Natural History of Religions*, David Hume provided an explanation for this phenomenon. Monotheism, although being in his view more consistent with reason, is inherently more violent and intolerant than polytheism. Once we admit the existence of numerous gods, it makes little sense to persecute those who prefer one or the other, or to start a holy war against a people that worship a different set of deities. These are his words: “The tolerating spirit of idolaters, both in ancient and modern times, is very obvious to anyone who is the least conversant in the writings of historians or travelers,” while “the intolerance of almost all religions which have maintained the unity of God is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists” (Hume 1889, 39-40). A few lines below, the Scottish philosopher gets more explicit, calling the three Abrahamic religions by name.

The implacable narrow spirit of the Jews is well known. Mahometanism set out with still more bloody principles; and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. And if, among Christians,

the English and Dutch have embraced the principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priest and bigots. (Hume 1889, 40)

Let us be clear; Hume is not saying that idolaters are inherently more pacific than monotheists. He is just saying that they are more tolerant in religious matters. It is a well-known fact that ancient polytheistic nations were systematically involved in wars. However, they waged war against neighbors to take control over more territories, food, slaves, and females, like primates do. With few exceptions, holy wars and religion persecutions are rather a specificity of monotheists.¹

In this work I will pay special attention to Christianity, as it is particularly ambivalent in this respect. On the one hand, Jesus Christ preached tolerance, altruism, frugality, and even love for one's enemies. On the other hand, Christians have constantly been involved in wars of conquest and the exploitation of other peoples' resources. One may notice that this kleptocratic and warlike attitude gained momentum in the last two centuries, as a consequence of the *secularization* of Christian societies. There is a grain of truth in this observation. However, we cannot fool ourselves. The colonization of non-European continents, the enslavement of indigenous populations, the systematic despoiling of the resources of those lands, forced conversions, and the very birth of capitalism are processes that began when the de-Christianization of Europe was still far from beginning. The oppression of the weak was perpetrated with Christian symbols and banners raised high in the sky. It is enough to notice that the populace of the United States of America is notably more religious than the European one and, from the end of the Second World War to the present day, it has been involved in more wars than the latter. The same applies to Israel and some Islamic countries.

This is the general picture. However, the aim of this article is to present and discuss an illuminating exception to the rule. I will bring to the surface an idea of God that finds space within different monotheistic faiths, including the Christian one, and works in favor of peace rather than war, of toler-

¹ It is appropriate, however, to point out that both motivations for waging war – economic and religious – can be intertwined. Geopolitical expert Lucio Caracciolo (2004) rightly warns against too simplistic explanations. Doctrinal issues play a role in conflicts, but are more often *used* to pursue economic and geopolitical interests. These are his words: “From the Balkans to Chechnya, from Afghanistan to the Middle East, from Sri Lanka to the Philippines, from Kashmir to Algeria, there is certainly no shortage of wars which to a lesser or greater extent reveal an ethnic and above all religious background.” And yet, “there are no purely ethnic and/or religious wars; all wars have a geopolitical background, even if only a fraction of geopolitical strife produces wars.” In a nutshell, religion is often reduced to an *instrumentum regni*. However, the fact remain that monotheistic religions are more suited to being used for these purposes, for intrinsic doctrinal reasons.

ance rather than intolerance. It is the idea of the “Unknown God” (*Agnostos Theos* in Greek, *Deus Ignotus* in Latin), often referred to as “The One” in the Greek philosophical and theological tradition – an alternative conception of the supreme godhead, deemed ineffable and unutterable, which emerged in the Pagan world and subsequently penetrated into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

To make my point, I will proceed along the following path. First, I will clarify that it is not monotheism as such which generates endless conflicts. It is the specific idea of God propagated by the Old Testament that offers fertile ground for religious wars and persecutions. Second, I will address the issue of the ambivalence of Christianity. It is true that the figure of Jesus Christ seems very different from that of Yahweh, so much so that an irenic idea of religion emerges from the Sermon on the Mount, but the two divine persons are merged in the Trinitarian conception of divinity. I will therefore present four main strategies adopted within Christianity to deal with the alleged moral discrepancy between the first and the second person of the Trinity. Finally, I will narrow the focus on the idea of the Unknown God and the related tradition of negative (or apophatic) theology. There is certainly no shortage of studies about this tradition, but my main intent is to argue that it produces religious tolerance rather than intolerance. I will make the point presenting a series of examples showing the presence of this idea in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and at last – more in detail – within the orthodox Christian doctrine.

2. THE TRIBAL DEITY OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

There has been much discussion about the incitements to violence contained in the Quran, especially after the events of September 11th, 2001 (Abdel-Samad 2016). Still, pointing a finger only at the sacred book of Islam would be misleading. The first symbolic source of violence and intolerance, common to the three Abrahamic religions, is the Old Testament. Here, God reveals himself both as the creator of the world and a relentless warrior who leads one people into war, ordering the extermination of idolaters and peoples of different religion and ethnicity. This image of God emerges from a specific translation and a literal interpretation – the most immediate and therefore most often practiced in the course of history – of the Bible.

For many believers, the Bible is the ultimate source of *morality*. On the contrary, not few intellectuals have hurled accusations at the Bible for promoting *immorality*. Among the latter, to provide just an example, is Aldous Huxley. Pacifist and fierce critic of the military-industrial complex, the English writer contrasted Eastern wisdom and Western aggressiveness.

In his book *Ends and Means*, Huxley (1946, 203-204) states that the modern world has “taken over from the Hebrews all that was worst in their cultural heritage,” namely “their ferocious Bronze-Age literature; their paeans in praise of war; their tales of divinely inspired slaughter and sanctified treachery; their primitive belief in a personal, despotic and passionately unscrupulous God; their low, Samuel-Smilesian notion that virtue deserves a reward in cash and social position.” In the meantime, for an irony of history, the West rejected “the admirably sensible rabbinical tradition of an all-round education.”

A few pages after, he adds what follows:

Christian theologians did their best to civilize and moralize this tribal deity; but, inspired in every line, dictated by God himself, the Old Testament was always there to refute them. (...) Texts to justify such abominations as religious wars, the persecution of heretics, breaking of faith with unbelievers, could be found in the sacred books and were in fact used again and again throughout the whole history of the Christian Church to mitigate the inconvenient decency of civilized morality. (Huxley 1946, 283-284)

In Huxley’s view, there is a need for doctrinal coherence and correspondence between proclaimed principles and actual behaviors. The means must be as good as the ends, pace Machiavelli’s cynical pragmatism. What the West lacks is an intelligent morality based on acts of genuine generosity. That is why Huxley praises Indian pacifism, which finds its clearer expression in the teaching of Buddha. The following are his words: “Buddhism, like Hinduism, teaches ahimsa, or harmlessness towards all living beings. It forbids even laymen to have anything to do with the manufacture and sale of arms, with the making of poisons” (Huxley 1946, 208-209).

What is the English writer referring to when launches his heavy accusation against the “tribal deity” of the Old Testament? Since the reading of the Holy Scriptures is no longer a common habit, if it ever was, I will report some fragments that exemplify the ferocity denounced by Huxley.

In the Book of Numbers (31:14-18, NIV), we read the following:

Moses was angry with the officers of the army—the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds—who returned from the battle. “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people. Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.

In the Deuteronomy (20:15-17, NIV), we find the following words:

This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy[a] them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.

Concerning the conquest of Jericho, the Book of Joshua (6:19-21, NIV) reads:

“All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.” When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

In the same book, we also learn about treatment reserved for the inhabitants of Ai:

When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the wilderness where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the Lord had instructed Joshua. (Joshua 8:24-27, NIV)

Ethnic clansing is never presented as an autonomous initiative of the Israelites. As we have seen, they actually resisted the idea of slaughtering innocents, only to be rebuked by Moses. This also happens under Joshua’s command. It is the Lord himself asking the Israelites to massacre both combatant and non combatant people, in Gaza as elsewhere, as the following verse also confirm.

So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua subdued them from Kadesh Barnea to Gaza and from the whole region of Goshen to Gibeon. (Joshua 10:40-41, NIV)

Quite instructive is also the First Book of Samuel. Samuel introduces himself as the prophet sent by the Lord to anoint Saul, the first king of Israel. The Lord Almighty's message addressed to Saul is the following:

"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." (1 Samuel 15:3, NIV)

Saul exterminates the Amalekites, but spares the life of their king, Agag, and the livestock, allowing the soldiers to take the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs. For this reason, the Lord takes away the crown of king of Israel from Saul and gives it to someone else "better" than him. Saul's sin is that he was too merciful. Reprimanded by Samuel, Saul apologizes to the Lord and puts Agag to death in front of him, without however obtaining God's forgiveness.

This tribal deity does not spare the Israelites themselves, when they disobey his commands, despite being the chosen people. In the Book of Ezekiel (5:12-13, NIV), by appearing to the prophet, God states what follows:

A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword. Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath on them, they will know that I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.

Terms such as "kill" and "armies" are recurrent throughout the Bible, making it a book of war rather than a spiritual tale. God himself is named *Ish Milchamah*, the Man of War, or *Yahweh Šēbā'ōt*, the God of the armies of Israel (1 Samuel 17:45, NIV). Moreover, as we have seen, war is mostly understood as ethnic cleansing. No prisoners were taken and civilians were not spared, not even old people, women, and children. Animals were also killed for no apparent reason. One may say that by condemning this conduct as patently immoral, Huxley and other contemporaries project today's morality backwards, but this is not case (leaving aside that the relativization of morality should not be invoked by those believing in eternal truths). When the Old Testament was written, there were peoples who did not kill the defeated. They took them as slaves. The Jews themselves were taken as slaves to Egypt and Babylonia, and were subsequently ruled by the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. They were not exterminated, because – unlike Yahweh – the gods of the Pagans did not order the killing of anything that breathes. This happens instead in the sacred book of the three great monotheistic religions.

3. FOUR STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH THE TRIBAL DEITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The problem of God-inspired violence is particularly thorny for Christianity because the Christian God is One and Triune. In addition to the mysterious Holy Spirit, the Trinity notoriously includes Jesus of Nazareth and Yahweh. As we said, while Jesus commands to forgive, love one's enemies, and turn the other cheek, Yahweh commands vengeance, extermination, and ethnic cleansing. Where is the moral unity, the convergence of purpose among the three divine persons, which would prove the essential unity and uniqueness of God? To put the answer delicately, it is very difficult to find.

Still, there are different ways adopted by believers and biblical scholars to deal with the apparent discrepancy between the first and the second person of the Trinity. I counted at least four main strategies emerging in the course of history and still currently in place.

The first strategy consists in admitting that gruesome biblical verses exist and can be interpreted literally, however that they are not problematic at all. This is the position of conservative or reactionary Christians. God is not essentially good, generous, and benevolent, which is a Platonic, and therefore Pagan idea. The Father is terrible and fearsome, as the Scriptures describe him. This is why religious people are also called "God-fearing." God is "just," exactly because he scares the faithful and punishes the wicked to maintain moral order. The idolaters and the apostates are wicked and must be converted or exterminated. Holy wars and persecutions are perfectly justified. Conservative Christians show a preference for the Old Testament but also find confirmation of God's harshness in the canonical gospels, for instance in the Apocalypse or in Jesus' sentences such as "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34, NIV).

The second strategy consists in pretending that those Bible passages simply do not exist. It is adopted by those believing that: (1) God is essentially good; (2) a literal interpretation of the Bible is legitimate; and (3) those passages are actually hideous. Believers rarely read the Bible. Reading the Bible, or more precisely translations different from the Vulgata, has been actually forbidden to the faithful for long stretches of the history of Christianity. Theologians and priests talk about those gruesome fragments sporadically, or possibly never. The problem is hidden like dust under a carpet. This is, however, a rather humiliating attitude, especially if implemented by biblical scholars.

The third strategy consists in postulating that only a metaphorical, symbolic, or allegorical interpretation of the Bible is legitimate. This approach has also a long history (as we will see, it was primarily elaborated by Origen

of Alexandria) and is currently dominant. To some people, this solution is fully convincing. Others think it is just a way to escape the problem, as interpretations are often very superficial. When an episode is particularly horrendous or embarrassing, allegorical interpreters resort to the category of “mystery,” which seems to be a one-size-fits-all solution. As a matter of fact, they do not tell us which is the symbolic meaning of the divine order to kill innocent children, non-virgin women, and animals. To my knowledge, no one has tried to derive the image of a peaceful, merciful, and benevolent deity specifically from the passages quoted in the previous section. It is not just a matter of nuances. One would have to turn their literal meaning upside down. Even by clutching at straws, one does not get much.

The fourth strategy consists in admitting that those passages, which exist, are actually embarrassing and difficult to be interpreted allegorically, however they do not have to be taken too seriously. This is because, while Muslims believe the Quran was *dictated* by God, Christians believe the Bible was only *inspired* by God and written by men. This implies that not everything we find in the Bible is necessarily true. Quite incisively, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Artur Sosa, to support the need for discernment and renewal, said that, “at that time, no one had a tape recorder to capture the words” (cf. Rusconi 2017). Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, president of the Italian Episcopal Conference, declared that “the Gospel is not a distillation of truth” (Cazzullo 2023). In short, that God himself could have personally ordered or perpetrated the extermination of innocent women and children could be a story invented by insufficiently inspired men to justify their own immoral conduct. This is a sound solution, but not without pitfalls. Is there a solid criterion for distilling from the Holy Scriptures what is true and abandoning what is false, which is not simply the dominant doctrinal orientation of the present?

These four strategies refer, in different ways, to the representations of God in the Holy Scriptures. However, in Christianity – and in Catholicism in particular – there is much more than the Bible. There is the so-called “Tradition,” which has been built over time through the encounter with philosophies and theologies of different origins, on the basis of an extensive interpretation of the evangelical saying “whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40, NIV). Just as others can draw from Christianity (this is the letter of the evangelical message), Christians can draw from other philosophies and religions. As a matter of fact, a large number of Christian theologians, both orthodox and heretic, since the very beginning of Christian Age, incorporated extrabiblical ideas into their faith. They actually ended giving prevalence to these ideas to any description of God found in the Holy Scriptures. One of these ideas is that God is essentially ineffable – that is, an infinite being which cannot be fully understood by our finite mind.

4. THE TALE OF THE UNKNOWN GOD

Let us start with a question. If, as it is often repeated, Western civilization has Judeo-Christian roots, why are we often shocked by the image of God emerging from the Old Testament – a God longing for gold and blood? We contrast this image with that of a pure spiritual being – a God who is infinite, absolute, far from worldly interests, incomprehensible in his essence by human reason. Where is this image of God from? The reason we have different images of God in mind is that our civilization also has Greek-Roman roots. Our civilization stands on two legs, Athens and Jerusalem. This very fact renders Western culture rich and interesting, but also potentially schizophrenic. On the one hand, since their childhood, Europeans and their descendants scattered across the Earth are told that Paganism was wrong, as it was essentially idolatrous if not diabolic; on the other hand, they later find out that Christianity incorporated not only Greek *philosophical* ideas, but also *theological* ones. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish philosophical and theological ideas in ancient writings, whenever the focus of the writers is on “the divine things.” No doubt Ancient Greek philosophers were Pagans, and so Pagan was their idea of God.

During and after the Reformation, criticism for having incorporated too much Paganism came to the Catholic Church from the Protestants. For instance, in his *Didactica Magna*, Comenius (1896, 383) writes that “if we wish our schools to be truly Christian schools, the crowd of Pagan writers must be removed from them,” and he denounces as a shameless profanation that to “the most learned men, even with theologians, the upholders of divine wisdom, the external mask only is supplied by Christ, while the spirit that pervades them is drawn from Aristotle and the host of heathen writers.” This argument keeps recurring in theological discussions. For instance, L’uboš Rojka (2022, 738) underlines that “the concept of God in continental philosophy is inspired by Greco-Roman philosophy (the *apeiron* of Anaximander of Miletus, the absolute of Heraclitus of Ephesus, the *nous* of Anaxagoras of Clazomene, the being of Parmenides of Elea, the One of Plotinus, the supreme and perfect Good of Boethius).” He also mentions the impact of this process on Christian apophatic theology, noticing that “an extreme mysterianism (Tertullian, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius) causes the loss of meaning of words.” Rojka distances himself from this approach, stating that his preference goes to analytic philosophy and so-called “Open Theism,” exactly because less influenced by Paganism. Here, as it should already be clear, I am reversing this argument, pointing to the beneficial effects coming from ancient Greek philosophy to the monotheist faith. True, to a large extent, Christians – especially Catholics – are still “heathens,” but this is not necessarily a bad thing.

The idea of the Unknown God has a long history, which has already been object of scholarly research.² As regards secondary literature, the most influential work on this topic is Eduard Norden's book *Agnostos Theos*. Published more than a hundred years ago, the book has been the subject of intense debate and has attracted both criticism and praise. The work is certainly impressive and, in terms of size and quantity of information, still unmatched. Norden initially centers his analysis on a well-known fragment of the *Acts of the Apostles*, in which St. Paul mentions the presence in Athens of an altar consecrated to an "Agnostos Theos." From here Norden starts to reconstruct the genealogy of this expression and the concept it underlies. First of all, he argues that the Gospel story takes up a recurring theme in Pagan literature. In particular, he argues that the story is in a dependent relationship to a similar one found in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Flavius Philostratus, which in turn depends on an older work written by Apollonius' assistant Damis. The difference is that, according to Philostratus, the inscription on the Athenian altar is dedicated to the "unknown gods," in the plural. This would also be supported by other sources. Therefore, the first conclusion reached by the German philologist is that the idea of *Agnostos Theos*, in the singular, indicating a mysterious and primordial God who precedes all other gods and worldly creatures, is not primarily Greek. To find the origin of the Unknown God we must move back in time and towards the East, in pre-Christian Gnosticism, in the Jewish writings, in the religiosity of the Persian Magi and in the cults of other Semitic populations of the Middle East, such as the Babylonians.

Here, my intent is not to endorse or reject this reconstruction. Norden starts from the *Acts of the Apostles* to move backwards in time and towards the East, while I – with respect to that episode – will move forward in time and towards the West, as I am more interested in the impact of that idea on Christianity. Besides, I will recall only a few episodes of that history, with the aim of emphasizing its intrinsically peace-friendly character. Norden (2002, 204) does not seem particularly interested in these developments, so much so that he dismisses the figure of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in a few lines, presenting him as "a forger" who revels in "the phantasmagoria of unbridled mysticism" and the author of a poor text that merely takes up ideas of Proclus and other Neoplatonists.

However, a few words on the genealogy of this seminal idea cannot be avoided, as it is a matter of controversy. The most lucid, systematic, and influential elaboration of apophatic theology and the idea of the ineffability of

² The most extensive study of negative theology in the Platonic tradition, to my knowledge, extending from the 5th century BC to the 9th century AD, was published by Deirdre Carabine (1995).

God is to be ascribed to Plotinus. Therefore, even assuming that Norden is correct in believing that the Athenian altar to the Unknown God is a red herring, it remains to understand what the deep roots of Neoplatonism are. No doubt, one of these roots is Plato's original thought. Norden discusses the cosmogony presented in the *Timaeus*, noticing that goes close to the idea of *Agnostos Theos* as different from the figure of the Creator, the Demiurge, but he dismisses the equivalence between The One and the Unknown God. The Neoplatonists had a different understanding of the *Timaeus* and other Plato's dialogues. As a matter of fact, Plotinus appeals to Plato's authority in this matter by quoting *Parmenides* 142: "Then the one has no name, nor is there any description or knowledge or perception or opinion of it... And it is neither named nor described nor thought of nor known, nor does any existing thing perceive it."

To this we must add that Plato, in addition to being the main source of this idea, was a staunch pacifist in a world perpetually immersed in war. In his ideal Polis, all citizens were to have a military education and a permanent class of armed guardians had to keep internal order and external security, but the purpose of these institutions was purely defensive (Shuster and Howes 2016).

True, one cannot understand Plato without paying attention to the pre-Socratics and, in particular, to figures such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Xenophanes. The Mysteries, Gnosticism, and Neo-Pythagorean philosophy must surely be added to the Platonic roots, and perhaps Persia and India should remain in the sight. Norden is therefore right in underlining the role of Christian and pre-Christian Gnosticism, as well as mentioning a figure such as the neo-Pythagorean Apollonius of Tyana. He may be wrong, however, in looking for the Judaic and, more generally, Semitic roots of the idea of *Agnostos Theos*. Norden was mainly a classical philologist and, as such, more interested in the history of the forms of religious discourse. A genealogy can take very different paths if one looks for the exact wording of a phrase or, alternatively, for the related philosophical concept, even if conveyed by different expressions.

As Irish classical philologist Eric Robertson Dodds (1971, 310) notices, it is perhaps true that the actual phrase "Agnostos Theos" occurs in no writer of purely Hellenic culture, however, as regards Plotinus, this is irrelevant "for the phrase, so far as I know, occurs nowhere in the *Enneads*." The Irish scholar adds that the phrase is "frequent in Gnostic writings, and Norden produces good reasons for regarding it as specifically Gnostic," but then the search for the concept itself takes us in different directions. According to Dodds (1971, 313), Norden is deceived by words and commits "the common fallacy of arguing from coincidence of language to identity of thought." Brief, in his view, there is no reason to hypothesize the importation of this

and other related Neoplatonic ideas from the Middle East, as they can all be found within the circle of Hellenic speculation.

It is true that a certain interpretation of the Judaic Scriptures is often invoked by Christian Platonists to support the reconcilability of the two ideas of God, Neoplatonic and Biblical. Yahweh is not, properly speaking, an “unknown god.” Nonetheless, he is a “hidden god,” a *deus incertus*, whose name cannot be pronounced and whose face cannot be seen. This reference to invisibility and namelessness can be and has been used to support the idea of God’s ineffability, and the idea that the Holy Scriptures and Greek philosophy speak of the same god.

Still, as regards God’s alleged invisibility, the message of the Bible is quite ambiguous if not patently contradictory. It is true that in *Exodus* 33:20, the Lord tells Moses: “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” So, God can be heard but not seen. However, this sentence surprisingly comes right after the following one: “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (*Exodus* 33:11, NIV). In *Exodus* 24: 9-11, we also read what follows: “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.”

Yahweh also confirms to Moses that he is the same being who revealed himself to Abraham as El Shaddai. Concerning that encounter, in *Genesis* (18: 1-5, NIV), we read what follows:

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.” “Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.” So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.”

After this encounter, Abraham tries to convince the Lord that it is not morally justifiable to kill all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra, without distinguishing the righteous from the sinner. Abraham seems to be more merciful and morally sensitive than the Lord himself. How far is this visible being who walks, washes his own feet, eats bread, and plans to exterminate the inhabitants of two cities, from the ineffable divine darkness, inaccessible

not only to senses but also to human reason, of which the Gnostics, the Neoplatonists, and the Christian mystics speak?

Let us examine the problem in detail. As Norden did, I will start from the *Acts of the Apostles*, but to move forward rather than backward. Given the limited parameters of this work, I will select only one example for each type of doctrine or period to illustrate the presence of the idea of the Unknown God in different religious movements or ages, always with a careful eye on the problem of religious tolerance.

5. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

When St. Paul visited Athens, he entered the Synagogue and discussed faith issues with the Jews and the Pagans who believed in God. Later, by walking the streets of Athens, he noticed an altar with an inscription dedicated to the *Agnostos Theos*. Quite interestingly, he equated the Unknown God with the Christian one. The circumstance is reported as follows:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ (Acts 17: 22-28, NIV)

God created the nations and set their borders. Here, one may see an implicit reference to Elyon, the Most High, who does this in Deuteronomy 32:8-9. Even more significant is the fact that Paul clarifies what is the essence of God by referring not only to the Old Testament but also to Pagan writers. In the last two sentences, he quotes respectively the Cretan philosopher Epimenides and the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus. The Unknown God is therefore understood, from the very beginning, as a meeting point between different religions. It is a concept that allows Paul to connect Judeo-Christian religiosity with the spirituality of the Gentiles.

It should be noted that the circulating translations of the Acts differ considerably. In the version of the Italian Episcopal Conference, in Acts 17:17, we read that in the Synagogue Paul speaks with “the Jews and the Pagans who believe in God,” a phrase which suggests that one can believe in God while remaining Pagan. In the New American Bible version, however, we read that Paul speaks “with the Jews and with the worshipers.” Every reference to the Pagans disappears, together with the logical sense of the phrase: weren’t the Jews perhaps also worshipers? In other English versions of the Bible we find the expression “God-fearing Gentiles.” It is not clear, however, whether the feared God was the Jewish one or a God in the generic sense of the word. Furthermore, in the King James version, Acts 17:22, Paul addresses the Athenians saying: “I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” It is very unlikely that the Apostle would have used such a harsh expression, as it would have immediately alienated any sympathy by the listeners. In many other translations, we read: “I see that in every respect you are very religious.” You will notice that a very different concept is expressed here. The possibility of a Pagan religiosity is admitted, which cannot be reduced to idolatry alone. The only fact that Paul’s explicitly refers to the image of God elaborated by Epimenides and Aratus gives major value to the translation by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

If Paul was interested in introducing Christianity into the hearts of the Athenians through the concept of the Unknown God, we are more interested in understanding how the Unknown God of the Gentiles entered Christianity, bringing in it tolerance toward other religions.

6. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

Among religious studies scholars, there is a broad consensus on the fact that Catholic orthodoxy was not born immediately with, or immediately after, the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth, but was built over time through the drafting of the Pauline letters, the writings of the real and self-proclaimed disciples, the selection (and a continuous modification) of the canonical gospels, the exclusion of the apocryphal gospels, the fight against heresies, and, finally, the transformation of the Church into an institution protected and favored by the State, having therefore political functions. At the beginning there was a spiritual melting pot in which Christian sects with very different orientations flourished, some more Judaizing and others closer to Indo-European (Greek, Roman, Persian, and Indian) spirituality, but still oriented towards the search for syncretic syntheses. In this melting pot, a rather important role is played by “Gnosticism,” a term-and-concept used to indicate a vast set of esoteric circles and religions which includes, in addition to Gnostic and Christian-

Gnostic sects properly, also the Marcionite heresy, the Hermetic tradition, and Manichaeism. In spite of the differences, which are sometimes notable, that characterize these religious phenomena, common elements can be outlined. In addition to the aforementioned aptitude for syncretism – involving, in particular, Pythagorean and Platonic Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and religions of the Far East – in Gnosticism, understood in a broad sense, there is a tendency to distinguish the true God from Yahweh, and to stress the ineffability and unutterability of the true God.

The available information on Christian Gnosticism largely comes from heresiologists, such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, and Epiphanius of Salamis. Therefore, it is not always reliable, as the Church Fathers were mainly animated by polemical intentions, and not by the disinterested will of knowing which constitutes the fundament of the scientific ethos.

Although most of the original Gnostic writings have been lost, thanks to the testimonies of heresiologists, the original writings in Greek that have miraculously survived, and the Gnostic codices in Coptic fortunately found in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945, we can now have a better understanding of this spiritual phenomenon (Grant 1978). The authors of the Gnostic writings are sometimes identified as historical figures, whose real existence is confirmed by other sources, while in some cases they are mysterious figures hidden behind pseudonyms. For example, the author of a famous Gnostic gospel found in Nag Hammadi introduces himself as the apostle John, son of Zebedee, but we know nothing about his true identity. Naturally, this also applies to the authors of the canonical Christian gospels. In any case, there is no doubt that the idea of the Unknown God is the cornerstone of the Gnostic gospels. In the Apocrypha of John, the true God, the One, is described as perfect, boundless, unsearchable, immeasurable, invisible, external, internal, eternal, ineffable, unnameable, flawless, impeccable, incorporeal, inscrutable, and beyond time (cf. Jacobs 2016).

Many religious leaders can be associated, more or less strictly, with Christian Gnosticism, and they often stand in a master-pupil relationship. For instance, proto-gnostic Simon Magus was the teacher of Menander, who in turn passed his knowledge to Saturninus and Basilides. Paul of Tarsus, who is seen as a master by both Gnostics and Catholics, supposedly taught Teudas, who in turn instructed Valentinus, who later formed a school. Among the pupils of the latter, one finds Ptolemaeus, Secundus, Marcus, and Colarbasus. Tertullian indicates Certo as the master of Marcion of Sinope, who in turn is the master of Lucan and Apelles. Having to choose one single example, I will briefly mention the doctrine of Valentinus, in the form systematized by his pupil Ptolemaeus (or Ptolemy). This choice is due to the fact that Valentinus was close to becoming the Bishop of Rome, an event that would have perhaps changed the history of Christianity. A Greek-

speaking Egyptian theologian and philosopher, Valentinus was indeed the most notable representative of Christian Gnosticism. Deacon under Pope Hyginus, his attempt to become bishop having failed, he ended founding his own religious school. In 143 A.D., Pope Pius I excommunicated him.

As mentioned above, Gnostic Christians escaped the problem of divinely inspired violence, by clearly distinguishing the figure of God from that of the biblical "tribal deity." Let us see how heresiologist Irenaeus of Lyons summarized the Valentinian system, as codified by Ptolemaeus. The incipit of Chapter I of his book *Against the Heresies*, gets straight to the point. By assessing the creed of the Valentinians, he writes what follows:

They claim that in the invisible and unnameable heights there is a certain perfect Aeon that was before all, the First-Being, whom they also call First-Beginning, First-Father, and Profundity. He is invisible and incomprehensible. And, since he is incomprehensible and invisible, eternal and ingenerate, he existed in deep quiet and stillness through countless ages. (St. Irenaeus of Lyons 1992, 23)

So, in their cosmogony, at the beginning of all things, there existed the First Being who, after ages of silence and contemplation, through a process of emanation, gave life to the Pleroma (the divine world), formed by thirty Aeons grouped in pairs (syzygies) masculine and feminine. Each Aeon is indeed androgynous. Even the primordial godhead is both male and female, father and mother. The feminine side of Profundity is Silence (a feminine noun in Greek). The flux of emissions from the First Being downwards follows the path of Pythagorean theogony ("Thus these four constitute the first and principal Pythagorean Tetrad, for there are Profundity and Silence, then Mind and Truth").

After a series of emissions, the Pleroma emanated the Aeon Jesus, perfect fruit generated by all the Aeons. His syzygy, the female twin divine Aeon, was Sophia. While the Aeon Sophia is part of the divine world, her passion known as Sophia Achamoth wanders outside of it, because she wants to achieve direct knowledge of the First Being, the original divinity, which however is intrinsically unknowable. In this process, without the contribution of the paired masculine Aeon, Sophia Achamot generates the Demiurge who in turn creates the earthly world. The Demiurge also creates, in his likeness, hylic and psychic human beings, which are respectively the idolaters and the Christians. These are both considered spiritually inferior to pneumatic human beings, namely the adherents of Gnosticism. The biblical Yahweh is identified precisely with the Demiurge, of which Plato's *Timaeus* also speaks. He created the earthly world believing to be God but without being so. This explains the presence of evil in the world. Quite interestingly, Jesus

is not the son of Yahweh, nor his father, but precedes him in the emanation process and is also hierarchically superior to the biblical god. Thus, continues Irenaeus (1992, 34):

Demiurge imagines, they assert, that he made the totality of these things by himself, whereas he made them inasmuch as Achamoth [his Mother] emitted them. He made the heavens without knowing the heavens; he fashioned man without knowing Man; he brought the earth to light without understanding the Earth. In like manner, they assert, he was ignorant of the images of the things he made, even of his Mother herself.

It is worth noting that Ptolemaeus was a “moderate” Gnostic (Bultmann 1951, 113). He does not identify Yahweh Sabbaoth (Yaldabaoth) with evil, and therefore with the Devil himself, as other Early Christian writings seem to imply.³ In the *Letter to Flora*, a document preserved by Epiphanius of Salamis (2009, 216-221), Ptolemaeus explains that the God of the Old Testament is neither good nor evil, but rather “just.” As is well known, his rule of justice is a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a stripe for a stripe. It cannot be said that this retribution for the evil committed is patently unjust and, nevertheless, it is not consistent to an idea of God as perfect goodness, as it transforms the judge into a murderer himself. In this type of justice lies a shadow of injustice.

³ For example, in the epistle of Barnabas, which is not included in the canonical Gospel, we read that the practice of circumcision was imposed on the Jews by an “evil angel,” and we know that in Genesis 17 it is Yahweh himself who requests it (Carleton Paget 1994). The idea that Yahweh is actually the Devil, and the Son of God came among us as Jesus of Nazareth to open our eyes to this fact, is still alive today. To understand how alive this idea is, one can have a look at some Youtube channels, as the quantity of views and likes, and the quality of comments, gives us a measure of its popularity. As a sociologist, I think this aspect is quite important. For instance, Bobby Collier (2017) emphasizes that many teachings given by Jesus expose the evil nature of Yahweh. In particular, Collier notices that the Tetragrammaton YHWH was revealed to Moses, but Jesus never uses the term “Yahweh” to refer to God. He always calls him “Father,” implying that he is a merciful and benevolent entity, different from Yahweh. Jesus says: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” (Matthew 18:10, NIV); while Yahweh says: “The people of Samaria... will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open” (Hosea 13:16, NIV). The bestselling author Paul Wallis (2021) also claims that Jesus exposes Yahweh as the evil one. He notices that Jesus says “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?” (Luke 11:11, NIV). Why did he come up with that image? According to Wallis, he is referring to a famous verse of the Old Testament: “they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’ Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died” (Numbers 21:5-6, NIV). Thus, through these symbols, Jesus is trying to instruct us that Yahweh *is not* God the Father.

The Lord of the Old Testament is an intermediate creature between the God of the abyss and inscrutable depths that stands above the spiritual worlds, on the one hand, and the Devil, or the evil incarnated that rules over the material world, on the other hand. For this reason, he is actually called *The Intermediate*. The First God, the Ineffable One, is beyond the Heavens; Yahweh the Demiurge dwells in the heavenly place, that is, in the Hebdomad; while the Devil reigns over the Earth. Still, because of his ignorance and arrogance, Yaldabaoth is anyway, ultimately, also the father of the Devil.

In relation to our discussion, what really matters is that the Gnostics tended to be peaceful. In the *Letter to Flora*, Ptolemaeus says that Law of God itself is divided into three parts, the first of which confirmed by the Savior, the second one destroyed by him, and the third one to be intended only allegorically. The third part of the law includes the rituals of Judaism, such as the sacrifice of animals or the circumcision of male children. Here, Ptolemaeus invokes the authority of Saint Paul to state that the law is definitively repealed. Particularly interesting is what he says in relation to the first and the second parts of the Law.

Thus even the Law which is acknowledged to be God's is divided into three—into the part which is fulfilled by the Savior (for “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” and “Thou shalt not bear false witness” are included in his prohibition of anger, lust and oaths). And also into the part that is annulled altogether, for “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” which is intermingled with injustice and itself contains an act of injustice, was annulled by the Savior through its opposites. But opposites have the property of canceling each other: “For I say unto you that ye resist not evil by any means, but if a man smite thee, turn to him the other cheek also.” (cf. Epiphanius of Salamis 2009, 220)

The Gnostics were politically apathetic. They took very seriously the Sermon on the Mount. There was nothing farer from their intentions than imposing their religious creed through a secular arm, persecuting the members of other cults, or becoming a state religion in order to wage war against foreign nations populated by infidels.

7. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN NEOPLATONISM

We have already seen that Pre-Socratic philosophy and subsequent Platonic elaborations could be the original sources of the idea of *Agnostos Theos*, at least in the Western World. We have also seen that the Christian-Gnostic sects, not surprisingly indebted to Platonic mysticism, postulated the ineffa-

bility of the First Being, who remains unknown to the Aeon Sophia (Wisdom) itself. Still, it is Neoplatonism that, in the 3rd Century, elaborates the philosophical fundaments of apophatic theology, which in turn will be later incorporated into Christianity.

The founder of Neoplatonism was Ammonius Saccas (175 – 242 AD), Alexandrian philosopher and apostate of the Christian faith. Porphyry says that as soon as he came into contact with Plato's philosophy, he once again became a Greek from being a Christian. The episode is reported by a dubious Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1998, 209). Since he left nothing written, we can only speculate what his ideas were by looking to those of his disciples, the most important of whom were Plotinus and Origen – a fellow Pagan and a Christian.

If one considers that Origen was twenty years older than Plotinus, one cannot exclude that it was the former to influence the latter rather than the other way round. After all, Origen wrote his masterpiece *On First Principles* around the year 220 AD, while Plotinus wrote his first treatise in 254, and his complete works, *The Enneades*, were edited and compiled after his death by his pupil Porphyry of Tyre, in the year 270, that is, half a century later. On this issue, however, there is no consensus among historians. According to Swiss philologist Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (1951, 480), co-editor with Belgian theologian Paul Henry of Plotinus' works, "it is *a priori* improbable that Plotinus would have studied the writings of Origen." This hypothesis is instead considered credible by Hermann Langerbeck (1957). Anyway, Porphyry (2018, 19) insists on the fact that Plotinus, Origen and Herennius, "had made pacts not to reveal the doctrines that Ammonius expounded in his lectures." This is why Plotinus waited a long time before writing down his ideas, after having disclosed them in oral form for years to the initiated. He started disseminating his ideas in written form only when realized that Herennius and Origen had violated the pact. In any case, it seems that Ammonius was more crucial than anybody else in developing these ideas, but we cannot but quote his pupils.

Given the uncertainty, I will begin with Plotinus, also in consideration of the greater systematic nature of his work on apophatic theology. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus (2018, 569) states that "the One is, in truth, ineffable, for whatever you might say about it, you will be saying something." Then, he specifies that "to say 'transcends all things and transcends the majesty of Intellect' is, among all other ways of speaking of it, the only true one, not because that is its name, but because it indicates that it is not 'something' among all things, it having itself no designation." Afterwards, the Neoplatonist master adds that God can only be reached by following the *via negationis*: "In fact, if we do not have knowledge of it, does it follow as well that we do not have it at all? But we have it in such a way that we can speak

about it, though we cannot speak it. For we say what it is not..." (Plotinus 2018, 570).

Plotinus places the One at the top of the ontological hierarchy of the universe. Everything flows, emanates from it as the light from the Sun. The One, of itself, cannot say anything other than: "I I" or "am am." These expressions are very close, though not exactly equivalent, to "I am that I am" or "I will be what I will be" – the famous phrase pronounced by Yahweh when interrogated by Moses about his name (Exodus 3:14). We can exclude the equivalence, and therefore the direct influence of Judaism on Plotinus, because the only possible version of the Bible accessible to the Egyptian master was the Septuagint, that is, the Greek version of the Holy Scriptures. In the Septuagint, the expression אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה ('ehye 'ăšer 'ehye) is translated as ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν (Ego eimi ho on), "I am The Being." This is something the Ineffable One would not say.

We do not know if Plotinus wanted to remark the difference between his supreme deity and the one of Hellenic Judaism, however, right after, the author of *The Enneads* explicitly specifies that the first hypostasis cannot say "I am this," if "this" is something different. This is something that only the second hypostasis can say. Indeed, below the Ineffable One there is the hypostasis of universal Intelligence, which Plotinus calls "Logos" and that already belongs to the sphere of the multiple. Plotinus writes that Intelligence, having entered a dual dimension, of itself, in an instant of self-awareness, can say: "I am being" – which is exactly the phrase we find in the Septuagint. Similarly, for Christians, the Logos is the second person of the Trinity.

Below Intelligence there is the hypostasis of the Soul, or of life, which represents one more step into multiplicity. Finally, one step below is Matter, which – according to Plotinus – cannot be considered a hypostasis of being. This is consistent with the ancient Greek idea that anything that changes has no real ontological consistency. It is not a being in the full sense of the word. However, it is appropriate to clarify that Plotinus does not completely devalue matter, nor identifies it with absolute evil, as it is not the antithesis of the One. The material world is, in any case, emanated from the One and therefore, despite being imperfect due to its distance from the primordial and unknown source of being, besides being intertwined with evil (understood as lack of goodness), still contains beauty and goodness in every of its smallest and apparently insignificant aspects. Matter receives its forms and its movement from the superior hypostases, so much so that the ascent and return towards the One, the process of transcendence which should be the ultimate meaning of our existence, can also begin, as Plato said, from the contemplation of the beauty of human bodies. On this precise aspect he argues several times with the Gnostics. In his view, the latter would have uselessly and absurdly multiplied the number of hypostases (their Aeons), would have dis-

tanced themselves excessively from the Greek masters, would arrogantly consider themselves ontologically different from other human beings, and would have excessively devalued the sensible world.

The second hypostasis, Intellect or Intelligence, can be seen as the Platonic hyperuranium, that is, the set of perfect forms. The Logos in its pure state is the self-reflecting mind of The One. This level contains not only every possible truth, all human knowledge, past, present and future, the entire knowledge, but also all the images of God developed by all the religions of the world. It is precisely this idea that turns Neoplatonic monotheism into a source of religious tolerance. Typically Neoplatonic is the idea of the "Unified Olympus." Neoplatonism in its purest form is a philosophy-religion for initiates only. However, traditional religions are seen as good because they allow even less spiritual people to get closer to the godhead. The myths of tradition, the divinities represented in temples, and propitiatory rites are, in any case, only allegorical and metaphorical representations that try to translate into the understandable language of symbols what is fundamentally ineffable and unspeakable. In consideration of this fact, one should never fight to give pre-eminence to some symbols over others. All Western and Eastern deities should be brought together in one single ideal temple. We find this idea both in a proto-Neoplatonic thinker like Plutarch and in an exponent of mature Neoplatonism like Proclus.⁴

Such is the refusal of violence among Neoplatonists that Porphyry also campaigns against the killing of animals, especially in religious rituals, and follows Pythagoras in promoting vegetarianism. In particular, he is amazed by the fact that the Jews – who he defines as "a people of philosophers" who suffered intolerable outrage to their traditions from the Romans – sacrifice animals in such a bloody way. Indeed, "they do not feast on the sacrificed animals, but burn them in their entirety, at night, pouring over them much honey and wine; they used up the sacrifice quickly, so that not even the All-Seeing should be a spectator of this terrible act" (Porphyry 2000, 65). This

⁴ Historian of philosophy Mario Vegetti (2018) explains that "Plutarch works on a theological system in which the great deities of Egypt, such as Isis and Osiris, are integrated into the old Greek Olympian religion; and Proclus, who brings this system to completion, finds in it a space for all the gods, be they Greek, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Persian. But here there is a very close parallel between the metaphysical system and the theological system: the gods are "names" and symbols that designate the philosophical objects that populate the metaphysical universe of Neoplatonism; this universe in turn constitutes an immense unified Olympus, in which all religions find their place and their rational justification." In a popular science book, Ubaldo Nicola (1999: 162) attributes this idea to Plotinus, writing that "he called for the foundation of a unified Olympus in which all the forms of the Divine invented by all religions are brought together: the Greek Zeus can coexist with the Egyptian Osiris and the monstrous-looking oriental gods because they are all representations, names of the unknowable One, a human attempt to describe the unimaginable."

non-violent sensitivity applies also to Plotinus who, according to Porphyry (2018, 17), “would not agree to take medicines derived from wild animals either; he did not, he said, want to derive nourishment from the bodies even of domesticated animals.”

Besides being crafted by Ammonius, Plotinus, and Porphyry, these ideas were then taken up, disseminated, reworked by other Pagan philosophers of the Neoplatonic school, such as Iamblichus, Proclus, and Damascius, to be then absorbed by Abrahamic religions. In particular, the influence exerted on Christianity by Proclus’ *The Elements of Theology* is difficult to overestimate.

It is worth noting that Plotinus’ theological ideas also deeply penetrated into Islam, thanks to the translation of the *Enneads* into Arabic provided by the al-Kindi’s circle. Curiously, “long sections of this translation went under the title *Theology of Aristotle*. The attribution of the work to Aristotle helped the text to become an influential source of Neoplatonic ideas in the Arabic-speaking world” (Adamson 2022).

The relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity is ambivalent. The two theological schools were rivals but, at the same time, capable of building a mutually enriching dialog. The exchange of ideas happened in spite of the many controversies that divided the two movements. The Neoplatonists could never accept the idea of God becoming flesh and being experienced by senses, but this fact did not prevent a convergence on the level of morality. Philosopher Giovanni Reale (2006, ix) reckons that Porphyry was angry with the Christians, rather than with Christ. Indeed, according to Porphyry, “the gods have proclaimed that Christ was a most pious man who became immortal and that they remember him with great praise. Of the Christians, however, the gods say that they are corrupt and involved in error, and they use many injuries of this kind against them.” Note that Porphyry (2000, 70) mentions the gods, in the plural, but, as any good Platonist, he recognizes the existence of the One transcending the world of gods and men, with the following words: “The first god, being incorporeal, unmoved and indivisible, neither contained in anything nor bound by himself, needs nothing external, as has been said.”

A note is in order at this point. It is important to clarify that it would be erroneous to see the recognition of the fundamental unknowability of God as an irrationalistic drift of Hellenic philosophy. The search for the Archē by the pre-Socratics certainly generated logical paradoxes, but this does not mean that those philosophers left the confines of rational thought. Xenophanes denounced the limits of the human intellect, to affirm that only God has perfect knowledge of itself and nature, but he always did so using rational arguments. Socrates knows he knows nothing, but with this admission he does not fall into irrationalism. He rather clarifies that rational research be-

gins precisely when the limits of one's knowledge are admitted. If chimpanzees were able to communicate their thoughts and told us that they are not able to understand certain mental processes of homo sapiens such as quaternion algebra or quantum mechanics, would we conclude that they have slipped into irrationalism? Similarly, if computer scientists admit that the machines they designed can make calculations that exceed human possibilities, are they *ipso facto* victims of irrationalism? Perhaps we can even reverse the argument and conclude that those who think they can know everything, including the essence of God, are taking a dangerous slope. In theological matters, a certain degree of "mysterianism" is always in point, as preaching the perfect knowability of God can qualify as a sin of presumption.

It is time to turn our attention to mysterianism in orthodox Christianity. Since there is a legion of Christian mystics who preach the ineffability of God, I will limit myself to providing just a few examples. I will divide the authors into three groups, based on their belonging to three classical historical periods, that is, Early Christianity (Antiquity), Medieval Christendom (Middle Ages), and Renaissance (Modernity). Some of these authors were at some point convicted of heresy, but they have been subsequently rehabilitated and must therefore be considered orthodox.

8. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

In Early Christianity, the idea of God's ineffability can be found in the theological works of Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian, Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Synesius of Cyrene, and Augustine of Hippo, among others.⁵ The degree of mysterianism varies in different authors, as the degree of their religious tolerance. Apologetic intentions are preponderant in the works of these authors, who are often involved in polemics against Pagans or alleged heretics. However, the desire to defend and define the canons of the Christian faith does not prevent them from adopting ideas coming from their adversaries. It is precisely apophatic theology that represents the point of contact between Neoplatonic philosophers and Christian mystics. Of course, one should not establish this relationship too closely either, because there are many paths that lead to the Ineffable One. For instance, Theophilus (*Ad Autolyicum*, 1, 3-4) confers on God "the attributes of ineffability, inexpressibility, immutability, inconceivability" (cf. Sodano 2006, 10), but his theology is clearly a form of Hellenized Judaism, as he

⁵ An in-depth study of the idea of the Unknown God in the 4th century AD was recently published by Tomasz Stępień and Karolina Kochończyk-Bonińska (2018).

mainly draws from a literal interpretation of the Septuagint, a version of the Bible already imbued with Greek concepts (Grant 1947).

Here, as a way of example, we will focus on the work of Origen because the latter, in addition to being devoted to the Unknown God, defuses the charge of violence coming from the Old Testament through a completely allegorical interpretation of the same. Origen is one of the first authors, if not the very first, within Christian orthodoxy, to follow this path. Furthermore, he also developed a method of interpretation that would have a notable impact on the history of theology.

To start, there is no doubt that Origen (2017, 29) subscribed to theological mysterianism, as he wrote that, "having refuted, then, as best as we could, every notion which suggests that God be thought of in any bodily way, we assert that, according indeed to truth, God is incomprehensible and immeasurable."

We need, however, to clarify the meaning of an expression such as "bodily way," or – to put it in other terms – what is the theoretical premise to this conclusion. In his treatise *On First Principles*, he recommends allegorical interpretation of both the Old and the New Testament based on a well-argued criterion. Origen (2017, 484-561) states that three different levels of interpretations are possible, according to the "body" (or the "flesh"), the "soul," and the "spirit" – to say literal, allegorical, or moral. Many of the events described in the Old Testament, if interpreted in a literal sense, are "impossible" or "unachievable." Therefore, they must be read allegorically in order to become comprehensible. Some passages contain literal truths and others are rather symbolic messages that require a sophisticated exegesis.

By applying his method, Origen criticizes both the Jews who refused to welcome Jesus Christ as the Son of God (or the Messiah), and the heretics who distinguished the true God from Yahweh, the Demiurge of whom the Holy Scriptures allegedly speak. The Jews rejected the idea that Jesus is the Savior sent by God the Father because the signs that were announced by the prophecies did not occur. The Alexandrian theologian recognizes that the announced signs did not materialize, but maintains that the objection does not hold up precisely because the prophecies must not be interpreted literally. On the other hand, for the same reason, the heretics (the reference to Gnostics and Marcionites is implicit) who postulate the existence of two distinct deities, in order to exorcise the possibility that the true God may have done evil, wander in a world of fanciful fantasies. Origen (2017, 487) claims that phrases such as "A fire has been kindled in Mine anger," "I the Lord am a jealous (God), visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation," "it repents Me that I anointed Saul to be king," "I am the Lord, who make peace and create evil," "There is not evil in a city which the Lord has not done," "Evils came down from the Lord upon the

gates of Jerusalem,” and “An evil spirit from the Lord plagued Saul,” are not to be taken literally. They are allegories, metaphors, and symbolic representations of hidden and mysterious messages that the human mind cannot fully comprehend. Therefore, it is not necessary to sharply distinguish the creator of the material world, the Lord worshiped by the Jews, from the incarnated Logos, the Perfect being that entered the world as Jesus Christ.

More generally, Origen interprets almost all the events concerning the Jewish people symbolically and not historically. The tales of adulteries, incest and murders are symbolic, even if their meaning is not always clear to us. For instance, the incest of the biblical patriarch Lot who gets pregnant his two daughters, one of which was still a child (Genesis 19), and other similar stories, “were certain mysteries, and forms of spiritual things, but that we are ignorant of what nature they are.”

Equally, the stories about the escape from Egypt, the wars of conquest of the Holy Land, and the Babylonian captivity are all allegorical tales. None of these events can really have happened, because the Jews, when they rejected Christ and crucified him, demonstrated that they were not truly the chosen people. Therefore, the Bible was not written for them. It must be assumed that “Israelites” is a term that indicates the people of God, the Christians, even though they are in fact mostly Gentiles. The Gentiles who converted to Christianity are the true Israelites. All the nations mentioned in the Bible are just symbols, not real places or peoples. The descent of the prophets into Egypt symbolically represents their descent into this world, into the Earthly City. When the Bible talks about Israel or Judea is not talking about a place on Earth, but about the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God. The Promised Land is not a piece of land “from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates” (Genesis 12:7), but life beyond death. These ideas will have a notable influence on the doctrine of Saint Augustine. Thus, the problem of a God who should do good, and instead does evil, is resolved.

By an irony of fate, the anti-heretical doctrines of Origen and those of his followers will be declared heretical themselves by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, called by Emperor Justinian. Two ideas of the Origenists, both of Platonic ancestry, aroused scandal in particular, namely the idea that the soul is eternal and therefore pre-existing the birth of human beings, as it is a spark of divinity itself, and the idea that an essentially good God cannot condemn anyone to eternal damnation in a place called Hell. The restoration of creation to a condition of perfection and the salvation of all the creatures, a doctrinal truth known as Apocatastasis, is the only destiny that can be conceived by a God understood as infinite and absolute Goodness.

Although Origen, even in modern documents, is often labeled heretic by virtue of the condemnation inflicted on him under Justinian (cf. Edwards 2014), the current tendency of the main Christian churches is to consider him

orthodox. For instance, this is the position of the Catholic Church, explicitly expressed by Pope Joseph Ratzinger during a General Audience. Benedict XVI (2007) calls Origen of Alexandria a “maestro” and remarks that he “truly was a figure crucial to the whole development of Christian thought.” According to the Roman pontiff, Origen impressed an “irreversible turning point” upon the history of theology and Christian thought precisely by virtue of his allegorical approach to the Holy Scriptures. Benedict XVI (2007) underlines that “his field of interest extended from exegesis to dogma, to philosophy, apologetics, ascetical theology and mystical theology.”

The posthumous excommunication inflicted on him by the Council of 553, after his theological work had been considered in conformity with the doctrine of the Church for three hundred years, is, therefore, to be considered repealed. Origen not only can but must be read and accepted by Catholics. Benedict XVI’s final words leave no doubt about this: “I invite you – and so I conclude – to welcome into your hearts the teaching of this great master of faith.”

9. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN THE MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM

As regards the Middle Ages, the idea that God is fundamentally unknowable is found in the works of notable theologians, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Scotus Eriugena, Robert Grosseteste, Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Albertus Magnus, and St. Thomas Aquinas, just to mention a few. It is worth noticing that Aquinas, though mainly associated with the incorporation of Aristotle’s rational philosophy into the Christian doctrine, also absorbed the ideas of the Areopagite and dwelled to solve the riddle of the knowability and unknowability of God with ingenious solutions (Hill 1971).

Given the parameters of this work, here I will focus only on the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, as he is universally recognized as the most influential of the Christian apophatic theologians. As is well known, the author of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* was not the Athenian converted by Saint Paul in the Areopagus, as it was believed for more than a millennium, but a Syrian theologian who lived in the fifth or sixth century AD. Still, the fact that he was believed to be the convert of St. Paul gave him enormous authority in the Middle Ages, comparable to that of the Gospels themselves and the writings of St. Augustine.

Pseudo-Dionysius sets out to accomplish an “impossible mission,” that is, to identify the invisible, unknowable and unutterable God of Neoplatonic theology with the revealed and therefore visible, knowable, and utterable God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. To return to the One, the God of the Neoplatonists, it is necessary to free ourselves from sensory data, transcend

the material world, first by using abstract reasoning and then making a final leap beyond reason itself, through ecstatic contemplation. The Judeo-Christian God, instead, reveals himself precisely to human senses, sometimes to hearing alone and sometimes also to sight and touch. This applies to both Yahweh – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as described in the Old Testament – and Jesus of Nazareth, as presented in the tales of the New Testament. Dionysius resolves the issue by saying in his main writings, the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names*, that there are two ways, both legitimate, to reach God, namely, *cataphatic theology* (or the positive way) that tells us what God is, and *apophatic theology* (or the negative way) that tells us what God is not. There is little doubt that Dionysius' preference goes to the negative way, centered on philosophical reasoning and mystical intuition. In a private letter to Gaius Therapeutes, he clearly states that "if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see Him, but some of His creatures that are existing and known" (Dionysius the Areopagite 1897, 141). In short, Abraham and Moses did not see God, but creatures of God.

However, in his published works, he does not deny the legitimacy of the cataphatic way based on the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures. Of course, it is also legitimate to ask whether he could have denied the validity of the Scriptures at all. Let us look at the historical context. On February 27, 380 AD, the emperors Gratian, Theodosius I and Valentinian II issued the Edict of Thessalonica (*Cunctos populos*). Pagan cults were banned and the Catholic religion became mandatory throughout the Empire. The edict established that the imperial authority, which claimed coming from the heavenly Judge himself, would have condemned any violators. Two years later, in 382, Theodosius issued a decree of death for all Manichaeian monks. Augustine of Hippo converted to Christianity from Manichaeism on April 24th, 387 AD, Easter day, being baptized by the Bishop of Milan Ambrose. This means that he resisted the conversion for five years to the risk of his own life. With this we do not want to cast doubt on the sincerity of the Saint's conversion, but the fact remains that had he not been baptized he would have become a Pagan martyr rather than a doctor of the Church. This is why, though recognizing the ineffability of God, Augustine could not make room in his theology for the idea of the plurality of the languages of God preached by Symmachus or Themistius (cf. Campa 2014). It was illegal.

Between 391-392, Theodosius I promulgated a series of decrees, which regulated the practical implementation of the Edict of Thessalonica. Those who refused to convert to Catholicism were heavily fined (they had to pay from 15 to 30 libras of gold), lost the right to family inheritance, lost civil rights and, in some cases, put to death. Pagan temples were destroyed and practitioners often killed.

In 416, the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II issued a new edict, establishing that only Christians could hold public office, serve as judges, and join the army. This entailed the immediate dismissal of all judges, civil servants, and army officers who still adhered to Pagan and heretic cults. Under Justinian also, in 527, all heretics and Pagans lost their state offices, honorary titles, teaching qualifications, and public salaries. In 529, Emperor Justinian decided to eradicate from the European continent the last direct contact with ancient philosophical thought, by closing the Platonic Academy, which outlived its founder and lasted for about nine hundred years. The decision was justified based on the fact that the Academia of Athens taught "Pagan and perverse doctrines." Besides, as we already saw, under Justinian, Origen was also posthumously excommunicated. At that time, in Athens, Constantinople, and Asia Minor, Neoplatonists were still quite numerous, in spite of the many anti-Pagan decrees and persecutions. By the mid-sixth century, they were all forced to become Christians.

Pseudo-Dionysius lived in the fifth or the sixth century AD. He is believed to be a pupil of Pagan philosopher Proclus, who taught him theology. Being Syrian, Dionysius probably lived in the Eastern Roman Empire. This is to say that he did not live in a climate of religious freedom where one could openly reject the authority of the Scriptures. Moreover, he clearly was a high-ranking person who defended social hierarchies and even the institution of slavery. From his letters, we understand he was perfectly integrated into the imperial system, as he was not affected by any of the above-mentioned decrees. Even in this case, we have no elements to doubt the sincerity of the Pseudo-Areopagite's Catholic faith. To establish with certainty whether those who converted were sincere or not, we would need to have a time machine and the ability to access people's minds and hearts, something that no historian of ideas can do. However, the historical-social context cannot be ignored, if we really want to understand why certain ideas spread and others disappeared. Certainly, Dionysius showed no small courage in giving preeminence to the apophatic theology of obvious Neoplatonic origin, over the cataphatic theology of apparent Judeo-Christian origin, at a time when the Platonic Academy was closed and the Neoplatonists persecuted.

Having clarified these aspects, we can now come to the theological ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. First of all, following the Neoplatonists, he calls God "the One, the Unknown, the Super-essential self-existing Good," and he often talks of "the Emanations of the Goodhead." Needless to say that no Christian would currently call God "The One" or resort to the concept of "emanation," together or in alternative to that of "creation."

In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius (1920, 53) writes that the "the One which is beyond thought surpasses the apprehension of thought, and the

Good which is beyond utterance surpasses the reach of words.” Still, he adds that “many of the Sacred Writers thou wilt find who have declared that It is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also unsearchable and past finding out, since there is no trace of any that have penetrated the hidden depths of Its infinitude.” In other words, he stresses the compatibility between the God of the Philosophers and the God of the Prophets.

Indeed, Dionysius draws primarily from the theology of Plotinus and Proclus, but he also tries to show that this wisdom is not opposed to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. For instance, to illustrate how a believer can be lifted up to the radiance of the divine darkness which is beyond being through the voiding of all knowledge, Dionysius (1920, 193-194) mentions the mysterious encounter between “the blessed Moses” and God on Mount Sinai. He implicitly refers to the episode of the burning bush, when Moses hears the voice of God but does not see him, or to the episode where Moses asks God to show him his glory and the latter responds that no one can see his face. The Syrian theologian underlines that “nevertheless he meets not with God Himself, yet he beholds – not Him indeed (for He is invisible) – but the place wherein He dwells.” He takes this episode to signify “that the divinest and the highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body or the mind are but the symbolic language of things subordinate to Him who Himself transcendeth them all.” In other words, the Scriptures would confirm the ideas that God cannot be perceived by senses and, therefore, the revelation is symbolic. Obviously, Dionysius chooses the most favorable episodes to support his thesis, and without quoting directly the Bible.

In any case, the Syrian theologian makes it clear that, even when we are moving along the path of affirmative theology, we have to recognize that some statements are truer than others. In his *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius (1920, 198-199) writes that “it is truer to affirm that God is life and goodness than that He is air or stone, and truer to deny that drunkenness or fury can be attributed to Him than to deny that we may apply to Him the categories of human thought.” Brief, a furious god is not God. Saying that God is good is more correct than saying that God is evil. Still, the Ineffable One is not “goodness.” This statement must be understood in the sense that our human conceptualization of “goodness” can never be adequate enough to express the ultimate essence of the Godhead.

Given this theological view, what can we infer about Dionysius’ attitude to war and peace, tolerance and intolerance? In the *Divine Names*, Chapter XI is about Peace. God is presented as the Fount of Very Peace and of all Peace. Dionysius also address a letter to Demophilus Therapeutes, where harshly rebukes the receiver for having used violence against an impious man and a priest who had forgiven him. He tells him to be kind, tolerant, to respect hierarchies, and to mind his own business.

Demophilus is deeply convinced to have providentially preserved the things sacred, which were about to be profaned, and tells the Pseudo-Areopagite that he is still keeping them undefiled. Dionysius (1897, 153) warns him with the following words:

But thou, as thy letters testify, I do not know how, being in thy senses, hast spurned one fallen down before the priest, who, as thou sayest, was unholy and a sinner. Then this one entreated and confessed that he has come for healing of evil deeds, but thou didst not shiver, but even insolently didst cover with abuse the good priest, for shewing compassion to a penitent, and justifying the unholy.

Quite interestingly, even in this letter, Dionysus (1897, 150) refers to Moses as an example, noticing that the Jewish Prophet “was deemed worthy of the Divine manifestation on account of his great meekness.” He remarks, once again, that “the histories of the Hebrews (...) at any time they describe him as being excluded from the vision of God,” however, “they do not cast him out from God for his meekness.” Once again, he disregards uncomfortable biblical passages, such as the fact that the first thing Moses does after meeting Yahweh on Mount Sinai is to put thousands of Jews to death on charges of impiety, for having manufactured the Golden Calf. As we read in *Exodus* 32:28, “the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.”

It is worth noticing, however, that other coeval Christians did not see anything wrong in killing impious people. Dionysius tends instead to stress the goodness and mercifulness of God and the necessity to imitate him in this respect.

10. THE UNKNOWN GOD IN MODERN CHRISTIANITY

The Platonic perspective suffered a decline in the Late Middle Ages, when Aristotelian philosophy became hegemonic in Catholic circles. However, it is back in vogue in the Renaissance. Once again, many names can be associated with these ideas, such as German Catholic cardinal and scientist Nicholas of Cusa (1401 – 1464); Italian scholar and Catholic Priest Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499); Italian Renaissance nobleman and philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494); Spanish Carmelite nun and religious reformer Teresa of Ávila (1515 – 1582); and her coeval Discalced Carmelite John of the Cross (1542 – 1591).

With regard to this period, we will briefly touch upon Nicholas of Cusa, also referred to as Nicolaus Cusanus. I choose him as an example of this period by virtue of his vigorous attempts to overcome the doctrinal divisions

that tormented the Church internally and the conflicts with other religions, even if not always with the desired results.

In 1432, Cusanus took part in the Council of Basel, which was supposed to settle numerous issues within the church, in particular the Eastern Schism occurred in 1054. Cusanus initially sat among the ranks of the conciliarists. He conceived in this context his first great work, *De concordantia catholica*, published in 1433. He also helped organizing the great council of Ferrara and Florence, which started on January 8th, 1438, and ended proclaiming the reunion between the Greek and Latin Churches, an agreement that lasted until the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire, in 1453. This council is particularly important because Emperor John VIII Palaeologus, invited by Cusanus himself, embarks for Italy bringing with him Neoplatonic philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355 - 1452). This fact is crucial to our discussion, because Plethon gave a notable boost to Cosimo de' Medici's Platonic interests and inspired the foundation of the Platonic Academy led by Marsilio Ficino. The latter translated the works of Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, Hermes Trismegistus, and Dionysius the Areopagite into Latin.

In 1440, Nicholas of Cusa published *De docta ignorantia*, a work that put him in the footsteps of Dionysius. The starting point of Cusanus's epistemological reflection on the absolute maximum is that every research is comparative, in that it uses proportion as a means. Therefore, the infinite as infinite, escaping every proportion, is unknown. A finite mind cannot fully understand the infinite, so God as infinite is essentially unknowable. Nicholas of Cusa (1990, 25-29) defines Dionysius as "the greatest seeker of God," and underlines that "the great Dionysius says that our understanding of God draws near to nothing rather than to something."

The Catholic Cardinal thinks that the awareness of our ignorance of divine matters must precede any theological discussion, as the latter is placed on a lower level than the reality it speaks of. Positive theology is irremediably caught between the limitations of human intellect and language. Then, Cusanus (1990, 45) explains what negative theology is, by writing the following:

Sacred ignorance has taught us that God is ineffable. He is so because He is infinitely greater than all nameable things. And by virtue of the fact that [this] is most true, we speak of God more truly through removal and negation—as [teaches] the greatest Dionysius, who did not believe that God is either Truth or Understanding or Light or anything which can be spoken of.

Many disagreements among Christians, and even more between Christians and other Abrahamic monotheists, are triggered by the Trinitarian dogma. Apophatic theology solves this problem by positing that the Trinity

must be understood symbolically and that, ultimately, is dis(solved) in the ineffability of the One. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can be understood as synonyms of Unity, Equality, and Union. From the *One* (Unity, the Father) emanates the Logos (Equality, the Son) who is equal to the Father ("I and the Father are one," John 10:30, NIV). Equality can be predicated of *two* entities (I and the Father), but the doubling of the One (if we are allowed a bold biological metaphor, one can think of the process of cellular reproduction by mitosis) also produces a *third* element, which is the relationship, the Union, between the first and second persons of the Trinity. This is the Holy Spirit. As one can see, the stories of the Holy Scriptures are here understood as mere allegorical representations of a philosophical truth that one primarily finds in the writings of the Neopythagoreans and the Neoplatonists. These philosophers expressed the concept in "mathematical" language rather than in a "mythological" one. In addition to Plotinus' *Enneads*, one may think of *The Theology of Arithmetic* by Iamblichus (1988), or the *Elements of theology* by Proclus (1963).

This approach implies that God, understood as the incomprehensible infinity, "is neither the Father nor the Son nor the Holy Spirit" (Nicholas of Cusa 1990, 46) – a strong statement that could have made an illustrious judge of the Inquisition raise his eyebrows, if Cusanus had not been such a skilled debater as to keep himself away from any possible accusation of heresy. This theological conclusion is, however, fundamental for seeking conciliation not only with non-Catholic Christians but also, and above all, with any other religion of the world.

The problem of conciliation arises, above all, after the fall of Constantinople. May 29th, 1453 is indeed an ominous date for Christianity. The capital of the Eastern Roman Empire and spiritual center of the Greek Church, falls into the hands of the Turks led by Mehmed the Conqueror and is sacked. Added to the bloody aspects that characterize every war of conquest are religious persecutions. The Hagia Sophia, the Byzantine church known as the Church of God's Holy Wisdom, is transformed into a mosque. Christians are left with only three possibilities: escape, martyrdom, or conversion to Islam. The Latin West, which had previously tried to barter the overcoming of the Eastern schism and the submission of the Greek church to the Roman one in exchange for military aid, decides to react – albeit belatedly – by organizing a crusade. Of a different opinion is however Nicholas of Cusa, in the meantime appointed cardinal for his merits by Pope Nicholas V in 1448 and prince bishop of Bressanone two years later. Constantinople was a city to which he had personally gone before the Islamic conquest, with the aim of reconciling the two Christian churches. After the terrible event of the fall, Cusanus reached the conclusion that it was necessary to aim even higher and to reconcile, in the name of the Unknown God – in the name of faith,

wisdom, and learned ignorance – all the religions of the world. To this end, he wrote the work *De Pace Fidei* (On the Peace of Faith).

The Unknown God is the pivot on which he articulates his speech, aimed at convincing believers of all religions to see themselves as part of a single universal faith. Rites, myths, and beliefs divide nations, but they are in reality all united in their ignorance in the face of what is essentially incomprehensible.

Nicolaus of Cusa (1995) addresses God directly with the following words: “You, therefore, who bestow life and existence, are that one, who seems to be sought differently in the diverse rites and is named with diverse names, since You as You are remain unknown and ineffable for all.” And, again, he asks God to intervene, to help men overcome the superficial differences that push them to hate each other, to draw their swords and kill each other in his name.

If You consider it worthy to act thus, the sword and the envy of hatred and every evil will cease. Everyone will know in what way there is only a single religion in the variety of rites. Indeed, one will not be able to annul this difference of rites, or in any case this will not be beneficial to do, since the diversity may bring an increase in devotion, if every region bestows the most vigilant effort upon its ceremonies, which it holds to be, as it were, the most pleasant to You, the King; however, at all events, just as You are only one—there ought to be only a single religion and a single cult of adoration of God. (Nicolaus of Cusa 1995)

We have seen that the Neoplatonists had already worked for the foundation of a unified Olympus, a syncretic temple in which different rites could be officiated, different images of God of the many religions exhibited, and different names of God invoked, but with the awareness that these are only differences in habits and customs, different ways – in any case inadequate – undertaken by believers to approach the incomprehensible. These were, however, Pagan authors. Within Christianity, by simply putting the issue in these terms, to slip inadvertently into heresy is an imminent risk. Nicholas of Cusa is perfectly aware of this, so much so that his speech immediately focuses on the Trinity. It is necessary first of all to assure the Pope and his co-religionists that the entire discussion moves within Christian orthodoxy, even if the ultimate goal is ecumenical and syncretistic.

The bishop of Bressanone imagined a celestial interreligious and intercultural council, in which sages representing all religions and nations, led by Peter, Paul and the Word himself, contribute in the undertaking of valorizing what all faiths have in common. However, much of the writing is resolved in an attempt to convince a Greek, an Italian, an Arab, an Indian, a Chaldean, a Jew, a Scythian, a Frenchman, a Persian, a Syrian, a Spaniard, a Turk, a

German, a Tartar, an Armenian, a Bohemian, and an Englishman that they all believe in the triune nature of God, understood however in the allegorical sense already explained above.

When the Indian notices that “It will, however, be very difficult to achieve agreement from all sides in respect to the triune God,” the Logos answers that “God, as Creator, is three and one. As infinite He is neither three, nor one, nor anything that can be stated. The names which are attributed to God are taken from creatures, since He Himself is ineffable in Himself and is above all that can be named or stated.” Indeed, long sections of the book are to make clear that the Trinity is not primarily a Christian dogma, but a universal philosophical truth.

When the Arab, notoriously suspicious of anything that reminds polytheism, asks the Logos “How should those who revere several gods concur with the philosophers in reverence of a single God?,” the Logos replies that also polytheists are welcome to join the unified universal religion because “all who at any time worshiped several gods, presupposed the divinity to exist.” The divinity is understood as the prime cause of the universe, and as such it is one, behind and before any plurality of forms it may assume. The Logos clarifies this concept by mean of the following analogy: “as there is nothing white without whiteness, so there also are no gods without the divinity” (Nicolaus of Cusa 1995).

Coming to our days, it is worth noticing that Pope Francis’ initiatives aimed at overcoming distrust and conflicts between different religions move in the wake of these theological reflections, all falling within orthodoxy, even if they have sometimes scandalized not a few conservative spirits. I will provide just an example. When the Pontiff visited Athens to meet the President of Greece and other political and ecclesiastic authorities, on December 4th, 2021, he pronounced the following words:

From this place, humanity’s horizons expanded. I too feel invited to lift my gaze and let it rest on the highest part of the city, the Acropolis. Visible from afar to the travellers who over the millennia have arrived here, it inevitably bespoke the presence of the divine, the call to expand our horizons to what is on high. From Mount Olympus to the Acropolis to Mount Athos, Greece invites men and women of every age to direct their journey of life towards the heights. Towards God, for we need transcendence in order to be truly human. (Francis 2021)

At the center of the Acropolis is the Parthenon or Temple of Athena, the goddess of Reason. Mount Olympus was the home of the twelve Hellenic Gods. Mount Athos is an Orthodox spiritual center since 1054, the year of the Great Schism. How is it that a Catholic Pope celebrates all this? There is

no scandal in seeing the presence of the divinity in any religious symbols, once one deeply understands the principles of apophatic theology.

11. CONCLUSIONS

We have thus reached the end of our journey into the search for the Unknown God and the time has come to sum up the discussion. Apophatic theology, understood as an additional way of searching for God that completes and surpasses cataphatic theology, offers by far a more refined and complex vision of the divine than popular religiosity. The latter is not to be denigrated, as it anyway helps to approach the divine, but it can hardly satisfy the religious needs of deeply spiritual people. Besides that, the cult of the Ineffable One, to the extent that it is shared by the various religions of the world, offers the added advantage of making religious conflicts senseless. Indeed, apophatic theology prevents the possibility that the sense of belonging of religious communities is reinforced in contrast to other religious identities. Once believers understand that what they say about God is just a clumsy human attempt to talk about an ultimately incomprehensible reality, there is no longer need to quarrel. Nothing prevents believers from saying something more about The One – or whatever name they want to call God – but in doing so they *ipso facto* leave the perimeter of the deepest truths, to enter that of superficial speculation and allegorical imagination. It is like the difference between our naked human body and the way we dress it. Garments are important, in most cases even indispensable, but ultimately we are not the clothes we wear.

Holy wars and religious persecutions have been brought on by the assertion that one knows God and his will with certainty, along with the conviction that there is only one god. Less likely to wage war for religious reasons are those who assume that there are many gods or, if god is one, he is beyond human comprehension.

It is important to stress that, as strange as they may appear to those having a popular understanding of faith, these ideas fall within doctrinal orthodoxy. As Dr. Jonathan Sozek (2023) put it, “this is not some kind of obscure fringe corner of Christianity; this is the teaching of at least the Catholic Church, but it is not often conveyed adequately to people that are learning that tradition.”

To conclude, all religious people – regardless if they believe that God is one or triune, single or multiple, personal or impersonal, immanent or transcendent – are anyway brothers in faith, as these and other dichotomies cannot help but lose meaning when faced with the Absolute. The mystics are perfectly aware that, to many people, this assertion is quite difficult to digest.

That is why Dionysius (1920, 64) started his speech with a warning which I propose here as a closing formula.

Thou, therefore, O good Timothy, must guard these truths according to the holy Ordinance, nor must thou utter or divulge the heavenly mysteries unto the uninitiate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abdel-Samad, Hamed. 2016. *Islamic Fascism*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Adamson, Peter. 2021. "The Theology of Aristotle." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/theology-aristotle>
- Bachofen, Johann J. 2007. *An English Translation of Bachofen's Mutterrecht (Mother Right) (1861). A Study of the Religious and Juridical Aspects of Gynecocracy in the Ancient World*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston.
- Benedict XVI. 2007. *General Audience: Origen of Alexandria: life and work*, St Peter's Square, Wednesday, April 25th. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070425.html
- Benevento, Maria. 2019. "Letter signed by more than 1,500 accuses Pope Francis of the 'canonical delict of heresy'." *National Catholic Reporter*, May 1st.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. 1951. *Theology of the New testament*. New York: Charles Scribner's Son.
- Campa, Riccardo. 2014. "Le origini pagane dell'idea di tolleranza religiosa nella pubblicistica dell'illuminismo." *Orbis Idearum. European Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1): 19–60.
- Carabine, Deirdre. 1995. *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*. Louvain: Peeters Press.
- Caracciolo, Lucio. 2004. Conflitti etnici e religiosi, in *Treccani: Enciclopedia del Novecento III Supplemento*.
- Carleton Paget, James. 1994. *The epistle of Barnabas: outlook and background*. Tübingen: Möhr.
- Cazzullo, Aldo. 2023. Il cardinale Zuppi: "Anche per mio padre io ero Don Matteo. Chi salva i migranti non va criminalizzato." *Corriere della sera*, December, 23rd.
- Collier, Robert. 2017. "Jesus Exposes Yahweh as the Evil One." In: *Good God*, April, 1st. <https://youtu.be/MrqnxW5V7rg?si=wpEmEbtCwYlHueDL>
- Comenius, Johann A. 1896. *The Great Didactics*. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- Dionysius the Areopagite. 1897. *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, translated by Rev. John Parker. London and Oxford: James Parker and Co.
- Dionysius the Areopagite. 1920. *On the Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, translated by Clarence E. Rolt. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Dodds, Eric R. 1971. "The Unknown God in Neoplatonism." In: Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*. Oxford University Press.

- Edwards, Mark J. 2022. "Origen." In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/Archives/win2022/entries/origen/>
- Epiphanius of Salamis. 2009. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Book I. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Eusebius. 1998. *Ecclesiastical History*. Claremont, CA: Hendrickson.
- Francis. 2021. *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis*, Presidential Palace in Athens, Saturday, December 4th.
- Grant, Robert M., ed. 1978. *Gnosticism: a source book of heretical writings from the early Christian period*. New York: AMS Press.
- Grant, Robert M. 1947. "The Bible of Theophilus of Antioch." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66 (2), 173-196.
- Hill, William J. 1971. *Knowing the Unknown God*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Hume, David. 1889. *The Natural History of Religion*. London: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1946. *Ends and Means. An Enquiry into the Nature of Ideals and into the Methods employed for their Realisation*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Iamblichus. 1988. *The Theology of Arithmetic. On the Mystical, Mathematical and Cosmological Symbolism of the First Ten Numbers*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Phanes Press.
- Jacobs, Alan, ed. 2016. *The Gnostic Gospels*. London: Watkins.
- Langerbeck, Hermann. 1957. "The Philosophy of Ammonius Saccas." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, Part 1: 67-74.
- Mitani, John C., David P. Watts, and Sylvia J. Amsler. 2010. "Lethal intergroup aggression leads to territorial expansion in wild chimpanzees." *Current Biology* 20 (12): R507-R508.
- Nicholas of Cusa. 1990. *De docta ignorantia (On Learned Ignorance)*. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press.
- Nicola, Ubaldo. 1999. *Atlante illustrato di filosofia*. Colognola ai Colli: Demetra.
- Nicolaus of Cusa. 1995. *Toward a New Council of Florence: "On the Peace of Faith" and Other Works*, translated by W. F. Wertz. Washington: Schiller Institute.
- Norden, Eduard. 2002. *Dio Ignoto. Ricerche sulla storia della forma del discorso religioso (Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede, 1913)*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Origen. 2017. *On First Principles*. Oxford University Press.
- Plotinus. 2018. *The Enneads*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson et al. Cambridge University Press.
- Porphyry of Tyre. 2018. "On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books." In: Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 17-37. Cambridge University Press.
- Porphyry. 2000. *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Proclus. 1963. *The Elements of Theology*. Oxford University Press.
- Pulella, Philip. 2023. "Pope strips conservative US cardinal of Vatican privileges, Vatican official says." *Reuters*, November 28th.

- Reale, Giovanni. 2006. Prefazione, in Porfirio, *Vangelo di un pagano*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Rojka, L'uboš. 2022. "La necessità del male particolare nella teodicea dell'*Open Theism*." *Gregorianum* 103 (4): 733-754.
- Rusconi, Giuseppe. 2017. "Padre Sosa: Parole Di Gesù? Da Contestualizzare!" *Revista Panorámica*, February 19th.
- Schwyzler, Hans-Rudolf. 1951. "Plotinos." In *Paulys Realenzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, XLI, 477-481. Stuttgart: Metzler-Verlag.
- Shuster, Amy L., and Dustin E. Howes. 2016. "The Pacifism in Plato's Republic." *History of Political Thought* 37 (3): 438-460.
- Sodano, Angelo R. 2006. "Introduzione." In Porfirio, *Vangelo di un pagano*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Sozek, Johnatan. 2023. "God beyond God: Meister Eckhart." In: *Labyrinths*, February 21st. <https://youtu.be/jUIxrkrWyrA?si=Y9femTrzyfzCwrxK>
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons. 1992. *Against the Heresies*, Volume I, Book I. New York: Paulist Press.
- Stepień, Tomasz, and Karolina Kochańczyk-Bonińska. 2018. *Unknown God, Known in His Activities. Incomprehensibility of God during the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4th Century*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Vegetti, Mario. 2018. *Filosofia e saperi della città antica*. Milano: Hoepli.
- Wallis, Paul. 2021. "Jesus vs Yahweh | God vs Zero Point." In: *Paul Wallis*, August, 11th. https://youtu.be/L_GOZ0o4MoA?si=rPP-XmUrcpAyrbG