

Axial Hermeneutics: Part Two Dionysius

1. Welcome to this second part of my video lecture on Axial Hermeneutics in early Christianity. In this half, we shall be exploring how the sixth century Syrian monk, who wrote under the name of Dionysius, used Origen's hermeneutics to try to understand the nature of religious language and especially what we mean when we talk about God.
2. In the Book of Acts, Paul gives a speech to the philosophers of Athens. On his way to meet them he had passed by a statue entitled "to the unknown God." Paul uses this idea of the unknown God to address the philosophers. His speech flops however. He wins over only a few converts, one of whom is identified as "Dionysius." Later in the sixth century an otherwise unknown Syrian monk adopted "Dionysius" as his pseudonym to write philosophical treatises on the nature of religious language.
3. He will argue that all religious language was symbolic, performative language designed to evoke spiritual transformation and so calling for spiritual interpretation. But one could still distinguish within spiritual interpretation between three different forms of linguistic use: kataphatic, apophatic and analogical or "super-eminent."
 - a. (1) Kataphatic language, literally "according to what is said" is the language of prayer and ritual. It is found in all the sacred symbols and metaphors, images and objects that reconnect us to what we Christians hold sacred. As an expression of God's ongoing creative activity, (2) anything can be drawn into sacred ritual, that is anything can be treated as a hierophany, or revelation of the divine. Dionysius mines the scriptures for symbols that have been traditionally effective, the fruits of prophetic inspiration and cultic craft and artistry.
 - b. (3) But if anything can be a hierophany than nothing can be an exhaustive revelation of the divine. All religious expression must be partial, indeed given God's utter transcendence of this world, "more false than true." In agreement with both Valentinus and Origen, the Father is an ineffable abyss, beyond word and image. Encompassing all things, no concept can fully encompass it. Even calling God Father, for example, is not so much an affirmation about God as a salutation, a form of address to God, from our side of the ontological chasm separating creation from its creator.

- c. What philosophical properties can be literally attributable to God (4) are then ultimately negative or “apophatic”, (5) saying what is “apart” from God, or what God is not. For example to call God “infinite” is simply to say God is not finite; to call God eternal, is only to say he is not temporal; immutable, that he cannot not change; almighty, that his power is without limit, omniscient, that there is nothing he does not know, omnipresent, that there is no place where God cannot be found.
 - d. Understandably, some philosophers, such as Wittgenstein have concluded from this (6) that the only way to avoid speaking falsely about God is to say nothing at all. The closing proposition of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 10.0 simply reads, “Concerning that about which we cannot speak, we should remain silent.” Buddhism agrees. The meaning of a koan is precisely the recognition that it has no particular meaning. Meditating on a koan is designed to unencumber one’s consciousness of any and all objects, leaving it empty (*sunyata* in Sanskrit), a pure awareness without content, a state of nothingness. *Nirvana* literally means “ash” in Sanskrit.
 - e. But there is a danger in silence. We may forget what we hold sacred. (7) How can we reconnect to the divine, if we cannot speak about it, if we cannot at least address the sacred in words or point to it through images and rituals?
 - f. And so Dionysius speaks of a third religious use of language, (8) the way of analogy or “super-eminence” where we attribute to God properties that can be extrapolated (9) beyond all limitations, and in so doing, imaginatively draw our intelligence beyond the limits of its own understanding. (10) Such an analogical use of language about God, he will call a “dark knowledge” and a “learned ignorance”.
4. To illustrate these three uses of religious language, consider that it means to call God “good.”
- a. Kataphatically, (1) calling God good draws our thoughts to what we hold sacred as the ultimate horizon in relation to which anything appears good to us. God is good in that he is the ultimate source of all that is good. There are innumerable passages in scripture where God is called good.(2) So too God is affirmed as

good throughout Christian prayer and ritual. In fact Matthew will have Jesus claim that “no one is good but the Father”.

- b. But this creates a problem. If no one is good but the Father, what do we *mean* by calling God “good”? (3) If we mean “goodness” in the sense in which we attribute it to others, God is clearly not “good” in that sense. For example, human goodness involves resisting temptations. (4) But nothing can tempt God. Thus in the ordinary sense of the term, God is not “good.”
 - c. But now we are left with a contradiction. God both is and is not “good”. The only way to resolve it is to claim that (5) God’s goodness is analogous to human goodness only extrapolated to an infinite degree. Thus God is goodness without limitation, (6) pure goodness, absolute, transcendent goodness.
 - d. But what does infinite, transcendent goodness mean? It is beyond our merely finite, immanent understanding. But it is not meaningless either, for it draws our understanding up along a certain trajectory. (7) Calling God “good” may be more false than true, but it is still more true than calling God “evil.” Or to push a little further, for Dionysius God transcends human goodness, but God is not beyond good and evil altogether. The divine attribute does give some direction to how to understand God, (8) it provides our intelligence a point and vector along with to meditate
5. Now, other divine attributes, equally analogous, can also help to fill out what we mean by divine goodness, for they must be compatible with it. In fact they can be said to mutually define each other, establishing if not a clear and distinct, full and adequate definition, at least bounding a semantic field. Thus (1) infinite divine goodness is a form of goodness that is also (2) infinitely powerful, both (3) infinitely wise (4) and infinitely loving, (5) infinitely just (6) and infinitely merciful. So too it must be a goodness that is (7) eternal (8) and immutable, accessible anywhere at any time by anyone. Such apophatic and analogous predications thus direct our understanding’s extrapolation of human goodness along a determinate direction. While never ending, seeking to understand God is not futile. Its rather itself a way to reconnect to God, the cultivation of an ever richer relationship with what ultimately ever remains an incomprehensible, ineffable abyss.

6. Nor is God the only reality that transcends humanity. As with Origen and Valentinus, while Christianity is monotheistic, there are an array of spirits closer to the divine that we are. Dionysius will draw upon passages of Scripture to identify nine distinct classes of such spirits arranged in three groups of three in an ascending hierarchy to the divine abyss.
 - a. The realm of spirits closest to humanity(1) is the angelic realm.
 - i. (2)Angels, literally “heralds” in Greek, are messengers of divine revelation to humans. They preside over all human hierarchies. Some are assigned to particular nations, such as Michael to the Jewish people, Dionysius insists that each nation has its own angel assigned to preside over it. Similiar to Zoroastrianism’s celestial twin, and to Valentinus’ spark of the divine, there are also angels assigned to each and every person, their “guardian” angel, or “spirit of light”, to inspire and guide their discernment.
 - ii. Immediately above the angels are (3) “Archangels,” those who “interpret those divine enlightenments mediated by the first powers to the angels below them and through them to us.” Archangels are like middle managers in the distribution of God’s word and grace to us.
 - iii. Finally Dionysius identifies (4) “principalities”—executive directors one might say, “who possess a godlike and princely hegemony, with a sacred order most suited to princely powers” to “make manifest the transcendent principle of all principles.
 - b. Drawing from Paul’s letters, Dionysius then identifies a second tier of celestial beings charged with the governance of creation:
 - i. First, (5) “authorities” who “receive God in a harmonious and unconfused way,” they express “the ordered nature of the celestial and intellectual authority” imitating “that authority which is the source of all authority and creates all authority.”
 - ii. Secondly are (6) “powers” referring to a “kind of masculine and unshakable courage in all its godlike activities. A courage that abandons all laziness and softness during the reception of the divine enlightenments

granted to it,” imitating “that transcendent power that is the source of all power.”

- iii. And thirdly (7) “dominions” signifying governance which is “free and unfettered by earthly tendencies,” towards tyranny and domination. They “reject empty appearances, returning completely to the true Lord and shares as far as they can in that everlasting and divine source of all dominion.”
 - c. Finally at the top of the celestial hierarchy are three ranks of spirits that hover forever around God. They are like courtiers, who never leave the heavenly court.
 - i. First, among these are (8) “thrones,” spiritual personifications of the divine throne upon which the Father sits before a court that is always in session. They are “completely intent upon remaining always and forever in the presence of him who is truly most high.”
 - ii. Secondly there are the (9) “cherubim” who enjoy “the power to know and to see God, to contemplate the divine splendor in primordial power.”
 - iii. And finally, highest of all there are the (10) “seraphim” of Ezekiel’s vision of the divine throne room. These are unsurprisingly associated with incandescent fire: they are a perennially circling around divine things, of penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails” They enjoy “the ability to hold unveiled and undiminished both the light they have and the illumination they give out...pushing aside and doing away with every obscuring shadow.”
 - d. In Origenist terms, one might say that this last highest tier of celestial spirits never fell from union with God. They are, “as it were, in the anteroom of divinity,” “contemplative,” “perfect,” and “utterly pure.”
7. A comparison of Dionysius’ “celestial hierarchy” with Valentinus’ demonic powers of creation and divine persona of the pleroma illustrate how Christianity’s relationship with creation has evolved from cynical alienation to spiritual embrace. (1) On the one hand, while celestial Dionysius’ hierarchy is not divine. As with Origen, Dionysius’ spirits are not divine persona but rather divine ambassadors mediating God’s sacred wisdom and grace to us humans. Even the highest circle is outside the divine trinity. On the other

hand, Dionysius adopts a far more positive view of creation than even St Paul for whom Dionysius draws several of his celestial categories. (2) Powers, authorities, principalities and powers are at least potentially demonic for Paul; definitely so for Valentinus. For both imperial power is governed by the logic of mimetic desire, status competition, mimetic violence and sacrificial scapegoating. Christians should keep their distance from secular power.

8. Now as the religion of the Empire, Christianity sanctified the Roman order. Imperial administration was now under Christian inspiration and angelic authority. While still in exile, Christians now live under Christian rulers and divine legitimation. And so Christianity itself becomes institutionalized, run no longer by prophets and elders but by a bureaucracy of cultic priests and administrators. Bishops become important civic leaders. Dionysius will describe an “ecclesiastical hierarchy” that mirrors the celestial. However it will also mirror Roman Imperial administration. Three centuries after Jesus’ crucifixion at the hand of a provincial Roman governor, that same mimetic sacrifice will be ritually re-enacted daily to sanctify that same Roman imperial order. Christianity has transformed itself from a charismatic movement to a bureaucratic institution, like every other literate religion to endure beyond its first generations. What began as a failed Jewish reform movement has evolved into the axial religion of the empire, Roman Christianity.