

Imagery and Anagogy: The Influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Byzantine and Medieval Image Theory

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In this well-researched and carefully articulated paper, the author explores and compares Eastern and Western church image theory as it evolves from scripture up through the 12th century. Revealing and clarifying the source material for much of this image theory is a great joy to read, but the author's real strength comes out in a subtle, nuanced, and delicate comparison of how the two traditions dialectically worked towards and against each other, and finally how the two find an ultimate grounding in different takes of the same Dionysian heritage. Beautifully researched, carefully considered, and deeply evocative, it represents a student working at a very substantive level of mature Christian scholarship and clearly enjoying the process of discovery and

revelation. Though shorter and less annotated than the other winners in this category, it nevertheless demonstrates a strong capacity for sustained intellectual inquiry in the theological tradition, and is welcome evidence that ancient texts still have much to reveal to postmodern ears. The author is encouraged by this judge to get thee to a graduate school, post-haste.

In his seminal orations in defense of Christian iconography, John of Damascus (d. 749) repeatedly cites the following two passages from the corpus of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite:¹

[God's] love for human kind covers intelligible things by that which can be perceived by the senses and things beyond being by the things that are, and provides forms and figures for what is formless and without figure, and makes manifold

and gives form to simplicity that is beyond nature and shape in a multitude of separate symbols. (*De divinis nominibus* 1.4)

We ascend by means of images perceived through the senses to the divine contemplations. (*De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 1.2)

These passages make no direct mention of the practice of icon veneration, but they succinctly

¹ Both these passages are quoted in John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 40.

encapsulate the vision of reality to which Byzantine Christians like John subscribed—and from which they argued in defense of icons. This vision was impressed upon the Christian world largely through Pseudo-Dionysius, a fifth- to sixth-century theologian who likely hailed from Syria and who was famously steeped in the Neoplatonic tradition. Throughout the patristic and medieval periods, Dionysius was widely identified with the Dionysius of Acts 17, whom the Apostle Paul personally converted and instructed. This mistaken identification bestowed upon Dionysius’ writings to an all but apostolic authority in the middle ages, which further secured the influence of his already potent theology on medieval and Byzantine thought. Thus, unsurprisingly, and in just a handful of centuries, Dionysius’ influence came to extend well beyond his native Syria and into the respective worlds of Eastern and Western Christianity.

Dionysius’ thought is tremendously complex and rich in scope, but can perhaps be understood as a single, systematic elaboration of the biblical claim that *from and through and to God are all things* (Rom. 11:36). For Dionysius, God exists in absolute, inscrutable, self-sufficient transcendence; and yet, “in the loving care he has for everything,” God is “carried outside himself” (*On the Divine Names* 4.13): In a free act of ‘erotic’ affection, God calls our world into being from nothingness and grants it a share of his own life. Creation is thus, in every moment, a gifted participation in God’s reality, and for this reason is a constant reflection of the One in whom it participates. As Eric Perl puts it, the fundamental thesis of Dionysius’ thought is that all creation is a *theophany*, a finite manifestation of the infinite God.² God issues creation forth from Himself, sustains its being within Himself, and finally—through creaturely symbols and images—calls it eternally back to Himself. This picture of reality has powerful implications for image theory, which were drawn out

eventually in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

In this paper, I will very cursorily narrate the parallel developments of Eastern and Western image theory throughout the Middle Ages, taking special notice of the way(s) in which both traditions were influenced and formed by Dionysius’ theological vision. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate a general consonance between the mature image theories of East and West; at their best points of historical expression, I will contend, both traditions are grounded alongside one another in the heritage of Dionysian theology.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGE THEORY IN THE BYZANTINE EAST

For good reason, most analyses of John of Damascus’ image theory focus on his christological argument in defense of icons: namely, that because the invisible God has become visibly incarnate, He can now be depicted in iconographic form. Important as this argument is, it is all too often understood in isolation from the rest of John’s theological vision.

Following Dionysius, John takes the incarnation to be not *merely* a singular, unprecedented act of God’s self-revelation, but also the perfect expression and *fulfillment* of the way God has been revealing Himself to creation all along. This is because, for both Dionysius and John, everything that exists is—in however dim a capacity—an *eikon* of its God and Creator. Thus God has been ‘imaging’ Himself to humanity, through the created order, from the world’s beginning.³ And so the incarnation is not something alien to God’s prior, ‘imageless’ history with the world; rather, the incarnation confirms the power of *images in principle*—viewed properly—to truly reveal and manifest the invisible God.

Moreover, the incarnation shows humanity the eternal Image of God’s own person, the divine Image

² See Eric Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

³ Hebrews 1:1-3 could perhaps be read as an account of the way the incarnation of the Son—who is the only “exact imprint of [God’s] nature”—perfectly validates *and* fulfills the various and inexact images of God offered to Israel throughout creation and under the Old Covenant.

⁴ John explicitly identifies the Son as the first image in his so-called ‘Great Chain of Images.’ For a helpful analysis of this ‘Chain,’ see Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 216 (cited in full in note 4 below).

toward whom all creaturely images point.⁴ On John's account, the incarnation both validates images *and* teaches us to see *through* them, i.e., beyond them to their divine archetype. Thus, in Andrew Louth's words, "the making of icons and their veneration rests for John ... on what one might call the *architectonic significance* of image in the created order."⁵ As John himself argues (commenting upon a Dionysian text):

If it belongs to [God's] love for human kind to provide forms and figures for what is formless and without figure, and for what is simple and without shape in accordance with our analogy, how then should not we form images analogous to us of what we see in forms and shapes to arouse our memory and from memory arouse zeal?⁶

John's arguments were vindicated by the second Council of Nicaea in 787, but iconoclasm nonetheless reemerged powerfully in 9th century Byzantium, thus calling for a new wave of Eastern icon defenders. In particular, the 9th century demanded a more precise account of the *relationship* between icon and archetype than that of John. While John had acknowledged that an icon is "not like the prototype in every way,"⁷ his language occasionally appeared to suggest that archetypes were present in their icons in an all too *real* or *essential* way. The task of 9th century defenders of icons, then—chief of whom were Theodore the Studite and Nikephoros of Constantinople—was to explain how "the icon, unlike the idol, contains only partial and not full presence"⁸ of its archetype.⁹

Theodore and Nikephoros employ an Aristotelian distinction to clarify John's image theory: an icon, they argue, participates not in the essence (οὐσία), but in the formal likeness (ὁμοίωμα), of its archetype.¹⁰ This distinction allows Theodore to maintain that "if one says that the divinity is in the icon, he would not be wrong," and yet also that "the divinity is not present in [the icon] by a union of natures ... but by a relative participation."¹¹ Thus Theodore manages both to retain the participatory dimension of Dionysius' thought and to communicate the *nature* of this participation with more precision than John.

What is most crucial to note here is that, like John, both Theodore and Nikephoros follow Dionysius in affirming that images serve an *anagogical* function: that is, they affirm that, given the fundamentally symbolic character of all creation, it is necessarily *by way of images* that the soul rises to contemplation of God. Thus, their 9th century synthesis of Dionysian anagogy with Aristotelian terminology represents the final and most mature stage of Byzantine image theory. This stage would not be paralleled in the West for several centuries.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGE THEORY IN THE LATIN WEST

The principles of Western image theory were first laid down by Augustine in the fifth-century, who distinguished between three forms of vision in his *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*: corporeal vision (which perceives only material objects), spiritual vision (which perceives the intelligible forms of objects without looking physically upon them), and

⁵ Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213; emphasis mine. Louth continues a few pages later: "John finds authority for this idea of a world of mutually reflecting reality, in which signs and images trace its interrelationships and are the means by which human kind, which is both spiritual and bodily, moves through material reality to grasp invisible, spiritual reality, in the writings of Dionysios" (217).

⁶ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010), 87.

⁹ Though I will not be addressing it in this paper, I should acknowledge that the argument has recently been made by Glenn Peers that the "hectorings" of theologians like Theodore and Nikephoros were not representative of the Byzantine world as a whole, which was generally "imbued with a kind of animism." See his edited volume *Byzantine Things in the World* (New Haven: 2013).

¹⁰ See Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 33.

intellectual vision (which directly perceives eternal and immaterial truths).¹²

For obvious reasons, Augustine considers only intellectual vision capable of perceiving God in any real sense. But he goes farther than this, often asserting not only that corporeal vision is *unable* to see God, but also that it tends, by nature, to problematically *hinder* the intellect's perception of divine truths. Thus, in one influential sermon on the Ascension, Augustine argues that Christ's Ascension was necessary in order that the Apostles might begin to consider His divinity rather than His flesh:

They were fixated on the man, and unable to think of him as God. The time they would think of him as God would be if the man were removed from their sight; this would cut short the familiarity they had acquired with him in the flesh, and so they would learn at least through his absence in the flesh to think about his divinity. (Sermon 264, trans. Edmund Hill)

The thrust of this passage is clearly aniconic (if not iconoclastic): corporeal sight stands in the way of spiritual vision, and so the latter should be pursued in the absence of the former.

This Augustinian aniconism was by and large inherited by Gregory the Great, who wrote two deeply influential letters concerning imagery to a bishop named Serenus in the early 7th century. Gregory explicitly denies, in these letters, that sacred images are worthy objects of *adoratio* (whatever precisely it is that he means by this term), but defends their use on pedagogical grounds, as "books for the illiterate." Thus Gregory's understanding of images is generally in keeping with that of Augustine; although Gregory doesn't lay quite as much stress as Augustine on the

spiritual ineptitude of corporeal vision, both thinkers clearly believe images to serve little to no *spiritual* purpose, and to accomplish nothing that written texts do not.

This Augustinian-Gregorian tradition was the framework within which Western image theory developed in the Middle Ages. "Because it was limited to sensual apprehension of material forms," notes Kessler, art was understood to be "inherently unsuited to the representation of [intellectual] vision of God."¹³ So firmly established was this understanding, in fact, that some prominent medievals, such as Henry of Ghent and Bernard of Clairvaux, verged on rejecting art wholesale, "as a pagan invention that was food only for the eyes."¹⁴ This view was not dominant, however; and for the majority of Christians the reservation displayed by Augustine and Gregory simply indicated that art needed to be carefully designed and approached, so as to avoid idolatrous excesses.

And thus, in the West, writes Kessler, "The issue became how to direct the sentiments aroused by the sensual experience away from the physical object and upward toward the prototype behind it."¹⁵ In the 8th century, for instance, Pope Hadrian objected to the quasi-iconoclasm of Theodulf of Orleans on the grounds that, although art was not "directly implicated in spiritual seeing," it nonetheless "engaged the mind, which, once activated, elevated the spirit."¹⁶ In this and other early intra-Western debates, though, what was clear was that "an anagogical theory of art," in the vein of Dionysius, was not an available option.¹⁷ And this lack of anagogical emphasis, avers Kessler, was "what differentiated Western image theory absolutely from Byzantine notions that the icon was transparent, a window onto the higher reality."¹⁸

As Andrew Louth notes, "The West only came

¹² For more on Augustine's understanding of the three modes of vision and its influence on the development of Western art in the later Middle Ages, see Cynthia Hahn, "Vision," in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006).

¹³ Herbert Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 2000), 118.

¹⁴ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 167.

¹⁵ Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*, 120.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 124

¹⁷ As Kessler concludes, "If the sacred image in the West was a bridge, then it was a drawbridge drawn up, if a window, then only with a shade pulled down. It marked the existence of the 'world out there,' but it also revealed its own inability to transport the faithful into that world." *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

to learn of the notions of Dionysius when his works were translated into Latin” in the 9th century, and even then the “real influence” of Dionysius did not take root until the 12th century, primarily via the Victorines and their successors.¹⁹ This influence was real and perceptible, though, and yielded some of the West’s first explicitly anagogical descriptions of imagery. Hugh of St Victor, for instance, who wrote a 12th century commentary on Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy*, “provides a detailed account of the perceptual process by which a person should be led from visible things to invisible things,”²⁰ arguing that both scripture *and nature* are books written by God’s hand. In an almost explicit echo of Dionysius’ *De divinis nominibus*, Gertrude of Helfta argues that “as invisible and spiritual things cannot be understood by the human intellect except in visible and corporeal images, it is necessary to clothe them in human and bodily forms.”²¹ And Gertrude herself derives this Dionysian notion from Richard of St Victor, who on its basis went so far as to alter the traditional Augustinian scheme of vision, identifying *anagogical* instead of intellectual vision as the highest form of human perception.²²

Jeffrey Hamburger observes that for these Victorines, “the visible world represents no more than the first stage in the mind’s ascent to God, but, in a fundamental shift, it now represents an *indispensable stepping-stone* along the way.”²³ And it is certainly no coincidence that this “fundamental shift” toward visibility and anagogy was almost exactly concurrent with an increase of monastic, meditational, and otherwise devotional use of images in the period.²⁴ Clearly, images had at this point become far more than mere “images for the illiterate,” and were in fact understood by some Westerners to communicate truths that even language could not adequately express.

CONCLUSION: ABBOT SUGER AND THE COMMON DIONYSIANISM OF EAST AND WEST

To be clear, none of this establishes that East and West were ever in perfect agreement regarding imagery. Nevertheless, it does indicate that both East and West developed and adjusted their image theories throughout the medieval era, and—at least at certain points in their respective histories—gravitated toward increasingly similar theories thanks to the influence of Dionysius’ thought. The East scaled back its essentialist tendencies, whereas the West scaled back its aniconic ones; but both traditions moved away from their respective extremities and toward the *via media* of Dionysius’ anagogical theology.

In closing, there is perhaps no better visual illustration of the common ‘Dionysianism’ of East and West than Suger’s 12th century addition of stained-glass windows to the Basilica of St Denis. Probably the single “most ambitious attempt ever made in the medieval West to construct an elevated theological program by means of pictures,”²⁵ Suger’s addition of these windows was probably intended as an affirmation (occasioned by certain Western attacks on materiality) that corporeal sense indeed has the power to be “spiritually productive.”²⁶ These windows, like the robust affirmation of materiality from which they followed, could hardly have been more Dionysian in character. The visual play of interwoven light and darkness they created, the anagogical reading of scripture their graphics employed, even the radiant beams of sunlight they produced inside the cathedral: these and other elements are all unmistakably reminiscent of Dionysius’ theology, and could simply never have been included in a world bereft of Dionysian influence.²⁷ St Denis thus deserves commemoration as a potent, enduring symbol of

¹⁹ Andrew Louth, “Apophatic and cataphatic theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (New York: Cambridge University Press), 143.

²⁰ Jeffrey Hamburger, “Mysticism and visuality,” *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, 288.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

²² See Veerle Fraeters, “Visio/vision,” *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*.

²³ Hamburger, “Mysticism and visuality,” 288; emphasis mine.

²⁴ See Fraeters, “Visio/vision,” 182; also see Hahn, “Vision,” 59.

²⁵ Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing*, 191.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144. Following Conrad Rudolph, Kessler takes Suger’s windows to be, at least in part, a direct reaction to Bernard of Clairvaux.

²⁷ I should acknowledge here that some art historians, most recently Andreas Speer, have argued that the connection between

Pseudo-Dionysius' theological heritage—a heritage shared by the Eastern and Western churches.

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Dionysius' theology and Suger's 'anagogical' project was in fact either minor or nonexistent, and that Suger's additions to St Denis were primarily (if not exclusively) motivated by non-theological concerns. Such objections seem largely beside the point. For whether Suger was personally familiar with Dionysius' theology or not, and whether he intended his additions to St Denis to be distinctively 'Dionysian' or not, the simple fact remains that his stained-glass windows *could not have emerged* in a world whose vision had not already been profoundly shaped by Dionysius' theology. (Suger's own descriptions of his work themselves attest to this fact, after all.) What meaningful difference does it make whether the influence of Dionysius was transmitted directly or indirectly to Suger? In either case, Dionysius' theology exists at the core of Suger's project.