

Mystics of the Church 3

Augustine and Dionysius

1

Augustine and Dionysius

- As the earlier lectures show, the birth and early development of mysticism took place in the eastern Roman Empire under the influence of Neoplatonism. Despite the gradual decay of the western Empire, however, interest in mysticism made its way westward via the importation of monasticism from Egypt. During its gradual takeover by the Germanic invaders the West, of course, had no scholars who could articulate mystical theology as Origen or the Great Cappadocians did. Augustine (356-430), therefore, springs forth as something of a surprise, and it would be difficult to overestimate his contribution to western mysticism.

2

Augustine and Dionysius

- I. Augustine
 - Although Origen laid the foundation for Christian mysticism, Augustine erected the superstructure upon it in the West, despite the fact that he lacked the erudition of the precocious Alexandrian. By his day the Neoplatonism Origen helped to create had matured, but the “barbarian invasions” were ringing a dark curtain down on western culture. The Vandals crossed into North Africa in 419. As the great Bishop of Hippo lay dying in 430, they were laying siege to his city. He had spent thirteen years, 413-426, fashioning his great apology for Christianity, *The City of God*.

3

Augustine and Dionysius

- As great as that philosophy of history was, however, it did not surpass one he composed many years earlier when he succeeded Valerius as the Bishop of Hippo, *The Confessions*, in which he testified with great profundity to the working of Grace in his life and assembled the key building materials for western Christian mysticism, of which Bernard McGinn has labeled Augustine “the founding Father.” Unlike Origen, Augustine did not write a systematic theology; he wrote occasional pieces—mostly against the Manichaeans, the Donatists, the Pelagians, and pagans. Where Origen was a peerless Bible-lover and scholar, however, Augustine was a superb thinker who answered humanity’s most urgent questions not just for his own civilization and age but for eternity. The nexus for the two brilliant minds resided in their common quest to know God and to guide others in that same quest.

4

Augustine and Dionysius

– A. Life

- 1. Thanks to the *Confessions*, we possess far more intimate detail about Augustine's life than we do about any of the mystics treated up to now. Augustine was born in Tagaste, Numidia in 354 to Patricius and Monica. With considerable strain on family resources he obtained sponsorship of Romanianus to study in Carthage at age 16. His hyperactive libido prompted him to take a concubine, who gave birth to a son, whom they named Adeodatus, in 371. His father died the same year. In 373 he experienced a first "conversion" on reading Cicero's *Hortensius* and joined the Manichaeans, with whom he associated the next nine years (373-382).

5

Augustine and Dionysius

- 2. Augustine taught in Carthage from 376 to 383. Not happy with the quality of students, who often failed to pay their tuition, he moved to Rome in 383. He slipped away from his mother, but she followed him. In 384 he assumed a professorship in Milan that put him under the tutelage of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. In a retreat with friends at Cassiciacum in the late summer of 386 he experienced a more profound conversion to Christian faith. Ambrose baptized him on Easter Sunday, April 25, 387. In the late summer of 388 he and Monica set out to return to Africa. Monica, however, died in the Roman port of Ostia. His son died also in 389 or 390.

6

Augustine and Dionysius

- 3. Not long after his return to Numidia, in 391 Valerius, Bishop of Hippo, prevailed upon him to accept the role of Auxiliary Bishop. He composed the *Confessions* in 394. In 395 or 396 he was appointed Coadjutor Bishop and, on the death of Valerius in 396 succeeded him as Bishop, a position he held until his death on August 28, 430. During his career, he carried on debate with the Manichaean sect he had once belonged to, countered the Donatist movement that had grown strong in North Africa, and wrestled against Pelagianism. Between 413 and 426 he composed his influential *City of God*. As he lay dying, Vandals surrounded the city of Hippo.

7

Augustine and Dionysius

- B. Writings
 - 1. From his early years as a teacher in Carthage onward Augustine wrote prolifically. Following his conversion and appointment as an assistant to Valerius at Hippo, he took up his pen first against the Manichaean sect he had belonged to from ages 19 to 28. Next, he aimed his salvos at the powerful Donatist movement, which controlled a majority of the churches in Numidia and Mauretania up to the Council of Carthage in 411, when Augustine vanquished their best debater. Immediately thereafter he had to respond to the growing influence of Pelagianism in the West and, simultaneously, to pagan charges that Christianity was responsible for the fall of Rome in 410 and the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West.

8

Augustine and Dionysius

- 2. Many things Augustine wrote had some connection with his mysticism by virtue of his Platonism, but the most important sources for understanding his mystical theology are *The Confessions*; *Homilies on the Psalms*, possibly dictated from c. 391 until as late as 422; *The Trinity*, composed between 404 and 420; 124 *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, preached between c. 406 and 422; and ten *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, delivered between 413 and 418.

9

Augustine and Dionysius

- C. Was Augustine a Mystic?
 - From 1863 on, scholars have debated whether Augustine deserves classification as a mystic. Many have echoed Ephraem Hendrikx's judgment in 1936 that "Augustine was a great enthusiast but no mystic." In 1975, however, Hendrikx changed his tune and admitted that Augustine may have been a mystic, though not in the traditional sense. McGinn takes the position that we don't have to characterize Augustine as a mystic in the same sense as Bernard of Clairvaux, Meister Eckhart, or Teresa of Avilá were or prove that he had a lot of mystical experiences. Instead, we should recognize that he gave much attention to the mystical element in Christianity and exerted great influence on later mystics. In this sense he is rightly called "the Prince of Mystics" (as Cuthbert Butler has labeled him) and "the Father of Christian Mysticism" (as John Burnaby has done).

10

Augustine and Dionysius

- D. Augustine’s Mystical Thought
 - In *The Foundations of Mysticism* McGinn has sketched three main themes in Augustine’s mystical thought.
 - 1. *The first has to do with “his account of the soul’s ascension to contemplative and ecstatic experience of the divine presence.”* Augustine found the answer to his preoccupation with the issue of happiness in one thing—the possession of God achieved by way of the vision of God. In the *Confessions* he described an experience he had at Milan in 386.
 - Being thus admonished to return to myself, under your leadership I entered into and my inmost being. This I could

11

Augustine and Dionysius

- do, for you became my helper. I entered there, by my soul’s eye, such as it was, I saw above that same eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light. . . . He who knows the truth, knows that light, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it, O eternal truth, and true love, and beloved eternity! You are my God, and I sigh for you day and night. . . . You beat back my feeble sight, sending down your beams most powerfully upon me, and I tremble with love and awe. . . . From afar you cried to me, “I am who am.” I heard, as one hears in his heart; there was no further place for doubt, for it would be easier for me to doubt that I live than that there is no truth, which is clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.” (7.9.16; Ryan, 170-171.)

12

Augustine and Dionysius

- The base for this is Plotinus, but there is a significant difference. Whereas in Plotinus the soul remains capable of lifting itself up because it is of divine origin, for Augustine the soul, as a fallen creature, can only be elevated by God's action, i.e., by grace. Plotinus would have thought divine intervention strange, and this is precisely what Augustine's own experience dictated. As McGinn points out, Augustine's mysticism had a Christological and ecclesiological dimension Plotinus's did not have. This experience in Milan also differed from Plotinus's in its noetic character; it lasted but a moment.

13

Augustine and Dionysius

- More famous than this experience is the remarkable vision Augustine shared with his mother Monica at Ostia. McGinn has called attention to notable differences. (1) The most significant was that Augustine shared it with his mother, something one could not imagine Plotinus making room for. (2) The Ostia account is shot through "by the language of affective intention." McGinn says, "Love and knowledge are intertwined in Augustine's mystical consciousness." (235)
- Less often noticed is a third experience of vision reported in Augustine's long analysis of memory. After deep reflection on the power of memory, Augustine lamented his previous aimless neglect. "Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so

14

Augustine and Dionysius

- ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me, while I was outside; it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these thing of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you." (10.27.38; Ryan, 254.)
- Only a few texts report Augustine's own experiences. In his sermons on the Psalms and on John, however, he projected the possibility of attaining the vision of God in this life by all. He did not address his messages to a spiritual elite but to a general Christian congregation. In a homily on Psalm 26 he suggested that consciousness of the presence of God in this life was less important than the union with God all Christians possess in the Body of Christ. In his *Homily on Psalm 41*, moreover, he stressed still more strongly that all progress

15

Augustine and Dionysius

- toward God could take place only within the Church. In this life believers still have to recognize that they have no answer to the skeptic who demands, "Where is your God?" Nevertheless, we long for God like the Deer longs for living streams. "I have sought my God in order not only to believe, but also, if possible, to see something [of God]." The soul covets ecstasy. The ecclesial nature of Augustine's mysticism is clearly seen in a comment on Psalm 41.9:
 - Ascending the tabernacle, the soul comes to the house of God. While it admires the members of the tabernacle it thus is led to the house of God by following a certain sweetness, an

16

Augustine and Dionysius

- indescribable interior hidden pleasure. It is as if a musical instrument sweetly sounded from the house of God, and while walking in the tabernacle he heard the interior sound and, led by its sweetness, he followed what had sounded, separating himself from every clamor of flesh and blood until he arrived at the house of God.
- About the emphasis on the church, McGinn has remarked, “Augustine is primarily interested in inviting his flock to a deeper, more intense, even immediate experience of God in this life, which he describes primarily in scriptural terms. Unlike some Greek fathers, he is not much concerned with individual ‘union’ with God. . . . When he does speak of union here below, it is the union of Christ and the church he has in mind.” (242)

17

Augustine and Dionysius

- 2. *The second involves a Trinitarian basis for Augustine’s mysticism.* As Augustine conceived it, the central task of spirituality is to restore the image of God in humankind. In the last half of his great work on *The Trinity* he established “the thoroughly Trinitarian character of the mystical experience.” To understand the Trinity, the supreme mystery of Christian faith, insofar as possible in this life, “is a spiritual therapy designed to help restore the image of God in us so that we can more fully share in the experience of the divine presence in this life.” (McGinn, 244-245.) Augustine employed two different analogies. In Book 8 he used the love analogy. Only by way of love of neighbor can we love God; therefore, love alone gives us access to the vision of God in this life and the next. In this life, of course, it is impossible to remain steadfast in our relation to God for long. By grace, however, we can do so momentarily. To see God, we must desire God; to desire God, we must know God. We show that we know

18

Augustine and Dionysius

- God when we love our neighbor. In Books 9-15 Augustine turns from the love analogy to the issue of knowing, and he argues that all of our knowing is grounded in the inner life of the Trinity. In our very nature we possess an image of the Trinity: “There is an image of the Trinity: the mind itself, and its knowledge which is its offspring and the word that comes from it. Love is the third. And these three are one and one substance.” (9.12.18; McGinn, 247.) The purpose of introspection is to attune us to personal awareness of the Trinity within. “Hence this trinity of the mind is not on that account the image of God because the mind remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself, but because it can also remember, understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does so, it becomes wise; but if it does not, even though it remembers itself, knows itself, and loves itself, it is foolish. (14.12.15; McGinn, 247.)

19

Augustine and Dionysius

- 3. *The third is the role of Christ as the mediator between God and humankind.* Augustine believed that humans can “deform” but not “reform” God’s image in us. As divine and human, Christ “functions both as the goal of our journey and as our way there.” (McGinn, 248.) As in the Beatitude, to see God, we must become “pure in heart.” Christ alone can effect this cleansing. He is at work in the church to do so. In the church we share in the great mysteries by which the God-man wrought our salvation. He both prays for us and in us. The bishop underscored emphatically John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Two concepts express the outcome of our bonding with Christ: divine sonship and divinization. As Irenaeus, Augustine insisted that the purpose of the Incarnation was the divinization of humanity. Unlike Neoplatonists, he did not see divinization as a consequence of natural divine origin; no, it is God’s doing in Christ.

20

Augustine and Dionysius

– E. Some Questions

- 1. In what sense was Augustine a “mystic”? In the sense that Christianity contains “an inner dimension in which the believer is called to participate through incorporation into Christ at baptism.”
- 2. Are his descriptions and theories of mystical vision confused and inadequate as some charge? Augustine did not depend on the metaphor of vision alone and never thought our immediate experiences of God could be expressed clearly.
- 3. Did he speak of vision or experience of God as mediate or immediate? In ecstasy he surely thought in terms of immediate vision or experience. He did have some reservations about esotericism.

21

Augustine and Dionysius

- 4. What is the relation of the contemplative experience to the life of active love? Augustine, like other fathers, insisted that we could never dispense with the active life. “No one should be so contemplative that in his contemplation he does not think of his neighbor’s need; no one so active that he does not seek the contemplation of God.” (*City of God* 19.19).
- 5. How did he view the roles of intellect and love in attaining experience of God? Contrary to some, he stressed affectivity; and few early writers dealt more profoundly with the nature of love. “It is *caritas*, the love of God poured out in our hearts, that is the power unity the two,” McGinn has said (258). Augustine did tread carefully around erotic language in his mature writings. He always applied the language of the Song of Songs to the Church.
- 6. What did he see as the ultimate goal? Just as we continue to love a friend in this life, in heaven our love of God will continue to grow.

22

Augustine and Dionysius

- II. The Bridge from East to West: Cassian and Pseudo-Dionysius
 - The broadcasting of the seeds of mysticism in both east and west depended to a large degree on two monks, John Cassian and the unidentified author of writings composed under the name of Dionysius, whom Paul converted on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:34). Cassian brought to the West in the early 5th century wisdom gleaned from Pachomian monasteries in Egypt and from interviews with Egyptian monks, including Evagrius Ponticus. Benedict of Nursia relied heavily on Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences* in composing his *Rule* and assumed that monks knew those writings.

23

Augustine and Dionysius

- Pseudo-Dionysius, thought by most scholars to have been a Syrian monk who composed his treatises and letters around 500, never visited the West, but John Scotus Erigena (c. 810-c. 877), under patronage of Charles the Bald, translated the Areopagite's works into Latin and brought them to the notice of his successors. Thanks to this translation, Dionysian theology influenced the mystics of St. Victor in Paris, especially Richard of St. Victor, some of the schoolmen (Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas), and Meister Eckhart. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* translated *The Mystical Theology* into English in the 14th century.

24

Augustine and Dionysius

- IIA. John Cassian
 - Most contemporary studies of Cassian give him higher marks for creativity than he would have given himself. He depicted himself chiefly as a recorder of insights of the monks of the desert, but he should not be seen as a stenographer. Curiously, although he favored hermitic monasticism, his writings and activities nurtured coenobite monasticism as reflected in the Benedictine tradition.

25

Augustine and Dionysius

- A. Life
 - Gennadius called John Cassian a “Scythian (modern Romania) by nation,” but his birthplace is uncertain. Born c. 360, he joined a monastery at Bethlehem as a young man, but left it soon afterward around 386 and migrated to Egypt. In Egypt he sought out Egyptian masters for seven years and then, as the Origenist controversy heated up, traveled to Palestine and to Constantinople, where John Chrysostom ordained him a deacon. In 404 Chrysostom sent him on an embassy to Pope Innocent I in Rome, where he was ordained a priest. After ten years in Rome, he moved to Marseilles and founded two monasteries, one for men and the other for women. He evidently created what is known as Semi-Pelagianism, a position half-way between Augustine and Pelagius. He died in 435.

26

Augustine and Dionysius

– B. Writings

- Cassian's most widely known writings are *Institutes* and *Conferences*, which he composed out of materials collected during his years in Egypt. The *Institutes* delineate rules and discuss eight hindrances to monastic perfection. The *Conferences* recount conversations with the Egyptian masters. He also wrote a treatise *On the Incarnation of the Lord* c. 430 to acquaint westerners with the teachings of Nestorius.

27

Augustine and Dionysius

– C. Thought

- 1. Unlike his great contemporary Augustine, Cassian did not have anything good to say about the active life. The one way to be perfect is the monastic way. Monasticism is not an element in society but a Christian *alternative* to it.
- 2. Cassian was not an original thinker. He depended heavily on Evagrius and, like the latter, on Origen. In his translation of their thought, however, Owen Chadwick has observed, he created new possibilities for a distinctive western mysticism. For his basic structure he followed Evagrius. He did abandon Evagrius's favorite term *apatheia* and substitute *puritas cordis*, "purity of heart," for it. Where Evagrius claimed that

28

Augustine and Dionysius

- *apatheia* gave birth to *agape*, Cassian united *agape* with “purity of heart.” In *Institutes* 4.43 Cassian wrote: “Purity of heart is acquired through the flowering of virtues, and the perfection of apostolic charity is possessed by means of purity of heart.” For Cassian charity, contemplation, and union are correlative terms to express the “spiritual science” that leads to God. When he spoke about *theorike physike* and *theoria theologike*, moreover, he spoke in terms of the proper mode of understanding scriptures. He followed with a discussion of the four senses of scripture—history, allegory, anagogy, and tropology—manifesting his tie to Origen.

29

Augustine and Dionysius

- 3. The mystical themes Cassian developed were: prayer, contemplation, the vision of God, and union with God. In his view *prayer* is the key to the life of perfection. The goal of prayer without ceasing is absorption into the loving union that binds the persons of the Trinity. The purest prayer “centers on no contemplation of some image or other. It is marked by no attendant sounds or words. It is a fiery outbreak, an indescribable exaltation, an insatiable thrust of the soul. Free of what is sensed and seen ineffable in its groans and sighs, the soul pours itself out to God.” (*Conferences* 10.11; *Classics of Western Spirituality*, 138.) Cassian thought that the solitary life would facilitate such prayer better than the community, but he insisted that a monk should begin in community. *Contemplation* should secure the progressive conformity of the soul to God.

30

Augustine and Dionysius

- As indicated earlier, he left hardly any room at all for the active life. At the highest levels contemplation leads to the *vision* of God and even *union* with God. He may have been an ascetic theologian rather than a mystic, as Owen Chadwick contended, but he expressed a clear desire for experience of the Presence of God. When we attain purity of heart, “there will be accomplished in us what our Savior prayed for when, speaking to His Father about His disciples, He said: ‘So that the love you have for me may be in them, and they in us’ (John 7:26). That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, and that they may be one in us’ (John 17:21). The perfect love with which God ‘first loved us’ (1 John 4:10) will come into our hearts, for our faith tells us that this prayer of our Savior will not be in

31

Augustine and Dionysius

Vain. . . As God loves us with a love that is true and pure, a love that never breaks, we too will be joined to Him in a never-ending unshakable love, and it will be such a union that our breathing and our thinking and our talking will be ‘God.’ And we will come at last to that objective which I have mentioned, the goal which the Lord prayed will be fulfilled in us: ‘That they may all be one as we are one, and I am in them and you in me so that they are utterly one’ (John 17:22-23).” (*Conferences* 10.7; Classics, 129-130.) Cassian deserves to be thought of, McGinn has insisted, as “one of the founders of the Western mystical tradition” (226).

32

Augustine and Dionysius

- IIB. Dionysius
 - The mysterious author of writings circulating under the name of Dionysius not only gave us the phrase “mystical theology” but “also gave systematic expression to a dialectical view of the relation of God and the world that was the fountainhead of speculative mystical systems for at least a thousand years.” (McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 158.) In the modern era, however, he has had strong detractors. Luther called him “most pernicious” and insisted that “he platonizes more than he Christianizes.” (*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, cited by McGinn, 158.) Modern scholars have also called him more a Neoplatonist philosopher than a Christian. Nevertheless, he has had interpreters such as the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky and Hans Urs von Balthasar who believe he was a Christian theologian in Neoplatonist disguise. Still others have taken a middle road in noting that he adopted Platonic categories to give expression to Christian ideas such as the Trinity, creation, and the return to God.

33

Augustine and Dionysius

- A. Writings
 - The surviving writings include four treatises. *The Divine Names*, the longest, deals primarily with positive or kataphatic theology, although it also introduces apophatic theology. *The Mystical Theology*, his most widely known work, “now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.” (*The Mystical Theology* 3.) The other two writings—*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*—treat the lower stages of the upward progression. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* shows how the church’s liturgy and offices contribute to the process. *The Celestial Hierarchy* examines how scriptural depictions of the nine choirs of angels should be understood so they may contribute to lifting us up to God.

34

Augustine and Dionysius

– B. Mystical Theology

- 1. McGinn has observed that “The theological center of Dionysius’s concern is the exploration of how the surely unknowable God manifests himself in creation in order that all things may attain union with the unmanifest Source.” (*The Growth of Mysticism* 161) The surviving writings give little attention to theological anthropology, but they imply concern for the being, goodness, and beauty of the whole universe. As von Balthasar says, Dionysius is “the most aesthetic of all Christian theologians” because the world’s aesthetic transcendence enables us to understand theological or mystical transcendence (*Glory of the Lord* 2:168). The Dionysian writings also lack moral theory. His great concern was to use the liturgy and church offices to explain the return to God rather than, as Evagrius, the attainment of *apatheia*. His attitude toward scriptures is also unlike that found

35

Augustine and Dionysius

- in Church fathers since Origen; he wrote no biblical commentaries, although he enlists biblical passages in support of his system. It is also hard to say how he used Christian as well as Platonist sources, although he obviously was steeped in both. Diverse theologies are not separate disciplines but different ways of speaking about God.
- 2. Dionysius uses Thearchy as a new term for the Triune God, just one of many kataphatic names for God. He correlates it with Hierarchy. Powers of purification, illumination, and perfection are inherent in the created universe because they participate in the Thearchy. Dionysius defined hierarchy in this way: “In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine.” (*The Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1.) Since the Thearchy is

36

Augustine and Dionysius

- a triunity, each hierarchy must also consist of three in one. Each comprises a level that perfects, enlightens, and purifies and will contain those who act, meditate, and are acted upon. “Three orders of sacred agents use three rituals to divinize three groups of Christians, because ‘the goal of a hierarchy . . . is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be one with him’” (CH 3.2; McGinn, 164f.).
- 3. Dionysius’s description of the hierarchies reflects indebtedness to Neoplatonism, especially of Proclus, but he also effected some important changes (1) in the way he presents divine Goodness as universal Eros and (2) in how he uses the triad Being-Life-Intellect as a real name for the Creator. The first change shows a connection with Origen’s designation of God as EROS I. He obviously extended the

37

Augustine and Dionysius

- function of eros beyond the Platonist theory of it as an intermediate force to be both cosmic and divine. The creator, the cause of all things, “loves all things in the superabundance of his goodness” and thence “he makes all things, brings all things to perfection, holds all things together, returns all things” (*The Divine Names* 4.10). Like Origen, Dionysius had to defend his equation of *eros* with *agape*, but *eros* remained his preferred term. He insisted that the divine Eros must be ecstatic. “It must be said that the very cause of the universe is the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (*agape*) and by yearning (*eros*) and is enticed away from the dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.” (*The Divine Names* 4.13.) Eros is not only transcendent but also cosmic. Because the Theurgy is ecstatic, the Hierarchy must also be ecstatic.

38

Augustine and Dionysius

- 4. Dionysius found the solution to the problem of unity and multiplicity of Platonism in locating the source of multiplicity in the First Principle itself. He criticized the pagan formulation of the triad as a series of gods who exercise providence over lower ranks of reality. He effected a major shift in Platonism by identifying the primal triad with Thearchy itself. Quite clearly, he views God “as the direct and immediate cause of all things as individuals and in all their particular qualities” (McGinn, 169). This stands contrary to those who have thought that Dionysius did not give adequate expression to the Christian doctrine of creation. McGinn has said, “From the human perspective, the understanding of the activities of the hierarchies reveals the immediacy of all creatures to divine Eros. This is the heart of Dionysius’s distinctive Christian Neoplatonism.” (170)

39

Augustine and Dionysius

- 5. The Dionysian spiritual journey is fundamentally ecclesial and liturgical. The *anagoge* or upward journey is not a “flight of the alone to the Alone” but a process accomplished through three essential aspects of church life: (1) the proper understanding of the “holy oracles,” (2) in and through the action of sacred rituals, (3) performed (or received) according to one’s place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Dionysius heightens the metaphorical beyond anything found in Origen and Evagrius. In his view one does not *ascend* to God so much as “one appropriates the significance of the levels as a means of attaining inner union with their source, the hidden God.” (McGinn, 171.) It was Dionysius who increased the significance of *mystikos*. He created the term *mystical theology*. He never speaks of himself as a mystic, but he points to others. In *The Mystical Theology* he uses Moses as the ideal of one who undergoes purification, then gains

40

Augustine and Dionysius

- contemplation, and finally attains union. In Dionysius the ultimate goal is not knowing but unknowing. *Aphairesis* (cleansing) leads to *agnosis* (unknowing) and *agnosis* to *henosis* (union). In the case of Moses "Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing." (*The Mystical Theology* 1.3.) The goal is union, and union means divinization. Dionysius would agree with predecessors that this is not due to the soul's natural state but only by virtue of God's uplifting *eros*. Divinization is a gift of God. Contemplation is rooted in God's self.

41

Augustine and Dionysius

- 6. There is considerable debate as to how important Jesus the Christ is in Dionysius's scheme of the mystical journey. The descent of the Logos or the Incarnation do not have the importance for him that they had for subsequent theologians such as Maximus, John Scotus Erigena, or Meister Eckhart.

42