

# Iconographic Interpretations of Theological Themes in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and in St. Gregory Palamas and the Reception of these Themes by Meister Eckhart

Emil Ivanov

## Works of Dionysius the Areopagite

FROM Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo Dionysius we have received a corpus of several titles written in the 482–532/33 period: Celestial Hierarchy, in 15 chapters and Church Hierarchy, in 7 chapters<sup>1</sup>, Divine Names, in 13 chapters<sup>2</sup>, Mystical Theology, in 5 chapters<sup>3</sup>, and letters sent to various people on matters related to dogma<sup>4</sup>. Because his works were highly respected by the moderate Monophysites, their truthfulness was challenged already in 532 by Bishop Hypatius of Ephesus,<sup>5</sup> but in the Western part of the Empire they were accepted and recognized by Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604). After that the first and earliest known so far commentaries on Dionysius's works emerged again in the East and are the work of John of Scytopolis (d. 540) and Ven Maximus the Confessor (d. 662).<sup>6</sup> Before that separate quotations from these commentaries could be met with earlier in the works of Sevir, a Monophysite and bishop of Antioch between 512 and 518, but not before the beginning of the 6th c. Ever since the Areopagitic corpus has been part of the canonical literature of the Church and the fact that these works were translated throughout the Middle Ages both in the East and the West shows the unceasing interest in them.

## Mystical Theology Interpreted in Iconography

One of the main points in Dionysius's Mystical Theology has inspired in the course of centuries mystically-minded seekers of the divinely revealed truths: *“Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians to Divine Wisdom; direct our path to the ultimate summit of your mystical knowledge, most incomprehensible, most luminous and most exalted, where the pure, absolute and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly*

*impalpable and invisible fairness of glories surpassing all beauty*”, a unique ode dedicated to the radiance of uncreated knowledge.

Pseudo-Dionysius understands Platonism and expresses it in Christian terms basing his work on both approaches—the cataphatic and the apophatic ones: God manifests Himself among peoples by means of many names through which He can be felt, for instance Beauty, Love, Gentleness, Good, etc. Together, with this however there exists also a supernatural reality, incomprehensible and intangible to the language and conceptual system of people as God is absolutely invisible and imperuptible, knowledge about Him is impossible for man: “*Because it is super-essentially exalted above created things, and reveals itself in Its naked Truth to those alone who pass beyond all that is pure or impure, and ascend above the topmost altitudes of holy things, and who, leaving behind them all divine light and sound and heavenly utterances, plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as the Oracles declare, that ONE who is beyond all*”.<sup>8</sup>

Even Moses, deliberating further Dionysius says: “*It was not without reason that the blessed Moses was commanded first to purify himself and then to separate himself from those who had not undergone purification; and after the entire purification heard many trumpets and saw many lights streaming forth with pure and manifold rays; and that he was thereafter separated from the multitude, with the elect priests, and pressed forward to the summit of the divine ascent. Nevertheless, he did not attain to the Presence of God itself; he saw not it (for it cannot be looked upon) but the Place where it dwells*”.<sup>9</sup>

The main points in these formulations are interpreted later successfully also on the image-iconographic level. One can detect a parallel to that in chapter 5 of *Mystical Theology* and at that in the sense in which Dionysius understood it, i.e. that “The Kindly Original Cause of everything” can be expressed more words, less words, and even in the complete absence of words, and that means also by means of images and drawing and painting. The very exclamation in the beginning of the treatise: “*Supernal Triad, Deity above all essence, knowledge and goodness; Guide of Christians to Divine Wisdom !*” and the compositions showing Sophia, the Wisdom of God, are an example of that. Their dissemination especially in the 14th c. shows also their link with the ideas of mystical seeking of God and Hesychasm.

We see such representations in Byzantine and Medieval Bulgarian monuments the biblical texts being only additional motivation for the reception of Dionysius’s ideas in iconography.<sup>10</sup> In most of the cases the Supreme Wisdom is presented by way of personification—the figure of



**Fig. 1** Sophia, the Wisdom of God, wall painting in Chrelio Tower of Rila Monastery, 1335/36 (Bulgaria)

a woman or the image of an angel sitting at a festive well-laden table around which there scurry about servants with additional plates. The scenes in the St Sophia Church in Ochrid (1235), the monastery churches at Gračanica (1321) and Dečani (the middle of the 14th c.) interpreted correctly from a Christological point of view the orthodox doctrine by using a nimbus over Sophia with the letters  $\text{’O } \Omega\text{N}$  i.e. “I AM WHO AM” (Gen. 3:14).

The theme of the text directs the viewer to the medieval iconography of the Mother of God—the Burning Bush with Celestial Powers at her flank and this explains the link with Dionysius’s Celestial Hierarchy. Sometimes in the mural compositions depicting Sophia one can recognize Christ as the Angel of Supreme Wisdom (the churches of St Sophia, 1235, and St. Clement, 1294/95, in Ochrid and the Gračanica Monastery, 1321, while in another case (Hrelyo’s Tower in the Rila Monastery, 1336), Sophia is presented as an muse from Antiquity around which we see revealed all spheres of God’s creation that has become accessible to human cognition—the Celestial Powers, prophets,



**Fig. 2** Sophia, the Wisdom of God, fresco in the Church of St. John Prodomos, 1694/95 (in Yaroslavl, Russia)

evangelists, apostles, philosophers and musicians from Antiquity, personifications of the seasons. All they go in solemn procession towards the table of the Supreme Wisdom so as to receive Holy Communion from the spring, which is Christ.

### **Images Showing the the Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy**

According to Dionysius all things that exist are arranged in a strict divinely ordered system and harmony, which reveal themselves in the hierarchical structure of the world. Each creation has its strictly fixed position in the divine order with the lower creatures drawing power from the higher ones so as to rise from the low level to a higher level in the world. On the basis of the same principle the younger generations draw from the knowledge and experience of the older generation. They do so rushing on towards their limit of knowing. They do so in the





**Fig. 3** In Gračanica Monastery, 14th century (Serbia)

process of getting to know the unknown, the unknowing. In this sense “the unknowing” in the works of Dionysius the Areopagite is a category with content and to a maximum degree full of meaning, a category in which no cataphatic reasoning is possible.

The works “*De Coelesti Hierarchia*” and “*De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*” are the ontological system, which is hierarchically structured and arranged in degree-ordered ontology from the top to the base. “*De Coelesti Hierarchia*” describes nine ranks grouped in three triads in each of which the choirs (hosts) of the bodiless celestial powers are included, also arranged hierarchically. The first triad includes seraphim, cherubim, thrones, the second—dominions, virtues, powers, and the third—principalities, archangels, and angels. These nine ranks mediate in a descending line from the top down to the base, between God and man. Already in early Christian Art, in the 5th and 6th centuries, one can see a hint of depictions of the celestial powers. A background with stars has been added around the four apocalyptic creatures in the mosaic decoration in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna from 430–450. On the dome of the archbishop’s chapel in Ravenna (500) the composition has been supplemented with four angelic figures rushing towards Christ’s monogram in the centre. The composition in another Ravenna monument—the church of St. Vitalius (548) is similar. There instead of a heaven with stars, the space around the angelic figures is full of rich floral ornamentation and various birds and in the centre we

see the Lamb of God.

The mosaic in the apse of the church of St. Apolinarius in Classe (549) is an acme of the representative symbolism of the celestial hierarchy and God's grandeur. There the space around the cross of Christ is situated in the centre of a medallion is full of 99 stars on a blue background—an undoubtedly strong indication about the nine celestial ranks and the number of their angels and other powers, a number that excels the potential of the human eye.<sup>11</sup>

The oldest undoubted iconographic examples showing the Celestial Hierarchy are in the Limburg collection of crosses made exquisitely of enamel on gilded background (the work of a Constantinople workshop in 963–968) and a miniature decoration in Vienna codex Suppl. gr. 52, fol. 1v from the second half of the 12th c. In the first case the separate groups are presented in two ways—by means of anthropomorphic and symbolic figures—gathered around a relic from the Cross of Christ, a relic that is in the middle. In the second case the Celestial Hierarchy surrounds the image of the New Testament Trinity, which is presented in an anthropomorphic way—God, the Father with a slightly reduced figure of Jesus Christ in His lap. The 12th c. has also given us fragments of the angelic figures from the murals of the dome of the Church of St. George in Sofia and in Kurbinovo in Macedonia, the composition in the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, and elsewhere. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the scene with the Celestial Hierarchy became a constant component in the composition called “Celestial Liturgy” on central domes (mosaics in the Church of the Mother of God in Palermo, 1143, and in the baptistery in the Church of St. Marc in Venice, 13th c.) or in the apse (the church in Staro Nagoričino in Macedonia, 1316–1318).

After the 15th c. the intensified symbolism linked with the theme of the Celestial Hierarchy is felt even more strongly in the decoration on liturgically—used fabrics and church plate (an epithafios from the Church of the Mother of God in Moscow from the 15th c.) and especially in Russian medieval iconography on the subject “The Mother of God, The Ever Burning Bush” (an icon of the mid 16th c. from the Cyrillo-Belozersk Monastery) or an iconography of Church Fathers bowing before the Sacrifice for use during the Liturgy of St. Basil. The later is a rare iconographic subject and one of the few instances is on a Russian icon of the 18th c.: the central medallion has the figure of a bishop in vestments, who has elevated over his head a discus with anthropomorphic depiction—an image of Christ, the Lamb of God, laid for the sacrifice. Behind Him one sees the celestial powers, who are invisibly present during the prayer. On the second round row outside are

8 more small medallions with half length figures of powers of heaven accompanied by cherubs. Outside, at the flanks of the scene are the four apocalyptic picture of the New Testament Trinity, where only Christ has been depicted in an anthropomorphic way.

According to Dionysius the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a reflection of the celestial hierarchy also consists of nine ranks arranged in three triads, each triad consisting of three groups: sacraments—Baptism, Eucharist, Chrismation, clerics—bishops, priests and deacons, and the group to which there belong the monks, the laymen, and the penitents from among the monks and laymen. We see these strictly defined groups and ranks again in the pictures of the Day of Judgment their iconography being constantly enriched without leaving the thematic framework of the Areopagite. The best known examples have been preserved in the illustrations to Greek codex 74 from the 11th c. in the Paris National Library, as a mosaic on the western wall of the church at Torcello (11th c.), two Sinai icons of the second half of the 12th c., murals in the church of Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria (12th c.) and in Cappadocia—Kvarke Kilisse (1212), the southern wing of the monastery of Chora (the Kahrie Mosque) of 1315–1320.<sup>12</sup> The groups with church hierarchs after Dionysius’s description supplement also the upper part of the compositions showing the Dormition of the Mother of God (at Staro Nagoričino, 1316–1318) and at Marko monastery (around 1375), the Celestial Liturgy (Hrelyo’s Tower in the Rila monastery, 1335), the Crucifixion of Our Lord (an icon by Anastassiy Ivanovich, Moscow, 1806), Sophia-Divine Wisdom (Hrelyo’s Tower in the Rila monastery, the middle of the 14th c.), Synaxis of the Archangels (an icon consisting of many icons, from Novgorod, ca. 1500 and in scenes from the Apocalypse<sup>13</sup>.

### **Development of Dionysius’s notion by St. John of Damascus**

Before making a comparison with Meister Eckhart, it is proper for us to mention that opportunities for similar iconographic decisions exist also in the work of Maximus the Confessor and St. John of Damascus (died after 754). Reasoning on the way of attaining knowledge about the Creator Ven. Maximus links the term of “hypostasis” not only with a concrete real individuality, but more with a concrete notion of an image and a genuinely existing originality. In this view the first people in Eden were called upon to link created and uncreated being, to link Paradise and earth turn in the Earth into paradise. In this philosophical-religious reflections, for instance (*Disputatio cum Pyrrho*, *Mystagogia*, *De variis*

dificilibus locis)<sup>14</sup> he understood the history of the word as a mystical basis for the up building and existence of Creation.

In St. John of Damascus, the last representative of Greek classical patristic, who unlike of the Eastern fathers based his work not on Plato, but on Aristotelian ethics, one can also note a successful comparison of the cataphatic and the apophatic approaches regarding knowledge of God and mystical theology. In his works “De Sancta Trinitate” and “Expositio fidei” St. John reveals an apology of the Christian tradition, more specifically concerning the “theosis” of man, the two natures and wills, divine and human, of Our Lord, and the veneration of the holy icons, creating the basis of the theory of image: images are natural, didactic, and symbolic, man also is an image of God;<sup>15</sup> with the help of the image it is possible to achieve knowledge about the Universe, the bodies and the figures of the bodiless powers—both of the celestial bodiless powers and of the demons. In John of Damascus it seems that one can notice in the clearest manner the development of Dionysius’s notion about consistent order in the Universe and God’s presence in the world by way of His invisibleness, which becomes tangible exactly though the Incarnation of the Son of God, the historical person of Christ, the Godman. Hence it follows that it is also possible to depict Him, even according to canon 82 of the Trullo Council (692) it is required to depict Him through anthropomorphic and not symbolic iconography.<sup>16</sup> Choosing what is probably the strangest passage from St. Basil, the Great (d. 379), the dogmatic formulation of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) finally rehabilitated the theology of the image: “Because the homage paid to the image, refers to its original image” (διότι ἡ τῆς εἰχόνος τιμὴ ἐπι τὸ πρωτότυπον διαβαίνει)<sup>17</sup>, that is why whoever venerates the icon, venerates also the hypostasis (ἡ ὑπόστασις) (the person) depicted on it.

In this sense and within the context of the parallel being sought regarding what Dionysius the Areopagite wrote on Christian Art, we shall refer to St. John of Damascus, who made a conclusion in favor of Art as an opportunity to achieve rich mystical knowledge of God: “*I will not cease to respect matter through which my salvation has been obtained*”, and also: “*Do not make matter a bad thing!...Because nothing that comes from the Lord can be unworthy*”. St. John of Damascus sees in the Incarnation of God the most important reason for the use of images: “*That is why I do dare depict the unseen God not as One that may not be depicted, but as One, Who for the sake of our salvation becomes visible and participates in our flesh and blood. And we do not depict the Invisible Deity, but the Word of God, Which has*



*become visible flesh*".<sup>18</sup> Thus the icon of Christ is a genuine depiction or as St. Athanasius the Great (d. 373) said: "*an image of the Invisible God*"<sup>19</sup>.

### **Hesychasm of St. Gregory Palamas and Mystical Theology**

In Mystical Theology by Dionysius the Areopagite knowledge and concepts are transitory and because of that are an obstacle to achieving "theosis". The author speaks of maturity, of mystical mental concentration beyond the visible light ("*the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness*"<sup>20</sup>), where one again can only reach or detect God, but cannot understand or determine His Being. Here again one becomes aware of the conceptual link with the Hesychasm of St. Gregory Palamas (1269–1359) and respectively with the iconographic and liturgical reception of the themes of the Transfiguration. Dionysius further gives the following advice: "For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things thou mayest be born on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness"<sup>21</sup>. Here it is clear that the ultimate goal is not contemplation or emotion, but the renunciation of oneself.

In Meister Eckhart this apophatics of individuality has gone to an extreme. But the link with medieval Hesychasm is especially clear in the following passage from the same work by Dionysius: "*We pray that we may come unto this Darkness which is beyond light, and, without seeing and without knowing, to see and to know that which is above vision and knowledge through the realization that by not-seeing and by unknowing we attain to true vision and knowledge; and thus praise, superessentially, it that is superessential, by the transcendence of all things; even as those who, carving a statue out of marble, abstract or remove all the surrounding material that hinders the vision which the marble conceals and, by that abstraction, bring to light the hidden beauty*"<sup>22</sup>. Dionysius ends his treatise saying that nothing sensory and speculative can be the original cause of Creation as well as that God, the true original cause, cannot be affirmed or denied. He is above everything and He can be reached only by a mystical way through contemplation.<sup>23</sup> Without Dionysius, the very author, suspecting, that, within less than a century his ideas penetrated not only the theological discussions, but also Christian Art in East and West. It is enough to mention the mosaics in the apse of the Sinai monastery church and in the apse of the Church of St Apolinarius in Classe, both of them from the middle of the 6th c.

## Assessments of Meister Eckhart

In the first half of the 14th c., Johannes Eckhart (1260–1327), a Dominican preacher from Erfurt, master of theology in Strasbourg and Cologne, and lecturer in the University of Paris 1302 through 1314, reviewed critically patristic literature and created a mystical movement laying the foundation of German speculative mysticism. The latter is considered to be speculative in so far as in it, in a tendentious manner, there has been imposed an extreme interpretation of the ideas from Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius, ideas according to which God is absolutely transcendental and unattainable for human potentialities. In fact, the apophatics of Dionysius the Areopagite allows knowledge of God exactly because of the Incarnation and St. John of Damascus refers to this point when speaking in defence of the veneration of icons. Comparative analyses of the apophatics in Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Meister Eckhart show that the difference among them are based not so much on a rejection of the speculative method but rather on the need to defend consciousness from the destructive manifestations of apophatics.

In the 19th c. K. Schmidt and W. Preger presented Eckhart first of all as a schoolman<sup>24</sup>. At the same time H. Denifle rejects as unsubstantiated the view that Eckhart is a pantheist.<sup>25</sup> O. Karrer puts J. Eckhart among the Thomist thinkers of genius and says that he works harmoniously without contradictions with the official church and the West.<sup>26</sup> In the 40ies of the 20th c. on the basis of now available conclusions that Eckhart is a Thomist, Neoplatonist, Averroist, and pantheist, H. Ebeling presents an assessment that is interesting and is not devoid of reason. According to it Eckhart is a “talented compiler of philosophical systems”.<sup>27</sup> Of pure value in this train of thought is the opinion of K. Ruh that the German philosopher is a contextual thinker, whose ideas are the fruit of events in his own life.<sup>28</sup>

The notions about Eckhart, notions that have become established in the literature on the history of philosophy and that present him as a pantheist and a Neoplatonist, are rather one-sided as Eckhart proceeds from the positions of German charismatic mysticism. The reasoning faculty and the overcoming of the barrier of contemplation by means of it are the main goals of his philosophical reflections.

### Eckhart's sermon on “the Sermon on the Mount”

In his collection of sermons entitled “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

whose title comes from one of the verses in the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel (Mt 5: 3) Meister Eckhart draws a peculiar parallel between the Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite and the phrase in the nine beatitudes from Christ's sermon. here Eckhart begins from the view point of the social defects in Western societies and differentiates by way of speculation from Dionysius's work on hierarchy<sup>29</sup> the author arranges stepwise (i.e. in degrees) negative definitions of poverty that radically supplement one another and says that the poor person is not the one that does not feel pleasure, but the one that does not want anything, that does not know anything, and that posses nothing. Eckhart uses the Platonic linguistic tools, which he has acquired from the authors of Late Antiquity. In his view the one whom we call God is such only for the individuals that have separated from God—at His will (and at their own will). Hens the logic followed by Eckhart with regard to poverty is that true poverty means to be deprived of the desire for striving, knowledge, possession, urges, sensuality, and individuality—all of them are the goal for returning to the blessed state of bliss, completeness and unity, a state that is intrinsic to God's being and was intrinsic to human beings before the separation caused by sin. Therefore, achieving genius bliss, which at the same time means achieving genuine poverty, leads toward the path for doing away with the consequences of the Fall. This radical mysticism of Eckhart follows logically the Christology of Pseudo-Dionysius and the Eastern and Western church authors of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

### **Theological dispute between Palamas and Barlaam**

In the 40ies of the 14th c. in the East there blazed up a theological discussion concerning the Hesychast doctrine of Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. The wave of dissatisfaction brought forth justified questions as Gregory had been misunderstood. Is there a dependence on the ideas of Western mysticism? And is the apophatics in his ideas about the divine energies through which God reveals Himself to man a moderate one? Does not His presence in the world become remote and does not He become accessible only to a minority able to achieve mystical contemplation? Such were probably the questions that disturbed also at that time the Eastern Church and society.

Like Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart Gregory Palamas believed that God, Who by virtue of His nature is unknowable, reveals Himself to mankind through His divine energies and in the light of His glory. These energies are the power of the common actions of the

Trinity. That is why the categories of Palamas the image of the Holy Trinity is not only an image of God's tri-unity, but also notion about the real theophany of God such as are the Nativity, the Baptism and the Transfiguration of our Lord. According to the Hesychast doctrine prayer is a precondition for achieving ecstasy. It has the power to elevate man to Paradise and to enable him stand in front of God. This, however, cannot be achieved through elementary emotion. When one is in unceasing prayerful contemplation, his entire being is overwhelmed by suffusing light. This is the inoriginate light of the glory of God, which exudes eternally and super-abundantly from the Holy Trinity. The light of Mount Tabor, the opportunity for the hesychasts to catch sight of it, and the faith in the bliss in the eternal life, which we expect, are three stages of one and the same spiritual being.

The doctrine of Gregory Palamas and the first of all problems as to the character of the light from Tabor and the uncreatedness of the divine energies called forth ardent theological discussions in Byzantium. These discussions began in 1337 and reached their climax in 1340. The two opposing theses were supported respectively by St. Gregory, who defended the thesis of the real participation in what is divine and the fullness of the knowledge of God, and on the other side, by Barlaam from Calabria and Akyndinus, who stated that God can become known in an indirect way, i.e. by an "intellectual knowledge of God". The dispute is probably the first direct conflict between Byzantine Patristics and the West European scholasticism. In J. Meyendorff's view the essence of the dispute between Byzantine Hesychasm and the theological method of Barlaam consists of five fundamental points: the absolutizing by Barlaam of the unknowableness of God's essence being the clearest point of dissension.<sup>30</sup> On account of that John 14th Kalekos, Patriarch of Constantinople (1333–1347), convened a local council in Constantinople on 10th June 1341, which was attended by Emperor Andronicus III Palaiologos (1328–1341), a personal friend of Gregory Palamas, and also by John Kantakouzenos, who in principle sympathized with Barlaam. The entire state was involved in the council, which looked more like a trial<sup>31</sup>. Gregory Palamas arrived in the capital in May accompanied by some of his disciples—Isidor, who became Metropolitan of Monemvasia, and later was elevated to the dignity of Patriarch of Constantinople (1347–1349), the brothers Dorotheus and Mark, who both founded a monastery in Thessalonica. After 1370 one of them was elected metropolitan of Thessalonica. The council lasted only one day. Barlaam was condemned, while Gregory was vindicated.

## New Iconography on the Transfiguration of Christ

The positive outcome from the Palamite disputes contributed to the emergence and establishing of a new iconography concerning the theme of the Transfiguration, which became especially popular in Christian Art after the middle of the 14th c., chiefly in the areas under the direct influence of Hesychasm, i.e. in the areas where St. Gregory Palamas and his followers were active—Mount Athos, Meteora, Veroia, Kastoria, Thessalonica as well as Paroria and the monasteries in the areas of Tarnovo and Rousse in Bulgaria. This theme was known in Christian Art already in the 6th c.—the mosaic in the apse of the Church of St. Catherine in the Mount Sinai monastery. More recent examples date only from the 11th-12th cc. (mosaics in the byzantine churches in Daphne and in the narthex of the Chora monastery in Constantinople and also a mosaic icon showing the Transfiguration of our Lord in the Louvre, 12th c.<sup>32</sup>).

In the 14th c. the Transfiguration scene we see as an iconographic detail a change in the way of conveying the uncreated light (ἡ θεία δόξα) around Christ: in the oval mandorla around his figure there appear thickened and shirt stylized rays. This is undoubtedly due to the influence of the Hesychast doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas and shows the endeavor of the artist to present in the best possible way the uncreated light of Tabor. We see such examples in the murals in the Church of St George tou Vounou in Kastoria, 1368–1385, the church of the Mother of God in Cerske near Leskovik in Albania (the end of the 14th.c.), the church of Archangel Michael cut in the rock near Ivanovo, district of Rousse, in Bulgaria and also in the expensive byzantine icons from the same period (a mosaic diptyque icon with scenes from the twelve feasts in Museo dell' Opera del Duomo in Florence, an icon with four scenes on an iconostasis from the 14th c. in Sinai Monastery<sup>33</sup>). Besides that, the continuity between the theological—mystical ideas of the two, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Gregory Palamas becomes obvious on an iconographic level also a number of monuments after the 14th c. The Herminia (manual with models for icon painting) made by Trpko zoograph, it is said that the icon of St. Gregory Palamas should be “at the diakonikon together with the icons of Dionysius the Areopagite, St Ignatius the God-bearer, St. Andrew of Crete, St. Sylvester, pope of Rome, and St. Gregory of Neocaesarea”<sup>34</sup>. In the list in the Hermenia of Dičo Zograph St. Gregory Palamas is the 16th in number, i.e. at the position where Trpko Zograph has begun the list of martyr bishops. In the post-byzantine period his icon is almost always in



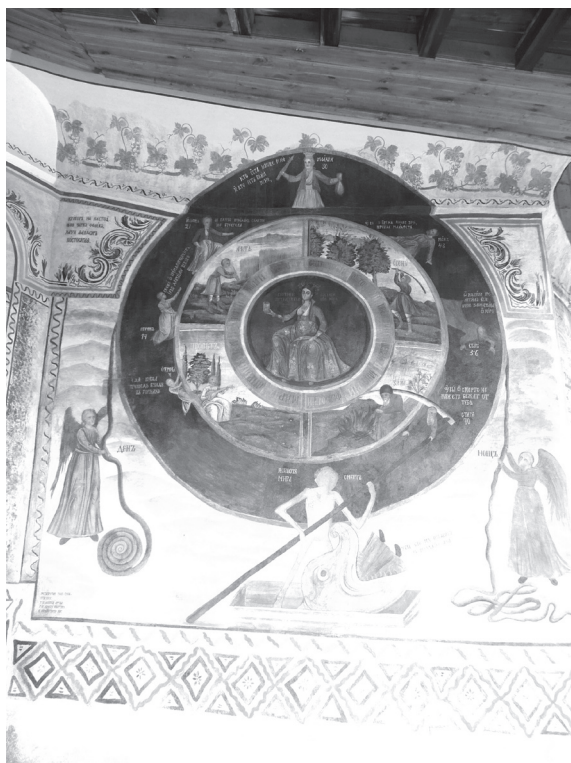


**Fig. 4** Transfiguration of Christ, mosaic in the Dafni Monastery, 11th century (Greece)

the sanctuary of the katholikon, i.e. the main church, in the Xeropotamou Monastery in Mont Athos, from 1783. It is the work of “zographos” i.e. church painters, Konstantin, Athanas and Naum<sup>35</sup>.

### **Mysticism of Eckhart and his Theological Influences**

In the 15th c. in the West the complicated mystical speculative sentences of Meister Eckhart were replaced by a conception about mysticism that is more pragmatic and imbued with an ethical meaning. Through the book “The imitation of Jesus Christ” by Thomas Kempis, a book disapproved by some orthodox theologians, the ideas of German speculative mysticism became disseminated in the New Devotion (Devotio) movement known in Burgundy, Holland, Flanders, France and Germany. This book stresses repentance and the constant reflecting on the self-sacrifice, suffering and the wounds of Christ crucified repentance and reflecting that the believer through mental contemplation should bring to the point of vision. Such a realistic pseudo-mysticism is a phenomenon characteristic of the crisis in the Western church in the 15th c., a pseudo-mysticism that has emerged to a certain extent also due to the Savanorola’s preaching in Italy. At the same time there emerged the movements of the Lollards in England, the Hussites in



**Fig. 5** The Wheel of Life, wall painting in the Transfiguration Monastery, 19th century (Turnovo, Bulgaria)

Czech lands, and of course, the Protestants in North-eastern Germany. Because of the feelings of fear engendered by the wars, diseases, high mortality, the constant loss of property and dear ones, and because of the reminiscences of the speculative and orally transmitted pseudomysticism, in France and Germany there appeared hundreds of pictures of the so called Dance of death (Dance Macabre, Totentanz), on cloth, wood, walls and oil canvas.

Eckhart exercised a considerable influence on his disciples and contemporaries such as Johann Tauler (1300–1361), Henry Suso (1296–1366) and Jan van Ruysbroeck (1292–1381). Two years after his death, on 27th March 1329, the philosopher was condemned with special bull by Pope John XXII consisting of 28 paragraphs dealing the passages of dispute in this texts. Of them 17 passages were declared to be heretical among them being the passages reasoning on the eternity of the world and on the worthlessness of man and his complete transformation in

God. In the second half of the 14th c. Eckhart's ideas inspired an anonymous Dominican monk from Frankfurt to write the book *German Theology*, which was published for the first time in 1516–1518 by Martin Luter. In this sense the name of Eckhart was to a certain extent involved ecclesiastically-politically in the events linked with the Reformation in Germany through he did not subscribe to concrete Protestant views on ecclesiastical matters or matters of dogma. In the 15th c. his name was mentioned in connection with Nicholas of Cusa<sup>36</sup> and in the 19th c. the interest in his philosophy was revived within the context of Romanticism and the idealist philosophy of Schelling and Hegel and later was also linked with the nihilism of Nietzsche.

Soon after the fall of Constantinople and the decline of Greek patristics, the medieval West entered its dramatic phase of a declining medieval civilization. The drama in the reality of life in the West was accompanied with a disintegration of feudal structures, conflicts and wars between separate petty rulers, and the loss of Latin territories in the East. Christian mysticism is the fruit of the development of theological thought in the 4th c. and at that this development took place in Christianity itself. Therefore with regard to the history of culture Christian mysticism has been influenced first of all by its own Christian tradition and to a certain extent by Neo-Platonism. The influence of Mithraism and other Eastern cults cannot be proved with specific examples that are valid for the entire context of Christianity, especially with regard to the liturgical practices and their development throughout the ages both in East and West.

To Eckhart apophatics Dionysius the Areopagite has been of undoubted importance: the latter is the one that is quoted most often by the authors of Late Antiquity and the German philosopher has built his exposition entirely on Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*. Plotinus has helped the philosopher only to draw a line between apophatics in Christian theology and apophatics in Neo-Platonism. Otherwise Plotinus's ecstasy remains incompatible with Eckhart's compilation as it presupposes a liberation from the super-naught, a liberation that can lead either to full knowledge of truth or to complete deprivation of knowledge.

### **Apophatic Theology and Buddhist Nirvana**

The Neo-Platonist Absolute which there comes the essence, is similarly to the Buddhist nirvana inexpressible. In the Orthodox tradition as this becomes most clearly visible in Gregory Palamas, God's essence is in

principle unattainable, except by way of the divine energies. In Dionysius the apophasis is necessary so as to strengthen people in the genuine faith, which frees them from the unceasing striving for freedom and nirvana, a striving in the religions of the East. In one of the cases there exists an existential need of faith and of reaching the irrational. The latter cannot be expressed with the concept “unity of opposites in the Absolute”. This, however, is possible by way of the theology of the symbol and the sacraments of the Church—this did not change during the Middle Ages and it continues the basis of the world-view of believers to this day.

In conclusion one can say the following: Taking into account Dionysius’s apophatics and adding the apophatic-cataphatic philosophical method on the basis of dialectics as understood by Hegel, one can say that cataphatics is an affirmation of the ecclesiastical institutions and hierarchy as well as the moral and ethical norms.

This synthesis contributes to the elaboration of a new philosophical-religious system and the formation of a new world-view. The moderate apophatics of Dionysius the Areopagite played a revolutionary role during Late Antiquity, in the times of the transition to mature theology. Later in the pre-Reformation period in the West such a role was played by the doctrine of Meister Eckhart. At about the same time—the middle of the 14th c.—in the East during the time of the Palamite disputes the same role was played by the Hesychast doctrine of Gregory Palamas.

Meister Eckhart brought moderate Dionysian apophatics to an extreme point, trying to dissolve in the “super-naught” (as a totally inexpressible idea of the divine nature) the Christian notion of the Divine Trinity. This rationalistic-mystical approach concerning the personal path for reaching the Absolute is skillfully drawn by Eckhart from the works of Plotinus in which the fusion with the Absolute by way of ecstasy is attainable only by chosen wise men and philosophers. In Buddhism these antinomies are overcome by seeking nirvana as the goal of every living being and by a row of lives and deaths<sup>37</sup>.

The widespread image of Eckhart as a pantheist and Neo-Platonist, who reduces the notion of the Triune God to the notion of an impersonal deity, gave the philosopher the place of a forerunner not only of the Reformation, but also of atheistic ideas. Nihilistic ideas like those of F. Nietzsche are also possible. Eckhart’s philosophy on the way of apophatic cognition “through the super-naught” can be considered also as forerunner of contemporary existentialism. At the same time, if the “super-naught” of Eckhart is considered as nirvana, than a Buddhist interpretation of his philosophy is possible.

## **Dissemination of the Hesychast Doctrine in the Eastern Church**

The dynamic of the appophatic points in the sermons and treatises of Eckhart presuppose more interpretations that reveal themselves only later, when seen a philosophical-historical context. The time, when Eckhart lives and works is a time of mass religious upheavals in Europe, groups of nuns seized by exaltation, itinerant preachers and mystics. Eckhart's texts are the fruit of their time. With their character and language and ideas meant to be understood by the mass of people, they aim at bringing into Church and socializing the mystical monastery ecstasies and religious psychoses.

In this sense it may prove that Eckhart is not a pantheist, but rather the victim of the stand and the tradition of the Western Church, which did not allow the further development of his doctrine. In the east the rehabilitation of Gregory Palamas and his canonization as a saint contributed not only to the dissemination of Hesychasm, but also to the enriching of orthodox iconography in all formal and stylistic levels. The development of the Hesychast doctrine gave impetus to the formation of an entire range of saints' lives and dogmatic-iconographic ideas and also influenced the hymnographic and literary genres. As a long range development the position of the Church in support of Hesychasm had positive consequence for its distributions also in the rest of the Balkans, and especially in Bulgaria through Theodosius of Tarnovo and Patriarch Euthymius, and this position had a favorable effect for the uniting and development of the monastic community. Eastern Orthodox monastic mysticism took firm root in Mount Athos just at the time of the Palamite disputes and it determines the form of Athonite monasticism today as well. Athonite mysticism is closely linked with the everyday life of monks and is characterized with constantly repeating stages of transition from verbal to non-verbal prayer, to prayerful contemplation, to vision of God, to getting into contact with the divine energies in the sense understood by Gregory Palamas, and the "all-luminous darkness" that we know of from the treatises of Dionysius the Areopagite that were translated into the Middle Bulgarian just at the time of the dissemination and adoption of Hesychasm in Bulgaria in the second half of the 14th c.

The presence of the celestial and the church hierarchy in the hermeneutics of Dionysius of Furna and the many extant iconographic variations in the theme as well as for the Wisdom of god only support the importance of the theological disputes for the development of all spheres of ecclesial life in the East. Conversely, the lack of theological and cultural



deliberations in the West on identical themes during the same period only reflects the general crisis of Western theology and civilization. At the same time the theme about the Wisdom of God refers those interested to the centre of the Palamite disputes in the 14th c. just as at the time of the followers of St. Gregory Palamas—St. Philotheus Kokin, St. Calistus, St. Euthymius of Tarnovo. Of course, such themes were discussed also by St. Athanassius the Great and by the Cappadocian fathers. Obviously, the required context and expertise are needed when such matters are put for consideration. One is impressed by the fact that in the course of centuries such problems of Christology were not discussed either in the East or the West. On the other hand, this theme emerges usually after a social crisis or to use the words of S. Bulgakov, when there is a transition from Marxism to Idealism and from there to Theology. In this sense not such discussion has taken place so far in the Bulgarian ecclesiastical-theological and philosophical domain.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> De coelesti hierarchia (PG, t. 3, col. 119–136), De ecclesiastica hierarchia (PG, t. 3, col. 370–584).

<sup>2</sup> De divinis nominibus (PG, t. 3, col. 585–996). See: *Kapriev, G.* Bemerkungen über den Kommentar des Thomas von Aquin zu ‘De Divinis Nominibus’ des Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagita, liber IV, lectio 1.—Archiv für mittelalterliche Philosophie und Kultur, Heft 3, Sofia 1996, 20–32.

<sup>3</sup> De mystica theologia (PG, t. 3, col. 997–1064). See Dionysius The Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, C. Luibheid, edit. Paulist Press, 1987: The Mystical Theology, 203–211.

<sup>4</sup> PG, t.3, col. 1065–1120: to Gaius the doctor (1–4), to deacon Dorotheus (5), to presbyter Sosipater (6), to bishop Polycarpus (7), to Demophilus, the doctor (8), to bishop Titus (9), and to John the Theologian, “apostle and evangelist, in exile on the island Patmos”.

<sup>5</sup> *Schwartz, E.* Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum, t. 4. Strassburg, 1914, 167–184.

<sup>6</sup> Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagitium: Sancti Maximi Commentaria in sancti Dionysii Areopagitae opera. PG, t. 4, col. 29–588. The commentaries of the two Fathers have been intermingled in the many transcripts made by the Byzantine copyists. The commentary of John of Scythopolis has been partially compiled on the basis of Syriac translations. See: *Balthasar, H.* Das Scholienwerk des Johannes von Scythopolis.—Scholastik, Bd. 15, 1940, 16–38; Die sogenannten Maximus Scholien des Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagitium.—Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen I. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 3/1980, 33–66.

<sup>7</sup> The Mystical Theology, ch. 1,1, p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ch. 1, 3, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ch. 1, 4, p. 204–205.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this iconography, see: *Ivanov, E.* Sophia—die Weisheit Gottes in der Theologie und Kunst.—Bulgarien in Himmerod. Bulgarische Bibliothek, Bd. 13. München 2008, 106–119.

<sup>11</sup> For the theological interpretation this monuments, see: *Ivanov, E.* Pravoslavieto sreshtu gotskoto arianstvo prez 6 vek, spored istoriceski i arheologiceski svidetelstva (Habil.), Sofia 2009, 73–76, 88, 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Garidis, M.* Etudes sur le Jugement Dernier post-byzantin du XV<sup>e</sup> à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Thessaloniki, 1985, Planches I, 2; II, 3–6; III, 8–10.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ivanov, E.* Apokalypsedarstellungen in der nachbyzantinischen Kunst.—Das Münster, 3, 2002, 208–217.

<sup>14</sup> Disputatio cum Pyrrho (PG, t. 91, col. 287–362), Mystagogia (PG, t. 91, col. 657–718), De variis difficilibus locis (PG, t. 91, col. 1031–1418).

<sup>15</sup> See: De Sancta Trinitate (PG, t. 95, col. 9–22), Expositio fidei (PG, t. 94, col. 1008–1420).

<sup>16</sup> Concillium Quinisextum, canon 82, Mansi, t. 11, p. 977–980. See: *Ivanov, E.* Istorko-dogmaticeski osnovania za pravoslavnata ikona.—Bogoslovski razmisli, sbornik. Sofia 2005, 98–111.

<sup>17</sup> *Basilius Magnus.* De Spiritu Sancto, 18, 45; PG t. 32, col. 149.

<sup>18</sup> Expositio fidei. PG, t. 94, col. 1245 A–C, see: Geischer, H. (edit.). Der byzantinische Bilderstreit. Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte, Heft 9. Gütersloh, 1968, 24 (1. Rede, 16, 24–25).

<sup>19</sup> See *Athanasius.* Orationes quattuor contra Arianos III. PG, t. 26, col. 332.

<sup>20</sup> The Mystical Theology, ch. 1,1, p. 203.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., ch. 2, 1, p. 205–206.

<sup>23</sup> See *Drews, F.* Methexis, Rationalität und Mystik in der Kirchlichen Hierarchie des Dionysius Areopagita.—Aktuelle Antike, Bd. 5. Berlin 2011, 21–110.

<sup>24</sup> In historical-philosophical works Eckhart has been presented in different ways—as a pantheistic Neoplatonist, forerunner of the reformation, mystical philosopher-apophatist and artist of Areopagitics, etc. See e.g. in spite of the interest by the Russian religious thinkers on the subject in the West In the East for a long time there has been no lasting research interest and the publications dedicated to Eckhart are sporadic, e.g. In Russian historiography there are earlier translations, cf for newer translations see: *Karpizkij, N.* Ekhart—put apofateseskogo samopoznanija, Tomsk 1997; *Lossev, A.* Filosofija imeni, Moskva 1990; *Bulgakov, S.* Svet nevecernij, Moskva 1994; *Toporov, V.* Mejster Ekhart, hudoznik areopagiteseskogo nasledstvo.—Paleobalkanistika. Sbornik naucnih trodov, Moskva 1989; Ekhart Master. Izbrannije propovedi i traktatij. N.O. Gucinskoj, St. Peterbourg 2011.

<sup>25</sup> *Denifle, H.* Meister Eckharts lateinische Schrifften und die Grundanschauung seiner Lehre.—Archiv für Literatur- und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters, Bd. 2, 1886, 417–615.

<sup>26</sup> *Karrer, O.* Meister Eckhart. Das System seiner religiösen Lehre und Lebensweisheit. München, 1926.

<sup>27</sup> *Ebeling, H.* Meister Eckharts Mystik. Stuttgart, 1941, 344.

<sup>28</sup> *Ruh, K.* Meister Eckhart. München, 1985.

<sup>29</sup> See: *Boiadjiev, T.* Das Lichtproblem im Kommentar des heiligen Thomas von Aquin in Dionysius De divinis nominibus (cap. IV, lect. 4).—Archiv für mittelalterliche Philosophie und Kultur, Heft 3, Sofia 1996, 33–53.

<sup>30</sup> *Meyendorff, J.* Introduction a l'étude de Gregoire Palamas. Paris, 1959, 147.

<sup>31</sup> *Nicophorus Gregoras.* Historia Romana, cap. X, 1–4.—MPG, t. 148, col. 759–766.

<sup>32</sup> Ikonen. Ursprung und Bedeutung. Velmans, T. (Hrsg.). Stuttgart, 2002, Abb. 125

(152–153).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Abb. 133, 134 (161, 163).

<sup>34</sup> *Grozdanov, C.* Zivopisot na Ohridskata arhiepiskopia, Studii. Skopje 2007, 421.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>36</sup> *Wackerzapp, H.* Der Einfluss Meister Eckharts auf die ersten philosophischen Schriften des Nikolaus von Kues (1440–1450). Münster, 1962.

<sup>37</sup> S. Bulgakov criticise from an Orthodox viewpoint Buddhism and the rational-mystical gnosis of Eckhart, which claims the capacity to achieve divinity through nirvana. It is interesting that in their criticism of Christianity Buddhists also use apophatic argumentation.