The Journal of Theological Studies, NS, Vol. 74, Pt. 1, April 2023

ON KNOWING AND UNKNOWING GOD: REASON AND MYSTICISM IN THE ARMENIAN THEOLOGIAN GREGORY OF TATEV

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Abstract

The dialectic of the cataphatic and the apophatic is vital for honouring the transcendent within the rational endeavour of theology. The medieval Armenian theologian Gregory of Tatev presents a theological approach that is strongly logical and analytical, discussing the mystical only in a few places. For this reason, he has been accused of abandoning the apophatic altogether. However, it can be shown that mystical theology is at the heart of his thinking and his own spiritual practice. After expounding his cataphatic and apophatic theologies this paper shows that the divine hiddenness and incomprehensibility shape Gregory's cataphatic theology in that they underlie its epistemology and hermeneutics. Both are developed from the spiritual experience that God is ultimately ineffable and that 'unknowing' is the highest form of knowing him.

Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus.
Augustinus[1]

Introduction

Theology is distinct from practised faith through its theoretical character. St Anselm's method of *fides quaerens intellectum* describes the essence of an endeavour that links the early Apostolic Fathers with academic faculties of theology today. Especially Western theology found itself confronted with the need of rational reflection and justification, either caused from within by early and medieval

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 835468. I would like to express my gratitude to Khachik Hovhannisyan (Leuven) for drawing my attention to Gregory of Tatev, and to Professor Valentina Calzolari (Geneva), Ani Shahinean (Los Angeles), and Fr Arman Gregory Shokhikyan (Nottingham) for useful discussions and their comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

[1] Aurelius Augustinus, *Sermo* 117.3.5 (PL 38, col. 663).

https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flac133 Advance Access publication 10 February 2023

heresies, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, or later from without by the European enlightenment and nineteenth-century criticism of religion. This apologetic pressure may be one of the factors which left little appetite for the irrational and for mysticism in Western theology. However, in 1932, Karl Barth linked the contemporary problems of Protestantism to the loss of 'an entire third dimension—the dimension of . . . mystery'[2]. Also others, such as Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich, emphasized the need to regain the mystical dimension in Western theology and religious life.

Eastern Orthodox theologians often point to the rationalism of Western theology and its entanglement with philosophy as opposed to the significantly stronger role of mysticism in their own theological thinking. Mysticism is based on experiences beyond rational reflection, ordinary language, and common representations of the world. Transcending the normal lies at the heart of every religion. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that rational reflection is an essential part of Christianity, even in the Orthodox churches. How then can we reconcile the experience of a dimension beyond our intellectual grasp with the rational endeavour theology has to be?

A tradition that combines an emphatically rational reflection with mysticism is Armenian theology. The fourteenth-century theologian Gregory of Tatev or, in Armenian, Grigor Tatʿewacʿi[3] represents a particular example. His doctrine of God displays an analytical and logical approach along with reflections on epistemology and language. However, Tatʿewacʿi is careful to maintain the mysticism which characterizes Orthodox theology. The following investigation shows how he connects both. This will shed some light on the importance of mysticism in theology generally.

Grigor Tatʿewacʿi and his Work

Biographical Remarks

Grigor Tatʿewacʿi (1344/46–1409/10) is an important theologian of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is part of the Oriental

[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (London: T&T Clark, 2009 [English translation first published in 1969]), p. 6.

[3] Alternative spelling: Tatevatsi. The spelling of Armenian words and names in this article follows the transliteration system of Meillet-Hübschmann, which is the standard for academic articles in Armenian Studies.

Orthodox church family.[4] Tatʿewacʿi was a celibate priest, a *vardapet* (doctor of the Armenian Church), and the head of a monastic school which settled, after several relocations due to political instability, at the monastery of Tatev in the south of modern-day Armenia.[5]

Of major consequence for the Armenian Church and theology during Tatʿewacʿi's time was the arrival of Roman missionaries which began towards the end of the thirteenth century. In 1344, a Roman–Armenian brotherhood was established with the support of the Dominicans at the monastery of Kʿŕna: the brotherhood of the Unitors or the *Fratres Unitores*.[6] The Unitors established a monastic school at Kʿŕna and translated many Latin authors into Armenian. The new ideas and the intellectual discourse which were thus made available appealed to many Armenian students and resulted in a strong attraction to Roman Catholicism. This, however, provoked the resistance of theological circles in the Armenian Church trying to defend the Orthodox teaching and to win back the young intellectuals. Yet the Orthodox theologians themselves were very interested in the new intellectual traditions. The libraries of their monastic schools contained translations of many Latin works, and also the curricula incorporated Latin authors. Tatʿewacʿi's school was very

[4] Short introductions to the Armenian Apostolic Church include: Vrej Nerses Nersessian, 'Armenian Christianity', in Ken Parry (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), pp. 23–46; Theo Maarten van Lint, 'The Formation of Armenian Identity in the First Millenium', *Church History and Religious Culture* 89 (2009), pp. 251–78; and idem, 'Armenian Apostolic Church', in George Thomas Kurian (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), pp. 114–20.

[5] Modern in-depth expositions of Tatʿewacʿi's life in English can be found in the doctoral theses of Sergio La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius," Volume III of Grigor Tatʿewacʿi's *Book of Questions*: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary' (Harvard University, 2001), pp. 2–89, and Diana Tsaghikyan, 'Grigor Tatevatsi and the Sacraments of Initiation' (The University of Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 20–83. For shorter accounts see Marcus A. Oudenrijn, 'Uniteurs et Dominicains d'Arménie: IV. Les adversaires de l'union', *Oriens Christianus: Hefte für die Kunde des Christlichen Orients* 45 (1961), pp. 95–108, at pp. 106–8; 'Grigor Tatʿewacʿi (Gregory of Tatev) (1346–1409)', in Agop J. Hacikyan et al. (eds.), *The Heritage of Armenian Literature*, vol. 2: *From the Sixth to the Eighteenth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), pp. 606–13; Sergio La Porta, 'Grigor Tat'ewac'i (1344–1409)', in *Gregory of Tatev: Homilies. Seventy Homilies from the "Book of Homilies which Is Called Summer Volume"* (Monterey: Mayreni, 2018), pp. xix–xxx.

[6] The monastery of the Holy Theotokos (*Surb Astuacacin*) at Kʿŕna was situated in the Armenian province of Naxiǰevan, which is today under Azerbaijani rule.

successful in restoring the intellectual appeal of Orthodox theology, thus attracting many intellectually engaged students, and fending off Latin attacks on Armenian theology. The Roman mission, however, had another positive effect. It forced Armenian theology to critically assess its own doctrine and thus inadvertently helped crystallize the identity of Armenian Orthodox doctrine and faith.[7] This intellectual engagement with Western theology through both delineation and integration is the hermeneutical frame crucial for reading and evaluating Tatʿewacʿi's texts.

Mysticism and Rationalism

Another important background of Tatʿewacʿi's work is the connection between mysticism and rationalism. The mystical element of Armenian theology, as in all Orthodox traditions, is deeply shaped by the works of the writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite. The *Corpus Dionysiacum* was translated into Armenian in the early eighth century and developed a strong influence on religious practices and theological thinking. As we will see, Tatʿewacʿi's theology is also fundamentally informed by the Areopagite. A gem of Armenian mysticism is the work of the tenth-century poetic theologian Gregory of Narek (Grigor Narekacʿi), who is one of the most famous and most influential writers in Armenian culture. And finally, prayer and worship are regarded as the route to mystical union with God. Some early medieval theologians described worship as 'deep mystery' (*xorhurd xorin*). These words became the beginning of a thirteenth-century hymn, which now opens the worship of the eucharist, the *Patarag*, like a motto or a heading.

This strong mystical character was from the beginning accompanied by a sharp rationalism. Christianity was initially introduced into a mainly Zoroastrian environment, which remained strong for many centuries.[8] Early Armenian theologians engaged in

[7] Sergio La Porta, 'Armeno-Latin Intellectual Exchange in the Fourteenth Century: Scholarly Traditions in Conversations and Competition', *Medieval Encounters* 21 (2015), pp. 269–94; Tsaghikyan, 'Grigor Tatevatsi and the Sacraments of Initiation', pp. 84–144; David Zakarian, 'Violence in the Monastery: An Episode in the Relations between the Catholic and Apostolic Armenian Clergy in the Fourteenth Century', *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 73 (2021), pp. 79–113.

[8] James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (Harvard Iranian Series, 5; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, 1987); Albert de Jong, 'Armenian and Georgian Zoroastrianism', in Michael Strausberg et al. (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 119–28.

extensive polemics to rebut Zoroastrian beliefs. Some Armenians were educated in Neoplatonic schools, and Greek philosophers were translated into Armenian.[9] Hellenistic philosophy provided argumentative tools to defend Christian ideas and rebut other religions.[10] The need for polemics and apologetics remained vital in Armenian theology over the centuries, due to the rejection of Chalcedon, the arrival of the Latin missionaries, the rise of Islam in neighbouring countries, the emergence of heterodox Christian groups, and many centuries of Islamic rule over Armenia.

Works

Tatʿewacʿi was a prolific writer. Educated not only in his Armenian tradition but also in Greek philosophy, Greek and Syrian Church Fathers, and Latin theology, he made use of all these different traditions to give answers to the issues and questions of his time. He produced a large number of writings in various areas: philosophical commentaries (e.g. on Porphyry, David the Invincible, and Aristotle), biblical commentaries, theological and liturgical works, letters, and sermons.[11]

The most famous of his works is the *Book of Questions* (*Girkʿ Harcʿmancʿ*), a comprehensive exposition of Armenian Orthodox doctrine, composed, as Tatʿewacʿi notes in the introduction, at the request of his students.[12] In the book's colophon, Tatʿewacʿi

[9] The so-called 'Hellenizing School'; see e.g. Valentina Calzolari, 'L'école hellénisante', in Marc Nichanian (ed.), *Âges et usage de la langue arménienne* (Paris: Entente, 1989), pp. 110–30; eadem, 'The Transmission and Reception of the Greek Cultural Heritage in Late Antique Armenia: The Armenian Translations of the Greek Neoplatonic Works', in Francesca Gazzano et al. (eds.), *Greek Texts and Armenian Traditions: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 47–70.

[10] Eznik of Kolb (Eznik Kołbacʿi, fifth century) is famous for his treatise *Against the Heresies* in which he refutes with sharp analysis and logic the religion of Zurvanism, a particular variant of Zoroastrianism.

[11] An overview is given by Mesrob K. Krikorian, 'Grigor Tatʻevacʻi: A Great Scholastic Theologian and Nominalist Philosopher', in Thomas J. Samuelian and Michael E. Stone (eds.), *Medieval Armenian Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Armenian Texts and Studies; Chico: Scholars, 1984), pp. 131–41, at pp. 134–7. Detailed lists can be found in Gevorg Vardapet Karpisyan, 'Grigor Tatʿevacʿi: Erkerə [Gregory of Tatev: The Works]', *Ējmiacʿin* 16/4 (1959), pp. 19–25 and La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 62–74.

[12] *Girkʿ Harcʿmancʿ Ericʿes Eraneal Srboyn Hor Meroy Grigori Tatʿewacʿwoyn* [*Book of Questions of our Very Blessed Holy Father Gregory of Tatev*], ed. Paghtasar Dpir (Constantinople: Astuacatur, 1729), pp. 4–5. The *Book of Questions*, hereafter: BQ, will be cited with the part in Roman numerals, followed by the chapter and paragraph in Arabic numerals, and the number of the question (q.) if there is more than one in the paragraph.

informs the reader that it has been completed in 1397 and that its purpose is to be used for instruction.[13]

The text is meticulously organized, from its macrostructure down to its particular paragraphs and specific arguments. The work is divided into 10 'parts' (*hatorkʿ*) comprising 40 'chapters' (*gluxkʿ*) which are again subdivided into 'paragraphs' (*prakkʿ*).[14] The sections usually contain one or several questions with answers, the arguments of which are often numbered or otherwise structured. Tatʿewacʿi provides various tables of contents. The first is given at the very beginning of the work and lists the 40 chapters. Tatʿewacʿi keeps referring to this table in the chapter headings within the book as the 'great index'. Then every chapter presents again a table of its paragraphs at the beginning. Already this clear exhibition of the book's structure reveals the influence of Western textbooks.[15]

Tatʿewacʿi is often likened to Aquinas and his BQ to Aquinas's *Summa*. However, Tatʿewacʿi's style is not that of the high Scholastic works. His direct assignment of question and answer(s) is not the Scholastic *quaestio* with its succession of arguments, objection, answer, and rebuttal of the arguments. However, its seniority within Armenian theology and Church certainly is comparable to Aquinas's *Summa* in the Roman Catholic Church.

Although the BQ refutes other religions and Christian sects or heretics, its main focus is Western doctrine.[16] As mentioned earlier, Tatʿewacʿi does not simply reject Latin ideas. In fact, his thinking appears so deeply immersed in Western thought that some have criticized him for partially succumbing to it by replacing traditional

[13] BQ, pp. 772–3.

[14] The word *prak* is related to the Greek word *πρᾶξις*, which designated, in Neoplantonic philosophical schools, the 'lesson' of the day. The end of the lesson was marked by stereotyped formulae, such as 'So much on these matters' or similar; Marcel Richard, '*Ἀπὸ φωνῆς*', *Byzantion* 20 (1950), pp. 191–222, at pp. 199–200. Similarly, Tatʿewacʿi often ends longer sections or *prakkʿ* with such a formula, e.g. *ayskʿan aṙ ays*, 'so much on this' (e.g. BQ I.1.4; III.8.10; V.17.27), or a summarizing phrase (e.g. BQ III.8.3). This and the use of the word *prak*, 'lesson', for the paragraphs may underline the origin of the BQ in oral teaching and its nature as a textbook. It also illustrates the influence of Greek philosophy on Armenian theology.

[15] Sergio La Porta, the leading Western scholar of Tatʿewacʿi, stresses that the use of the tables of contents as well as the question-and-answer format are 'modes of textual construction' which were introduced by the Latin writings: La Porta, 'Armeno-Latin Intellectual Exchange', pp. 292–3.

[16] Cf. La Porta, 'Armeno-Latin Intellectual Exchange', p. 291.

Armenian teaching with Western thoughts.[17] Mathieu de Durand believed he saw in Tatʿewacʿi a reluctance towards apophatic theology and considerable deviation from Dionysius in favour of a strong engagement with cataphatic theology.[18] We will see though that Tatʿewacʿi's approach is deeply shaped by the mysticism of his Armenian tradition.

Rational and Mystical Theology in Tatʿewacʿi

Tatʿewacʿi treats the doctrine of God mainly in BQ part III, chapter 8.[19] Part III is entitled 'On the theology of the holy Dionysius', which already highlights the importance of the Areopagite for the following reflections. Tatʿewacʿi explains that theology is 'first divided' into two areas: 'by affirmation' and 'by negation'. This equals the usual differentiation into cataphatic and apophatic theologies. Those two areas of theology are again subdivided into four further types. Tatʿewacʿi calls them: 'typical', 'aetiological', 'symbolic', and 'mystical'.[20] The first three make up cataphatic; the latter, apophatic theology.

Cataphatic Theology

Tatʿewacʿi's division and description of the types follow the third chapter of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*. Here, the Areopagite contrasts the negative theology of his book with affirmative

[17] Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian, *Armenian Church Patristic and Other Essays* (New York: The Armenian Prelacy, 1994), pp. 68–93 (esp. pp. 74, 82, 89–90) and Vigen Guroian, 'Armenian Tradition', in Adrian Hastings et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 39–41, at p. 40 saw his doctrines of the eucharist, confirmation, and baptism compromised by Latin ideas (e.g. original sin, transubstantiation). This criticism has been disproved by Tsaghikyan, 'Grigor Tatevatsi and the Sacraments of Initiation', pp. 145–312 (summary, pp. 313–19).

[18] Mathieu de Durand, OP, 'Une somme arménienne au XIVe siècle', in *Études d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale*, 4e série (Publications de l'Institut d'Études Médiévales de l'Université de Montréal, 19; Montréal: Institut d'Études Médiévales, 1968), pp. 217–77, at pp. 234–6. However, La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', esp. pp. 179–473, has shown the extensive influence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* on the BQ.

[19] Part III contains chapters 8 (on God) and 9 (on angels and demons). Apart from this, BQ I.2.6 provides various proofs of the existence of God, and BQ IV.10.6–8 discusses the application of the 10 Aristotelian categories to God.

[20] BQ III.8.18, pp. 122–3. The translations of chapter 8 are either taken, with occasional minor modification, from La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"' or are mine if La Porta is not cited.

theology which he claims to have outlined in three other books. He thus implies an arrangement of his books which follows the Neoplatonic idea of descent and ascent or *procession* of the divine One into creation (emanation) including the incarnation of the souls and *return* of the souls to their origin in the divine One. Each book is allocated to a specific stage of this movement and hence to a specific category of divine attributions.[21]

Tatʿewacʿi translates this arrangement of books into his four types of theology. La Porta has shown that the types of theology make up the macrostructure of BQ III.8. After some introductory epistemological reflections (prologue of the chapter, §§1–2), Tatʿewacʿi discusses issues in §§ 3–5 which he assigns to 'typical theology', §6 provides a transition, §§7–17 contain material of 'aetiological theology', §§18–19 insert a methodological parenthesis, §§20–25 explore subjects of 'symbolic theology'.[22] The four types mark different starting points within the movement of procession and return from which the theological understanding sets off.

Typical theology

Tatʿewacʿi calls the first type of theology 'typical' (*tpaworakan*), which is not a description of the contents but simply refers to the book Dionysius mentions first, the *Θεολογικαὶ Ὑποτυπώσεις* ('Theological Sketches', in Armenian *astuacabanakan tpaworutʿiwn*).[23] This type of theology, Tatʿewacʿi explains, is 'primary'

[21] Dionysius refers to this arrangement also at the beginning and the end of his *Divine Names*; see DN I.1, 585B and XIII.4, 984A. The first and the third book he mentions are either lost or fictional; see e.g. Paul Rorem, *The Dionysian Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 27–9. For better access I will always cite the location of the Greek version according to Migne but follow the text in *Pseudo-Denys L'Aréopagite: Les Noms divins I–IV*, ed. Ysabel De Andia (SC 578; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2016); *Pseudo-Denys L'Aréopagite: Les Noms divins V–XIII; La Théologie mystique*, ed. Ysabel De Andia (SC 579; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2016); only if relevant will I refer to the Armenian version. The works are cited according to their common abbreviations: DN = *Divine Names*, CH = *Celestial Hierarchy*, MT = *Mystical Theology*.

[22] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 97–101. La Porta assigns §§24–5 to 'mystical theology'. I will develop further below why I think they still belong to 'symbolic theology' and why a separate exposition of mystical theology is missing altogether.

[23] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 98 names the first type of theology 'typological'. However, it has nothing to do with typological interpretation or theological typology, i.e. interpreting 'types' of the Hebrew Bible from 'antitypes' of the New Testament. The adjective *tpaworakan* can be used to render *ἐν τύπῳ* 'in a form, shape', *τυπικός* 'typical', *τυπωτικός* 'figurative' in the *Corpus*

because it 'investigates that which is before eternity and time', namely God's unity, the Trinity, and the incarnation.[24] In the Neoplatonic and Dionysian schema of procession and return, this reflection starts at the highest level with the eternal nature of God and the intra-trinitarian processions as the first stage of the divine emanation. This type of theology, Tatʿewacʿi explains, is 'the most restricted and uses the fewest words'[25] because it is focused on God's simplicity and his inner-trinitarian relations.

In §3, Tatʿewacʿi examines God's oneness in its relation to the differentiation into three.[26] Particularly this paragraph draws heavily from the Aristotelian tradition. Tatʿewacʿi employs concepts such as common and particular, substance, quality, quantity, relation, identity, cause, nature, and essence to clarify the Armenian understanding. For instance, he interprets the theological question of the divine oneness and differentiation into three persons with the concepts of the common and the particular from the Aristotelian tradition. In Aristotle, the common has the priority over the particular. Already the Cappadocian Fathers made use of these concepts to emphasize God's oneness or unity over against the differentiation into three hypostases.[27] Similarly Tatʿewacʿi, who additionally roots the particular in the unity:

Dionysiacum (see Robert W. Thomson, *Indices to the Armenian Version of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: Greek–Armenian and Armenian–Greek* [Dutch studies in Armenian language and literature, 5; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997], p. 124) and is derived from the noun *tip* which is a loan word from Greek *τύπος* (from *τύπτω*, 'to poke, to beat'). The word families of *tip* and *τύπος* contain words such as printing, marking, forming, imprinting, impression, image, sketch, etc. So they denote something made, modelled, or formed according to something else, something secondary and inferior to the original which one would not expect in regard to God or the Trinitarian persons. This indicates that the term *tpaworakan* is not used in a descriptive sense but as a formal reference to Dionysius' book. Also de Durand, 'Une somme arménienne au XIVe siècle', p. 235 simply translates 'théologie "typique"'.

[24] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 163.

[25] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 166.

[26] It has to be noted that Tatʿewacʿi, similar e.g. to Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, does not begin with a separate discussion of the existence and nature of God which often prepends the doctrine of the Trinity in later Western theology; cf. Aquinas, *ST* I qq. 2–5, the last editions of Melanchthon's *Loci Communes*, Lutheran orthodox dogmatics, and modern theological expositions.

[27] Cf. Johannes Zachhuber, *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics: Patristic Philosophy from the Cappadocian Fathers to John of Damascus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), e.g. pp. 27–54, 61–6.

What are unity and differentiation? That is, the common and the particular of the divine? First, it is known that unity creates identity in substance. And unity creates likeness in quality. And unity creates equivalence in quantity. And unity creates particularity in relation. . . . Now, the unity of the Holy Trinity is manifold and clear, especially as everything is in common: nature, will, kingship, etc. But the particularity and differentiation of the hypostases are few.[28]

The paragraphs go on to explain the effect of the incarnation on the inner-trinitarian relations (§4) and the precise meaning of the names 'Trinity', 'Father', 'Son', and 'Holy Spirit' by deconstructing the concepts and developing propositions from this (§5). The style of all the paragraphs is not only very structured but also analytical with an undeterred logical argumentation.

Aetiological theology

The second type Tatʿewacʿi mentions in §18 is 'aetiological' or 'causative' (*patčaṙabanakan*)[29] theology because it derives propositions on God 'from those which are caused': 'having seen the beauty in the creations, we recall and name the cause and the creator'. Tatʿewacʿi calls this type of theology 'second' because it engages with the divine emanation into the realm of time and

[28] BQ III.8.3, p. 104; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 128–9. This explanation of oneness is based upon an idea that goes back to Aristotle, e.g. *Metaphysics* Δ.15, 1021a11–12: 'Those things are the same whose substance is one; those are like whose quality is one; those are equal whose quantity is one.' The idea is often used in Western theology to explain the equality of the Trinitarian persons, e.g. Aquinas, *1 Sent*. D.19 a. 1 co. However, Tatʿewacʿi's wording is very close to a passage in Hugh of Strasburg's *Compendium*. This book was attributed to Albert Magnus and translated into Armenian by the Unitors in 1344. Hugh writes: 'That there is equality . . . in God can be shown thus: . . . unity in substance causes identity, and unity in quality causes similarity, but unity in quantity causes equality.' Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], 'Compendium Theologicae Veritatis', in Auguste Borgnet (ed.), *Summae de Creaturis* (Beati Alberti Magnis Opera Omnia; Paris: Vivès, 1846), pp. 1–306, at p. 15 = Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], *Hamaṙōtutʿiwn Astuacabanutʿean Eraneloyn Mecin Alperti* [*Compendium of theology of the blessed Albert the Great*], trans. Peter of Aragon and Yakob Kṙnecʿi (Venice: Antoni Bortoli, 1715), p. 30.

[29] The adjective *patčaṙabanakan* derives from *patčaṙ*, 'reason, cause', and *ban*, 'word' with the semantic range of the Greek λόγος. Dionysius himself, in DN II.3, 640B calls the divine names of this category αἰτιολογικά, or *patčaṙabanakankʿ* in the Armenian translation. Hence the translation 'aetiological' is appropriate. Cf. La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 163, 316–7; de Durand, 'Une somme arménienne au XIVe siècle', p. 235 translates 'théologie "causative"'.

creation and discusses God as 'the cause of the creation of existent beings'. However, the divine attributions here are abstract or 'intelligible concepts' such as 'good, beauty, light, life, wisdom, and the like'.[30] This corresponds to the second book mentioned in Dionysius' account in MT III, the *Divine Names*, which treats 'the intelligible divine names' as opposed to those taken from the sensual world.[31] Concerning its extent, Tatevatsi explains that this type of theology 'uses more than the first' because it investigates the 'divine names',[32] which are more than the subject of the first type.

In §§7–17, Tatʿewacʿi discusses what can be said about God in relation or comparison with his creation: God as beginning and cause, being and non-being, his uncreated nature and the created nature of his creations, atemporal and eternal in relation to God and to the soul and angels, the differences between divine life and life of the creatures, the differences between divine knowledge and angelic and human understanding. Here too Tatʿewacʿi argues in a structured, analytical, and logical style employing Aristotelian concepts as tools to uncover the meaning and truth of theological propositions on God.

Symbolic theology

The names of God taken from the sensory realm belong to the third type of theology, the 'symbolic' (*nšanakan*) theology. It deals with the transformation of 'sensory forms' to attribute them to God: 'What does it mean [for God] to appear human or a lion, a spring, fire, light, etc.? And: what does it mean that God sleeps, is awake, is angry, is sad?' This type, Tatʿewacʿi explains, is 'third in order' because with it, we enter the realm of 'apparent things and corporeal things'. This is the lowest point of the divine emanation, the realm of material entities which are the most remote from the divine origin and which can be linked to God only by undergoing

[30] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 164.

[31] MT III, 1033A; cf. DN I.8, 597B where Dionysius stresses the book 'aims' at the 'explication of the intelligible divine names' and not at 'forms and figures' taken from the perceptible realm which are part of the symbolic theology. The list of concepts Tatʿewacʿi mentions does not follow Dionysius' account in MT III (good, being, life, wisdom, power) but rather resembles DN II.3, 640B–C (good, beautiful, being, life-giving, wisdom).

[32] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 166.

a transformation, i.e. in a figurative way.[33] This tallies with the third book mentioned in MT III, the *Symbolic Theology*, in which Dionysius claims to have described the 'transformation of names' (*μετωνυμίαι*) from the sensory to the divine to represent God.[34]

According to Tatʿewacʿi, symbolic theology 'uses an even greater and vaster [amount] and [is] more prolix' because it involves the human senses which are 'multiple and divided'. At the 'top' of the Neoplatonic pattern of descent and ascent, theology[35] is focused by meditating God's unity and Trinity, then, descending to the intelligible concepts, becomes 'divided from genus into species', and then, arriving at the bottom, has to deal with the multiplicity of the 'individuals'.[36]

This type of theology occupies §§20–25. Particularly in §20, the tone changes significantly. The logical, analytical, and focused style of the previous paragraphs makes way for a rich, almost abundant symbolic interpretation of the sun as a symbol of God and the Trinitarian persons, linking natural observations with biblical topics. For instance, Tatʿewacʿi interprets the sun's rise, its course from east to west, and its setting:

Similarly the intelligible sun, Christ, in the paternal breast is incomprehensible in nature, and having dawned from the Holy Virgin as from the eastern regions and warm with love, He humbled [= lowered] himself into the mortal nations just as into the west, and enveloped our frozen natures,

[33] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 164.

[34] MT III 1033B; see La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 318–19.

[35] The precise subject of the descending and becoming divided described here is not given. La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 166 relates it to 'one's vision' maybe from BQ III.8.15 q. 2 where Tatʿewacʿi explains about the 'vision of man' that 'intellection descends into the intellected thing which lies before it . . . [and] is both divided and differentiated into many'. However, human vision or intellection is not mentioned here, and in the surrounding sentences, it is theology which is the subject of descending and ascending. This means that Tatʿewacʿi' explains the different subjects of the four types of theology rather than the stages of individual contemplation.

[36] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 164. The replacement of the Platonic ideas with 'genus and species' reveals Tatʿewacʿi's perspective on abstract concepts which is informed by Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*. Both were integral parts of Armenian higher education throughout the Middle Ages. Moreover, Tatʿewacʿi adds an example which is reminiscent of what later commentators on Porphyry termed the 'Porphyrian tree' of genera and species: 'like the trunk of the tree is one, and the branches and leaves are many, likewise also is theology'.

and from the tomb into the heights again he ascended in the east to the Father.[37]

Unlike the exhaustive treatment of divine symbols in Dionysius' *Divine Names*, Tatʿewacʿi offers only an exemplary choice of different sorts of symbolic attributions. In §§21–5, he explains the meaning of certain affections when they are applied to God (ecstasy, jealousy, and love), interprets some biblical symbols, and expounds a patristic metaphor. The style of these paragraphs is also less argumentative and philosophical. Tatʿewacʿi often provides a chain of brief interpretations, frequently underpinned by Scriptural references:

> What is that which [the book of] Revelation says: 'I am the Alpha and O[mega]', which is *ayb* and *kʿe*?[38] – First, this is the intention that *ayb* is first and *kʿe* last; that is, I am first through my divinity, and I am last through my humanity [cf. Isa. 44:6; Rev. 22:13], since man is the last of the creations. Second . . .[39]

Apophatic Theology

Mystical theology and its brief extent in the BQ

The fourth of Tatʿewacʿi's types is 'mystical' (*xorhdakan*) theology. In Dionysius' pattern of procession and return, this type follows the ascent back from the divided multitude of individual corporeal beings to the simplicity and unity of the One, or in

[37] BQ III.8.20, p. 126; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 172. §20 is one of the longest paragraphs of the chapter. It discusses 10 numbered symbols of the Trinity and 20 of Christ. It is, among other aspects, this paragraph which contributes to de Durand's criticism. In his view, Tatʿewacʿi turns, after the inevitability of treating mystical theology in §§18–19, to the affirmative attributions 'avec élan' (de Durand, 'Une somme arménienne au XIVe siècle', p. 236). However, the necessity to set forth the symbolism of the sun to this extent may well be due to Zoroastrianism which survived in some regions for a considerable time (see Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, pp. 515–27). The characteristic of Zoroastrianism was the orientation towards the changing directions of the sun for the daily prayers. The sun was regarded as the embodiment of the warmth, light, and power of the highest god Ahura Mazda. Tatʿewacʿi's interpretation (the course from east to west, his warmth) may be read as an attempt either to reappropriate a central pagan motif in a Christian way or to emphasize over against Western theology a characteristic theme, which filtered into Armenian Christian spirituality from a substrate religion.

[38] The first and the last letter of the Armenian Alphabet.

[39] BQ III.8.24, pp. 129–30; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 177.

Tatʿewacʿi's words, theology 'having abandoned the multitude of beings, courses towards the One'.

La Porta assigns §§24 and 25 to the fourth type of theology. According to him, God's presence in Christ is the 'lowest extension' and the most hidden form of the divine emanation where God is concealed in opposites and thus presents the 'mystery of the Incarnation'.[40] However, it has to be noted that Tatʿewacʿi does not mention anything of this. On the contrary, §25 ('Why is the body of Christ called the feet', a metaphor from Gregory of Nazianzus) explicitly continues the symbolic interpretation stating that 'the two feet *symbolize* (*nšanakē*) the soul and body'.[41] The explanations here result in positive knowledge drawn from corporeal things which, as clarified in §18, must be abandoned altogether in mystical theology. This, along with the previous considerations on their style, makes it more plausible to regard these paragraphs as the conclusion of symbolic theology. Therefore, unlike the three cataphatic types of theology, mystical theology is not treated in a coherent unit of successive paragraphs, rather in a few remarks dispersed across the chapter (§1, §14 q. 5, §18). Why is this the case?

As Tatʿewacʿi explains, rising from the realm of the created beings means also leaving behind the cognitive means appropriate to dealing with them: 'Having abandoned all sensory and intelligible being, we pass mentally into the depths and enter into the cloud and the fog', the cloud or darkness of un-knowing. Since the One 'is completely without reason and . . . without intellection, ineffable, incomprehensible', human understanding and language lack the means to grasp him. As the brief extent of Dionysius' MT shows, the meditation of God in mystical theology has the tersest content of all types. Therefore, Tatʿewacʿi concludes that the One who surpasses everything 'is honoured by the whole creation with silence'.[42] So it is appropriate for this type of theology to possess almost no extent.

[40] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 100.

[41] BQ III.8.24, p. 129; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 177. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45 (the Second Oration on Easter), which meditates on the head of the Passover Lamb as a symbol of Christ's divinity and its feet as a sign of his incarnation (PG 36, col. 645A).

[42] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 165–6. The expression 'honoured with silence' is a quotation of the concluding words of Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*, CH XV.9, 340B; *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], ed. Robert W. Thomson (CSCO 488; Louvain: Peeters, 1987), p. 53.

In the West, it is often the Trinity which is termed a 'mystery'.[43] For Tatʿewacʿi, however, the Trinity is discussed in 'typical theology' and hence part of cataphatic theology. Western theology traditionally refers to Dionysius' apophatism or negative theology as *via negativa,* a means to obtain propositions on God which are, in the end, again positive statements: God is infinite, simple, eternal, etc.[44] In Tatʿewacʿi's account, such negative or privative attributions can be found either in 'typical theology' (§§3 and 6: unity, oneness) or in 'aetiological theology' (§8: non-being; §10: uncreated; §11: atemporal and eternal), which means again that they are part of cataphatic theology. Apophatism, for Orthodox theology in general, is not a way to *know something* by denying or excluding certain aspects from God. It is an *unknowing* by letting go the usual ways of knowing, an understanding by emptying the intellect; God is not only beyond all affirmations but also, as Dionysius stresses, 'above all denial'.[45]

And yet, like Dionysius, Tatʿewacʿi calls mystical theology the 'supreme summit of theology'.[46] How can he say this if he rather keeps silent about it? And what reasons are there to refute de Durand's view that Tatʿewacʿi seeks to escape this subject? We have seen that Tatʿewacʿi agrees with Dionysius on the brief extent of mystical theology due to the nature of its contents. But it is not only the express parts that exhibit the importance of mystical theology for the BQ. As I will show, apophatic theology has an important function for Tatʿewacʿi's cataphatic theology as a whole in that it shapes the underlying epistemology and hermeneutics. Furthermore, it can be shown that Tatʿewacʿi is deeply rooted in the mysticism of his tradition. Before exploring all this, we need to see what mystical theology for Tatʿewacʿi precisely is.

[43] Cf. for instance the first volume of Peter Lombard's *Sentences: Sententiarum liber primus de misterio trinitatis*, or John Gerhard's *Loci Theologici* (1610), Locus III: *De Sanctissimi Trinitatis Mysterio*.

[44] Usually following DN VII.3, 869C–872A and not MT; cf. e.g. Aquinas, *SG* I.14.2; *De Malo* 16.8 ad 3; Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], 'Compendium', p. 19. Luther's criticism of negative theology may not so much reject Dionysius' apophatism as the Western way of using it, which waters down apophatism and turns it into its opposite; cf. Johannes Zachhuber, 'Luther on Dionysius', in Mark Edwards et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 516–34, esp. 521–9.

[45] MT V, 1048B; see Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2005 [English translation first published in 1957]), pp. 23–43.

[46] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; cf. Dionysius, MT I.1, 997A; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 322.

Remarks on mystical theology in the BQ

At the outset of his exposition of the doctrine of God in §1, Tatʿewacʿi draws the attention to a differentiation in regard to God. He points to a 'distinction'[47] between that which is 'ineffable' (*ančaṙeli*) and that which is 'effable' (*čaṙeli*). Effable is God according to his 'participation' in creation, which is described by his 'names'.[48] This is the area of cataphatic theology. But God's essence cannot be approached by discursive knowledge. As Tatʿewacʿi continues at the beginning of §1:

> The word[49] of [God's] nature and essence is ineffable . . . the unparticipated and transcendent distinction of the uncreated is ineffable . . . God is unnameable, since the name reveals the nature, just as 'man', but the nature of God is unrevealed and unknowable.[50]

God is ineffable as far as he transcends his creation. But his transcendence does not only escape human language. The term 'ineffable' is equivalent to 'unknowable' as clarifies the second question of the paragraph: 'Why is the nature of God unknowable?' Even though God's 'participation' is 'radiated forth' and is hence manifest in his creation, his nature remains hidden from human vision. But only if we are able to perceive and understand something, can we capture it in language, enclose what it is in words. And vice

[47] The Armenian word is *orošumn*, 'distinction, division, separation, difference'. This does not of course indicate a separation within God. It refers to the teaching of the Greek Fathers that there is a distinction between God's unknowable essence, which is one, and his knowable energies or δυνάμεις (God's operation or activity), which radiate from his essence and are manifold. This follows Rom. 1:19–20 where Paul stresses that God's δύναμις καὶ θειότης are manifest in the creation and hence knowable. Cf. for instance Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, pp. 67–90.

[48] BQ III.8.1 q. 1, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 126.

[49] The presence of the word *ban*, 'speech, word; reason, understanding, insight', may be explained as a quotation from 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul speaks of 'a man in Christ' (v. 2) who was 'taken into paradise and heard *words unspeakable*' (v. 4), ἄρρητα ῥήματα, in the Armenian version: *bans ančaṙs*. Dionysius refers to this passage in DN VII.1, 865C where he outlines the paradoxical attributions of God: 'Thus the Scripture calls invisible the all-beaming light, and the manifold-praised and many-named ineffable (ἄρρητον/*ancaṙeli*) and unnameable'; *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 193. The terms *ančaṙ* and *ančaṙeli*, 'ineffable', derive from *čaṙ*, 'discourse, narration', and thus correspond to the Greek ἄρρητος.

[50] BQ III.8.1 q. 1 and 2, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 126.

versa, a name or a definition reveals to us its nature.[51] Since 'God's nature is unrevealed', God remains 'unnameable'.[52]

And yet Tatevetsi does not regard cataphatic theology as the only way to know God. He differentiates 'unknowing' (*angitutʿiwn*)[53] from 'ignorance' (*tgitutʿiwn*), which he says is simply 'laziness' and 'darkness of the mind'[54]. God can be 'known through unknowing' when we transcend the manifold created beings through negation towards divine union:

> And there is another unknowing when we open [our] minds to all that has been created, and we do not find him, we gather into one that which is outside of [or: beyond] those things, and in that way God is understood through unknowing.[55]

[51] Tatʿewacʿi draws the reflections on name and nature from David the Invincible (in Armenian: Dawitʿ Anyałt). David writes in the introduction (= lecture 1 in the Greek original) of his *Definitions and Division of Philosophy*: 'What a thing is becomes known to us either through a name or through a definition: through a name when we survey an object and ask: "What is this?" and we answer: "This is a man," and through a definition when we say: "This is a living creature who is rational, mortal, able to think and acquire knowledge."' *David the Invincible Philosopher: Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy. English Translation of the Old Armenian Version with Introduction and Notes*, trans. Bridget Kendall and Robert W. Thomson (Chico: Scholars, 1983), pp. 4–5. This work of the early sixth-century Greek philosopher was translated soon into Armenian and was, like Porphyry's *Isagoge*, part of the curriculum at the Armenian monastic schools; cf. e.g. La Porta, 'Armeno-Latin Intellectual Exchange', p. 289. Also Tatʿewacʿi's teacher Orotnecʿi writes: 'God does not have a name, a revealer of nature, for no one knows God'; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 183–4. Cf. Tatʿewacʿi's *Commentary on Song of Songs* where he (following Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Narek) compares *the* name and the *names* of God: 'the names of all things are vessels and disclosures of nature. But in the case of God names do not show nature because He is unsearchable; but through names we come a little bit to the knowing of God, as by scent to the oil. And seeing the creatures as vapour we understand the Creator though his nature is unseen.' St Grigor Tatevatsi, 'Commentary on Songs of Songs', in Z. Grigoryan (ed.), *Commentary on the Books of Solomon*, trans. Khachik Grigoryan (Yerevan: Ankyunacar, 2012), pp. 146–209, at p. 153.

[52] BQ III.8.1ʿq. 2, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 126. For the dichotomy of God's 'names' and the unknowable 'name', see also DN I.6–7, 596A–C.

[53] The term *angitutʿiwn* means literally 'un-knowledge' and corresponds to the Greek *ἀγνωσία*.

[54] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 184 connects this with John of Scythopolis' *Scholia* on DN: 'Not knowing in an ignorant manner . . . is darkness of the soul.' Similarly, John of Damascus writes: 'Knowledge (*γνῶσις*) is [the] light of the logical soul. The opposite, ignorance (*ἄγνοια*), is darkness.' *Fons Scientiae* 1 (PG 94, col. 529A).

[55] BQ III.8.1 q. 3, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 126.

In §14 Tatʿewacʿi specifies that for this unknowing the mind has to be 'detached from all things which have come into being, even from itself'. He clarifies further what of God can be 'seen' and what remains in principle and forever 'unknowable':

> The divine essence, according to which nature is, 'what it is' or 'what sort of thing it is', is unknowable to us in this and in the future world. Nevertheless, the 'if it is',[56] according to which God is, is seen in two ways, namely through knowledge and through unknowledge, by affirming and negating.[57]

Here Tatʿewacʿi differentiates the unknowing related to God. It is God's being (the 'if he is') that can be seen through unknowing, but God's essence remains hidden forever, even when the faithful rise to life with God after their deaths.

Does this contradict §1 where Tatʿewacʿi suggests that 'God is understood through unknowing'? It is elucidating to see that Tatʿewacʿi's explanations follow Dionysius. The latter explains in

[56] For David the Invincible, these questions are part of the 'four basic questions' through which philosophy gains knowledge of something: 'Is it? What is it? What sort of thing is it? Wherefore is it?'; *David the Invincible Philosopher*, pp. 2–3. Like Tatʿewacʿi David uses them also in a nominalized form (e.g. *τὸ εἰ ἔστιν*, *τὸ τί ἐστι*, lect. 1 in the Grreek version = *etʿēēn, zinčēn*, introduction in the Armenian version, *David the Invincible Philosopher*, p. 4). They were inspired by Aristotle, *Analytica posterior* II, 89b25 and were used at Neoplatonic schools in 'a general introduction to philosophy' which prepared for the study of Aristotle; Calzolari, 'The Transmission and Reception of the Greek Cultural Heritage', pp. 55–6. Interestingly, in his *Oskepʿorik* (written in 1401), Tatʿewacʿi modifies the assignment of the questions slightly. After emphasizing that only two of these four questions are applicable to God, he points out that 'if God is' is 'askable and credible' in this life', and 'the what sort of thing is he?' can be 'seen in the future [life]'. But 'the what is he?' can be known 'not here and not in the future [life] because the nature of God is unseeable by angels and by humanity'. The fourth question, however, does not make sense in relation to God because 'who shall name the cause of the cause of all?'; Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Girkʿ or kočʿi Oskepʿorik* [*Book which is called Golden Belly*] (Constantinople: Abraham Dpir, 1746), pp. 23–5. Cf. Meyran Zakaryan, 'Surb Grigor Tatʿevacʿin Astvacabanutʿean Masin [The holy Gregory of Tatev about Theology]', *Astvacabanakan ev kronagitakan hodvacneri žołovacu* [*Collection of Theological and Catechetical Articles*] 3 (2020), pp. 38–55, at p. 43. The version in the *Oskepʿorik* resembles a passage in Hugh of Strasburg's *Compendium*, which mentions only three of the questions: 'for in this life, we can know that God is, and in the above region we shall know what sort he is, but never, not here and not in the future [world], what he may be'; Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], *Hamaṙōtutʿiwn*, I.16, p. 36 = Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], 'Compendium', I.16, p. 18.

[57] BQ III.8.14 q. 5, p. 119.

DN VII.3 first 'that we know God not from his own nature' but from being the cause of the ordered creation. But then he stresses that God is also 'recognized' through 'unknowing' (*angitutʿiwn*) which is achieved through the 'unity superior to mind when the mind stands apart from all things'[58]—that is when the mind abandons its natural ability to form conceptual understandings and turns to the divine unity. Likewise, Tatʿewacʿi names the divine union as the source of ultimate knowledge of God. In §14 he describes the 'seeing' of God through unknowing: the mind 'having abandoned itself . . . is united to the divine radiance, which is the inscrutable light and wisdom'.[59] Unknowing allows us to approach God and encounter the one and transcendent God himself. And yet, this 'knowing' is not like the knowing which is natural to our mind, as Tatʿewacʿi clarifies in §18:

> when having abandoned all sensory and intelligible beings, we pass mentally into the depths and enter into the cloud [Exod. 19:9] and fog [Exod. 20:21] like Moses, and then we see Him separated out from all beings. For He is neither body, nor soul, nor mind, nor [any] other thing which we know or understand. And then we say [He is] unreachable, inscrutable, ineffable. He is incomprehensible and hidden, not only to us but also to any type of intellection. Just as the prophet says: 'He made darkness his covering' [Ps. 17:12 LXX].[60]

Knowing God through unknowing is nothing more than seeing in 'cloud and fog'. God's nature remains hidden and in darkness even when we see him in mystical union. This way yields a knowledge which is not knowledge and can only be described in paradoxical expressions: 'to comprehend the incomprehensible incomprehensibility, to envision the invisible through unvision'.[61]

[58] DN VII.3, 872A–B; *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 196; *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Translation*], ed. Robert W. Thomson (CSCO 489; Louvain: Peeters, 1987), pp. 139–40.

[59] BQ III.8.14 q. 5, p. 119; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 158.

[60] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 164. The translation and numbering of the psalms in the Armenian Bible follow the Septuagint. The vision of Moses at Mount Sinai is a common motif in patristic and Orthodox theology; see e.g. *Grégoire de Nysse: La Vie De Moïse*, ed. Jean Daniélou (SC 1 ter; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), II.152–170, 372C–380B, pp. 202–17.

[61] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 165.

This is a knowing beyond the way our mind naturally knows, that is, by comprehending the nature of a thing and designating it through names, concepts, and definitions. Through 'unknowing' humans can encounter God and experience him in mystical union—but this still leaves them without a concept, a name, or a definition. They still cannot grasp God entirely so that they could name his nature. As Vladimir Lossky cautions: 'If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him.'[62]

The Incongruity of Human Knowledge and God

The presentation of mystical theology has already shed some light on the important role of epistemology in Tatʿewacʿi's approach. So how precisely does this shape his understanding of human knowledge?

In §1 q. 2 Tatʿewacʿi elucidates his suggestion that we cannot know God's 'nature and essence' (q. 1) by pointing to the fundamental inappropriateness of human cognition. He presents two arguments. First, he points to the difference between Creator and created beings. The latter are created and hence limited, or literally 'measured', but God is uncreated and thus unlimited or 'unmeasured'. This is a fundamental incommensurability: 'The measured cannot measure the unmeasure.'[63] The limited mind cannot hold the unlimited divine nature. Second, Tatʿewacʿi stresses that 'the vision of the mind is equal to the existence of essence', that is, to the created beings. However, the 'nature' of those beings is, as Tatʿewacʿi has just argued, limited, and so therefore is 'also mental comprehension' which equals them. From those premisses

[62] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 25. Lossky seems to allude to Augustine's *Sermo* 52.4.16: *si comprehendere potuisti, aliud pro Deo comprehendisti* (PL 38, col. 360).

[63] BQ III.8.1 q. 2, p. 103. Dionysius describes how God, to make himself comprehensible to human mental abilities, 'separates through measure the unmeasure'; DN I.1 (588A); *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 128. Tatʿewacʿi's argument follows a patristic idea; cf. for instance Gregory of Nyssa: 'In the human nature, there is no ability for the precise understanding of God's essence (*οὐσία*). . . . Because great and impassable [is] the gap through which the uncreated nature (*φύσις*) is separated from the created being (*οὐσία*). This one is limited, that one has no limit; this one is enclosed by the specific measure according to what pleased the Maker's wisdom, yet the measure of that one is infinity.' *Contra Eunomium* II.67, 69, 70, ed. Wernerus Jaeger (Gregorii Nyssenii Opera, 1; Leiden: Brill, 1960), pp. 245–6.

Tatʿewacʿi concludes: 'Thus it is clear that that which is above being (*ēutʿiwn* = Greek *οὐσία*) is above knowledge.'[64]

But Tatʿewacʿi is keen to protect God's unknowability against misunderstandings. As we have seen, he stresses in §1 qq. 3 and 4 that unknowing does not mean ignorance, which he contrasts with the 'pure knowledge' of the ascent 'towards the supernal'.[65] In §2 he additionally seems to fend off the suspicion of scepticism when he asks: 'What is peace [or: tranquillity] of mind?' This was the central question of the Pyrrhonists, the Greek sceptics who answered it by rejecting the reflection on all non-evident matters: 'tranquillity follows on suspension of judgement'.[66] Against this, Tatʿewacʿi parallels the 'delight' of the 'vision of the eyes' with the 'vision of the mind' which finds its 'delight' in meditating on e.g. the 'incorporeal', the 'supernals', the 'intelligible', or 'theology'.[67]

So humans can know and should seek to know God but, according to Tatʿewacʿi, this knowledge relies on specific conditions and has a particular epistemological value. In the prologue of BQ III.8 Tatʿewacʿi outlines a threefold hierarchy of knowledge which positions the knowledge of God over against the knowledge of the created world:

It is necessary to know that the contemplation of sense objects is below reason, and the investigation of intelligibles is within the realm of reason, but theology is above reason.

[64] BQ III.8.1 q. 2, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 126. Tatʿewacʿi follows Dionysius, DN I.4, 593A (cf. La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 183): 'If all knowledge is of beings (*τῶν ὄντων*) and has [its] limits in the beings (*τὰ ὄντα*) the "beyond all essence" (*ἡ πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα*) is also excepted of all knowledge.' The expression *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας* (*οὐσία* as the whole of all beings) was coined by Plato, *Respublica* VI, 509b8. Dionysius' idea is also rooted in patristic thought; cf. again Gregory of Nyssa: 'A certain measure and limit of the human reasoning seems to be the world and the things within it, yet that which lies beyond it remains incomprehensible and inaccessible, clear from all that can come under human apprehension.' *Contra Eunomium* I.368, pp. 135–6.

[65] BQ III.8.1 q. 3–4, pp. 103–4; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 126–7.

[66] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (LCL 273; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), I.XII.31, p. 20. The philosophy of Pyrrhonism is refuted in David the Invincible's *Definitions and Divisions* and was hence known in medieval Armenia. David points out that, for the Pyrrhonists, 'being is unknowable'; *David the Invincible Philosopher*, pp. 6–7. Tatʿewacʿi mentions the Pyrrhonists (*pihṙonacʿikʿ*) in BQ V.17.27 q. 2, p. 269.

[67] BQ III.8.2, p. 104; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 127–8. David similarly stresses the 'delights' of philosophy, *David the Invincible Philosopher*, pp. 3–4.

The first level is, as Tatʿewacʿi often calls it, the 'vision of the senses' (e.g. §16 q. 2), particularly the 'vision of the eyes' (e.g. §2) which is aimed at the perception of 'visible things, such as a stone'. The second level is the activity of reason or the 'vision of the mind' (e.g. §16 q. 2) which 'forms likenesses and abstracts [them], such as white'; reason can even get so far that it 'investigates the intelligibles, such as angels'. The third level is then the 'highest part of intellection' through which 'one is extended to the divine things' supported by the 'light of faith' and 'Holy Scriptures'.[68] The description of this level—the passive verbs and the need for external support—already indicates that this knowledge is different from the first two. The difference becomes clearer in one of Tatʿewacʿi's sermons which presents an elaborated exposition of the threefold hierarchy. Tatʿewacʿi explains that the second level, here called the 'mind', 'is too weak for seeing God' and points again to the difference between created and uncreated, limited and unlimited, and to the fact that knowledge is bound to created beings: the 'knowledge of the mind follows the nature of things and sees nothing above nature, since where nature is not reached also the mind is not reached'. This is the 'natural light' of our soul, the knowledge of the philosophers many of whom 'were not able to understand God' despite all their knowledge.[69] Since God is not a created being, which the mind can capture, he is invisible to the mind. Human knowledge, one could say, finds itself confronted by what Gregory of Nyssa called an impassable gap.[70] Yet there is the third way to perceive or to know: 'But faith, for it has come from

[68] BQ III.8 prologue, p. 103; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 125. The whole prologue follows Hugh of Strasburg's *Compendium* I.16: *De incomprehensibilitate Dei*; Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], *Hamaṙōtutʿiwn*, p. 37 = Albertus Magnus [Hugh Ripelin of Strasburg], 'Compendium', p. 19. Tatʿewacʿi combines the last two paragraphs of the chapter into one and adapts them to his own thought.

[69] Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Girkʿ Kʿarozutʿean or kočʿi Amaṙan Hator* [*Book of Preaching which is called Summer Volume*] (Constantinople: Abraham Dpir, 1741), pp. 72–3. The sermon is partially quoted and translated in La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 179–81 and fully translated in *Gregory of Tatev: Homilies. Seventy Homilies From the "Book of Homilies which is Called Summer Volume"*, trans. Vatche Ghazarian (Monterey, California: Mayreni, 2018), pp. 110–17. In his *Oskepʿorik* though, Tatʿewacʿi suggests that reason can at least come to the conclusion that there is a God, as Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers show; Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Oskepʿorik*, p. 29. In the BQ, Tatʿewacʿi stresses that 'rational investigation' alone in matters of faith leads to 'heresy'; BQ III.8.17 q. 3, p. 122.

[70] See above, n. 63.

God to us, is capable to see and understand God.'[71] This is not a natural capacity of human cognition, but the latter is illuminated by faith and thus becomes enabled to see God. Tatʿewacʿi points to the definition of faith by the 'doctors' of the church: 'Faith is the illumination of the mind, poured from the first light into the rational person, to know the spiritual goods.'[72]

Now, how does faith illuminate the mind? Tatʿewacʿi describes faith by quoting Heb. 11:1: 'What is faith if not the firmness in things hoped and the conviction of things which do not show themselves?' And he explains, echoing Dionysius, that 'faith is the firm steadfastness which joins the truth to man, and man to the truth.'[73] Faith is the participation in God's absolute, immutable, and all-encompassing Truth, the certainty of God, as he is testified in the Holy Scripture as the loving Creator of all, the giver of good, and the guarantor of the future life. Illuminated by this truth, the mind can turn to creation and learn about its Creator through its natural cognition. God makes himself known through creation, as Dionysius often explains: God 'in conformity with our ability . . . hides things intelligible in sensory matters and supreme things in existing things, and imposes forms and designs on things formless and shapeless'.[74] Tatʿewacʿi follows this idea when he explains, in the prologue of BQ III.8, that we, 'confirmed through the light of faith and the testimony of the Holy Scriptures' and 'according to [our cognitive] ability . . . are enlightened to explain the inexplicable' (*čařel zančařen*).[75]

The idea is reiterated in §14 q. 5. As we have seen, Tatʿewacʿi follows DN VII.3, yet with some revealing modifications. He asks

[71] This argument is based on the ancient philosophical principle 'like is known through like', quoted for instance in Aristotle, *De anima* I.2, 404b18 and *Metaphysica* III.4, 1000b6, but reaching back as far as Parmenides and Empedocles.

[72] Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Amařan Hator*, p. 72. Cf. BQ V.27, p. 269: the 'light of faith' is 'an outpouring from God towards the understanding of man'. The quote from the 'doctors' corresponds to a passage by William of Auxerre (1140/50–1231), who ascribes it to Augustine: *Sicut dicit Augustinus, fides est illuminatio mentis quia illuminatur mens a prima luce sive a vera luce ad vivendum bona spiritualis*. *Summa Aurea in Quattuor Libros Sententiarum* (Paris: Philippe Pigouchet, 1500), III.3.2 q. 3, fol. 135ʳ.

[73] Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Amařan Hator*, p. 71; DN VII.4, 872C. Cf. BQ III.8.17 q. 2, p. 121; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 312.

[74] DN I.4, 592B; *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 132; [*Translation*], p. 92. Cf. DN I.1, 588A and VII.3, 872A.

[75] BQ III.8 prologue, p. 103.

the question: 'How do we see God, through intellection or through sensation?' This seems to be inspired by Dionysius' opening question: 'how [do] we know God who is neither intelligible nor sensible nor at all in accordance with beings?' Dionysius answers this question by setting forth the ascent from the 'ordering of all things' displaying 'some images and likenesses of his divine paradigms' which elevates us 'to that which is beyond all . . . to the cause of all' and concludes from this, that 'God is recognized both in all and apart from all; and he is recognized through knowledge and through unknowing'.[76] Echoing this, Tatʿewacʿi explains:

> [God] is seen in two ways, namely through knowledge and through unknowledge, by affirming and negating in this manner: First, by gazing at forms and likenesses which is the order of the created beings, and through these ascending to their paradigm, and through the same again ascending to the archetype of the paradigm. And in this manner to see that God is the cause of all. Second, also in this manner God is seen, when the mind is separated from all.[77]

Tatʿewacʿi modifies the biblical 'images' to the Aristotelian 'forms'[78] and then replaces the 'paradigms', the Platonic ideas, with *the* paradigm, the one idea or thought of God which contained the whole creation at the beginning and which Tatʿewacʿi identifies with the *Logos*, the Son.[79] *He* (the paradigm) is the one who allows the faithful to ascend from the *knowledge* (the forms) of the created to the Creator. As we have seen, Tatʿewacʿi holds that neither the 'vision of the senses' nor the 'vision of the mind' is able to reach God on their own, but that this is possible when they are

[76] DN VII.3, 869C–872B, *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], pp. 196–7; [*Translation*], p. 139.

[77] BQ III.8.14 q. 5, p. 119. The passage shows in an exemplary way how Tatʿewacʿi usually turns the rather meditative style of Dionysius into a structured sequence of arguments.

[78] The expression 'images and likenesses' in Dionysius quotes of course Gen. 1:26; however, the term 'likenesses' has also a philosophical dimension: *ὁμοιώματα* are the mental representations of real things in Aristotle's thought; in Plato it expresses the relation of individual things and universal forms; cf. Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* I, 16a4–9. Plato's view can be found in his *Parmenides*, 132a12–133a3; however, there is no evidence that there was a translation of this dialogue at Tatʿewacʿi's time.

[79] Thus Tatʿewacʿi avoids talking of a multiplicity in God and adds a Christological element to the Neoplatonic scheme; see BQ III.8.9, pp. 112–13; cf. La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 107–8, 303–4.

illuminated by the 'light of faith'. The Christological modification is the answer to the initial question: we can know God through sensation and intellection when they are enlightened by faith, that is, we can perceive God by understanding our perception of the creation through Christ.

So there are two major ways of 'seeing' God through faith. The first is *through* the mind, the human cognitive tool to know the created beings to which the 'divine things' are adapted. This is the area of cataphatic theology, and this background elucidates why Tatʿewacʿi is able to employ the tools of this cognition and the 'knowledge of the mind', which the philosophers possess, to understand and explain its theological topics in a strictly rational way.[80] The second way is by *abandoning* the mind, the way of apophatic theology, which Dionysius terms 'the most divine knowledge of God' and Tatʿewacʿi the 'vision' of the 'perfected like the prophets and the apostles', the 'luminous and radiant vision of faith'.[81]

In his sermon, Tatʿewacʿi calls faith the 'light of grace' which is superior to the 'natural light' of the mind but inferior to the 'light of glory'. Through faith, the prophets, apostles, and faithful can see God through knowing and unknowing—this knowledge is true, yet, as St Paul says, a mere 'reflection' (1 Cor. 13.12). Only the 'light of glory' will provide a knowing from 'face to face', as St Paul names it, which the angels and blessed saints possess.[82] And yet, even this knowledge will never be an understanding of God's nature: 'He is incomprehensible and hidden, not only to us but to any type of intellection.'[83]

Language

The prologue and §1 of BQ III.8 present a frame, a big bracket or motto, for all the following explanations in terms of epistemology.

[80] In BQ III.8.14 q. 5, p. 119, Tatʿewacʿi calls the 'vision' from this way 'natural' since it relies on the natural abilities of the mind. Hence Zakaryan, 'Surb Grigor Tatʿevacʿin Astvacabanutʿean Masin', p. 46 appropriately calls Tatʿewacʿi's cataphatic theology 'natural theology', which is, obviously, not to be confused with the Western concept of 'natural theology'.

[81] DN VII.3, 872A; BQ III.8.14 q. 5, p. 119; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 158.

[82] Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Amaṙan Hator*, p. 73. Cf. the *Oskepʿorik*: the 'what sort of thing is it' in regard to God can be known in the afterlife; Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Oskepʿorik*, pp. 24–5.

[83] BQ III.8.18, p. 122; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 164.

Now, this has implications for the language used to describe the knowledge of the divine. If limited human cognition cannot hold the unlimited divine, the same is true for human language. Tatʿewacʿi is aware of what we today would call hermeneutical issues. This becomes clear through his reflection on the meaning of words in relation to God and through the way he applies philosophical and ordinary language to God.

In §14 Tatʿewacʿi very clearly outlines the change of meaning which words undergo when attributed to God. Discussing the question 'How does God see beings, for he does not have sensation, as *we* see the intelligibles with interior sensation and the visibles with exterior sensation?',[84] he specifies what it means to attribute to God a 'lack of mind and sense',[85] literally 'un-mind and un-sense' (the common meaning of the words would be the adjectives 'mad and insensible'):

> Without mind [or: mad] and without sense [or: insensible] which we say of God are applicable not according to deficiency but according to excellence. As when we say without reason ['un-reason' or, commonly, 'irrational'] and 'foolishness' [it means] to have reason and wisdom [more] excellent than ours. And when we say 'to empty' it signifies greater power. And to become 'weak' on the cross [signifies] his greater power, and so on. In the same manner, also saying without mind and without sense signifies the excellent.[86]

In falling back upon St Paul and Dionysius, Tatʿewacʿi develops the privative forms as negations of *human* and hence limited mind, sense, power, and wisdom. The attribution of words follows a special method, and thus the words are to be understood in a special way. One could term this way of understanding a hermeneutics of supereminence or transcendence: the negation of mind in relation

[84] BQ III.8.14 q. 3, p. 118.
[85] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 156.
[86] BQ III.8.14 q. 3, p. 118. The terms 'foolishness' and 'weak' allude to 1 Cor. 1:25 where Paul interprets them as 'wiser than human wisdom' and 'stronger than human strength'; the expression 'to empty' refers to Phil. 2:7 and the doctrine of kenosis. As the words for 'excellence' and 'excellent' are often used to denote the Christian idea of transcendence, they can also be translated as 'transcendence' and 'transcendent', which La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 156 does, maybe following Thomson in *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Translation*], p. 138, who translates the literal parallels in DN VII.2, 869A by employing the term 'transcendence'.

to God does not mean madness or foolishness but a superabundance of mind.

Tatʿewacʿi's awareness of such hermeneutical questions is rooted in the tradition he relies on. In §14 he follows Dionysius by combining passages from DN VII.1 and VII.2.[87] DN VII.1 contributes St Paul's understanding of 'foolishness' and 'weak' to Tatʿewacʿi's explanations but also sheds some light on Dionysius' thoughts on language. Dionysius introduces the privative forms as a special form of theological language relating to God: 'it is also the custom for theologians instead of comprehending God to say of what things we are deprived.'[88] Ordinary language obtains a different meaning when related to the divine. This matches the general rule which Dionysius establishes at the beginning of DN where he introduces the 'law of the Scripture' that the biblical attributions of God are not to be understood according to human wisdom but according to the inspired power of the biblical authors 'by which we are united in an ineffable and unknowable way to the ineffable and unknowable', a union which surpasses 'our logical and intellectual potentials and activities'.[89] This union is the appropriate framework for the biblical attributions of God and has hence to guide our understanding of them. This hermeneutical background also guides Tatʿewacʿi's treatment of language.

Furthermore, human words and philosophical concepts denoting worldly objects are limited in their capacity to describe the divine. In §5, Tatʿewacʿi discusses the question 'Why do we say Trinity?' by exploring the meanings of the number three and what they could tell us about the Trinity. He analyses the meanings

[87] The Armenian version of the passage taken from DN VII.2, 869A reads: 'one must understand divine things in a divine manner. For without mind and without sense is applicable to God according to excellence [or: transcendence] and not according to deficiency', *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 195; cf. La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 298–9.

[88] *The Armenian Version of the Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite* [*Text*], p. 193; [*Translation*], p. 137. The Armenian version somewhat distorts and flattens the Greek text which reads: 'it is custom for the theologians to deny by having reversed [*ἀντιπάσχω*, 'to retaliate, reverse'] in regard to God the [things] of the privation', i.e. to negate the normal usage of privations; DN VII.1, 865B. So Dionysius stresses that privations relating to God are not to be understood in the usual way. Cf. MT I.2, 1000B: 'and not to believe that the negations contradict the affirmations but that [God], [being] more superior, is beyond the privation, beyond both denial and proposition.'

[89] DN I.1, 585B–588A.

philosophically and then shows that they render intelligible some aspects of the Trinity but also contain aspects which are not applicable: 'And we call it Trinity to differentiate it from the number three.'[90] So the meaning of words is always applicable up to a certain limit:

> Q.: Why is He called Father? A.: Since He is the source and the beginning from which everything emanates.
> Q.: Why is he called Son? A.: Since just as a beam of light from the sun, the Son also was begotten by the Father.
> Q.: Why is He not called mother from the female gender? A.: Because an offspring proceeds originally from the father.
> Q.: Why is He not named daughter? A.: Because a son resembles the father more than a daughter.[91]

A word, a philosophical concept, or philosophical analysis of words serves to highlight an essential aspect, but they are not to be taken literally and never correspond fully to the divine reality. Importantly, the knowledge of God which Tatʿewacʿi introduces is generally not derived from the philosophical analysis. It is theology, or faith, which determines what we know of God; human words and philosophy are tools to express it, but they are blunt tools, providing us with words and concepts which are applicable to the divine only in a limited sense.

Language faces the difficulty of expressing something it actually cannot express. Therefore, religious speech sometimes resorts to paradoxical formulations or logical impossibilities. In §11 Tatʿewacʿi explores the biblical attribution of 'ancient of days' (Dan. 7:9) to God. After a semantic analysis of the expression and a discussion as to how it can be applied to God, he stresses that it unites logical opposites: 'It is to be known that by saying "ancient", it signifies eternal; and "day" [signifies] time.' And not

[90] BQ III.8.5 q. 1, p. 107; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 135. One example is 'that the number is an accidental quantity and knowable to us; whereas in the Trinity, there is neither quantity, nor measure, nor accident, nor is it knowable to the created mind', BQ III.8.5 q. 1, p. 108; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 136.

[91] BQ III.8.5 qq. 3–8, p. 109; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 137–8. This passage is taken from Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium sive Dialogus de Summa Totius Christianae Theologiae* 1.2 (PL 172, col. 1111A–B), but it is a pronounced example of what can be found throughout Tatʿewacʿi's cataphatic theology.

only is the expression in itself paradoxical but also other scriptural attributions seem to collide with it: 'Daniel saw [Him as] "ancient of days" and old . . . whereas Abraham (Gen. 18.3) [saw Him as] a youth, as Philo says, "the three men were three youths".'[92] Language reaches its limit when it comes to describing God and has to break its own rules to at least touch the true divine reality from afar.

Dionysius warns not to fall for the literal sense of words when divine things are 'wrapped into the familiar form of our perception'. Since our intellect is aimed at the intellection of worldly beings, it can only grasp 'the things beyond itself' when elevated beyond itself by divine union:

> According to this [union] the divine things are to be understood not according to us, but by entirely abandoning ourselves and becoming entirely of God . . . For thus shall be given the divine things to those who become with God.[93]

Also for Tatevatsi the correct hermeneutical frame to understand words describing God is not the horizon of worldly beings, but the horizon of transcendence.

Practised Faith

It should be borne in mind that the *Book of Questions*, like most of Tatʿewacʿi's writings, are not pieces of practised faith. Even Tatʿewacʿi's sermons were apparently not addressed to normal congregations but to his students as instructive examples.[94] Tatʿewacʿi was focused on academic education. He sought to equip his students for defending the identity of Armenian doctrine against external threats, particularly from the Unitors and Latin theology, and to satisfy the intellectual demand of his time. Therefore, his writings seem not to provide much insight into his

[92] BQ III.8.11 q. 3, pp. 114–15; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 150.

[93] DN VII.1, 865C–868A; cf. MT I.2, 1000A–B against those who are caught in worldly beings and think they can understand God, 'who made darkness his hiding place' (Ps. 17.12 LXX), through their own knowledge of those worldly beings, or even those who 'characterize' the divine 'with [words for] the lowest beings' and believe the 'all transcending cause' to be just like this.

[94] Vatche Ghazarian, 'Preface', in *Gregory of Tatev: Homilies. Seventy Homilies from the "Book of Homilies which Is Called Summer Volume"*, pp. xiii–xvi, at p. xv. For the BQ cf. its introduction and colophon as mentioned above.

spiritual life. However, the majority of his writings have not yet been explored; many works have not even been printed. It may well be that some of them contain clearer and broader references to his mystical experience. In this article I can only point to some observations which may be understood as traces of Tatʿewacʿi's spiritual life.

Tatʿewacʿi was immersed in his Church's devotion, which is deeply informed by the mystical tradition. As a monk and a priest, he took part daily in the eucharist, called the *Patarag*, and the liturgy of the hours. The rites, prayers, and hymns convey a mystical spirituality which is hard to evade if one does not actively distance oneself from it. Moreover, in Armenian theology, the sacraments are regarded as the place of the divine union.[95] Therefore, standing before God 'in awe'[96] was Tatʿewacʿi's day-to-day experience. This implies that he knew well the spiritual dimensions when he writes about the 'divine radiance, which is the inscrutable light and wisdom' (§14 q.5), God's darkness when we 'enter the cloud and fog like Moses', the paradoxical way 'to comprehend the incomprehensible incomprehensibly, to envision the invisible through un-vision', and the 'silence' with which the whole creation honours whom it cannot comprehend (§18).

Apart from this, there are some passages in his sermons which provide glimpses of spiritual experience—Tatʿewacʿi's own experience and how he guides others into such an experience. In a sermon on the eucharist and John 6:52, he transforms the liturgy into a performative space in which the faithful participate in the divine realm. Interpreting the 'forms and rites of the Sacrament, lections and so on', he writes:

[95] Grigor Narekatsʿi writes for instance about the eucharist in his *Book of Lamentations:* 'to become God by election of the grace, and to be united with you, Creator, by consumption of your lordly body, and with your light of life by incorporation'; Grigor Narekatsʿi, *Matean Ołbergutʿean* [*Book of Lamentation*] (Jerusalem: Apostolic See of St. James, 1868), prayer 52, p. 204; cf. Abraham Terian, 'Gregory of Narek', in Ken Parry (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), pp. 278–92, at pp. 288–90. Alluding to the passage from Narekatsʿi's prayer, Tatʿewacʿi writes about the Holy Communion that it 'communicates [= imparts] us to [God's] grace and the mysteries of the church'; Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Amaṙan Hator*, p. 153.

[96] The expression is often found in Orthodox theology. It relates to a proclamation in the anaphora of the Divine Liturgy which opens the eucharistic prayer: 'Let us stand in awe!' It is also part of the *Patarag: ahiw hacʿcʿukʿ*, 'with awe we shall stand'.

When the priest descends from the altar[97] into the entire church and incenses and returns; . . . it signifies the sweet-scented brightness, which descends from God . . . to the intelligible classes of angels, and to the rational ones, [which is] humanity, and to animals, and to the last, [which is only] existence. . . . And the sung introit signifies the angels' voice, [which is] incomprehensible to us. And the hymn [signifies] the chants of the apostles, which were begun by the prophets. . . . Then the psalm according to the proper day. And it is to know that the psalm is sung at all times, in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, furthermore in all sacraments . . . And [the psalm] has all [of the Scripture] in it, of the past, of the present, and of the future. . . . But the Alleluia is the chant of the angels, who are the messengers of the arrival of the Word. . . . And see that everywhere a psalm is paired with the Alleluia, so that the chants of the angels and humanity intermingle together.[98]

Tatʿewacʿi describes the whole worship as a visible guide to the invisible. The liturgical actions, the smell, and the music address the senses, but Tatʿewacʿi guides the listeners to transcend them towards the invisible, inaudible, ineffable divine. The sermon becomes a mystagogical explanation as to how the *Patarag* leads through the visible and sensible to the invisible God. And in this way, the worship itself becomes mystagogy.[99]

Another sermon which also creates such an experiential space preaches about 'going to Jerusalem' according to Isa. 2:3. Tatʿewacʿi begins by talking about the 'desire' of the visible for the invisible, which leads him to the need of humans for God. But as embodied beings, he points out, humans are led to the spiritual only through the visible. Therefore, he directs his audience to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, from which he proceeds by typological and spiritual interpretation through 'our inner doors' to the 'upper Jerusalem, which is our wonderful mother'. He takes his audience along on an imaginative

[97] Literally 'from the bema (*bem*)', the area in front of the altar.

[98] Sermon no. 34, Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Amaṙan Hator*, pp. 153–4.

[99] Tatʿewacʿi stands in a long Orthodox tradition which interprets the building of the church as well as the liturgy as symbols through which the believers perceive God and salvation history, e.g. Germanus of Constantinople's *On the Divine Liturgy* (seventh/eighth century) or Grigor Narekatsʿi's *Book of Lamentation*. For the Armenian tradition cf. Sergio La Porta, 'The Reception and Influence of the Corpus of Works Attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite in the Medieval Armenian Spiritual Tradition', *Arc: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University* 35 (2007), pp. 211–26.

journey through the salvation history which took place in and around the city. From Noah's son Shem, who, according to legend, buried the bones of Adam at Golgotha and those of Eve at Bethlehem, through the patriarchs of the Old Covenant and Moses' unfulfilled longing for the 'land which pours milk and honey', to Christ's activity in the city and the day of judgement, Tatʿewacʿi incites imagination to uncover the hidden spiritual gifts that nourish the faithful like a spiritual mother. This is why he aims to raise the desire for 'the covetable places of Jerusalem, which has such praises':

> Now if the place is worthy of [being] where God descends for the Last Judgement and all the angels and saints alongside him, then it is worthy for everyone to run there as if before Christ, and to be physically face to face and to see Christ in the place of his incarnation. And in all the places to enjoy mysteriously graces and gifts from our generous and abundant donor, Jesus Christ, to whom [be] glory eternally, Amen.[100]

For Tatʿewacʿi the visible becomes transparent for the invisible. Events and places are read as signs and prefigurations which mystically lead to the spiritual nourishment of the soul. The two sermons shed some light on Tatʿewacʿi's own spirituality and the spiritual guidance he was capable of. The fact that most of his extant works are so much focused on academic teaching should not detract from this. Apart from being an inspiring teacher of philosophy and theology, Tatʿewacʿi was also a renowned instructor of liturgical singing and sacred painting,[101] which were very clearly shaped by the Orthodox mystical tradition. So even if Tatʿewacʿi's works engage in a sharply logical and sometimes rather dry intellectual argumentation, his spiritual experience is the context in which his writing and teaching took place and in which it is hence to be understood.[102]

[100] Sermon no. 136 in Grigor Tatʿewacʿi, *Girkʿ Kʿarozutʿean or koč̌ʿi Jmeṙan Hator* [*Book of Preaching which is called Winter Volume*] (Constantinople: Abraham Dpir, 1741), pp. 610–13. Cf. Sergio La Porta, 'Introduction', in *Gregory of Tatev: Book of Questions* (Portsmouth, Rhode Island: Mayreni, 2019), pp. xxv–xliii, at pp. xl–xli.

[101] La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', p. 43.

[102] La Porta, 'Introduction', pp. xxxi–xliii argues with emphasis for reading Tatʿewacʿi's work in the light of this spiritual dimension and not according to the separation between academic theology and mysticism which developed in the West.

Conclusion

Paul Tillich once warned that religious ideas approached in a rationalistic way turn into information.[103] They become distorted when taken for explanatory items which are related to an unequivocal meaning or a precise definition. Especially in times when religious ideas become the objects of scientific investigation, for example in psychology or cognitive science, it is crucial to uphold this insight. The transcendent of religion transcends by definition human cognitive and linguistic means. This is also crucial for theology. The question as to how to relate cataphatism and apophatism without compromising either of them is one of its big issues.

Tatʿewacʿi's approach represents one way of solving it. Even though mystical theology is not expounded at large, it is the foundation and frame of all his theology. He maintains that God is ultimately and eternally hidden from human knowledge. While God's energies participate in the creation, his nature transcends it and is hence essentially incomprehensible and ineffable. This is the foundation of the epistemology and hermeneutics of theology. Tatʿewacʿi defines human cognition as being aimed at created beings and hence unsuitable for the Divine. But that does not mean God is entirely inaccessible. There are two ways, one is through the mind, the other is through bypassing it. The first way is the mind's illumination by faith so that it can discover God's participation in creation. Thus directed to created things, the mind can investigate God as revealed in them by using the cognitive tools at its disposal: reason, analysis, logic, philosophical concepts, etc. The second way consists in abandoning the mind and its restrictions altogether. This is the way of spiritual practice and mystical experience. But even in this encounter, God remains incomprehensible. This has an impact on theological language. While theology cannot help but employ human language, the words used are not to be understood in the common fashion. Privations are linked to a hermeneutics of transcendence, affirmations are applicable in a limited way only, and sometimes established rules of language have to be broken through paradoxical expressions.

In the West, Dionysius' apophatism was often reduced to a way of obtaining divine attributes which were subsequently explored in

[103] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 157.

a very positive way. Tatʿewacʿi however is, at least in this respect, more comparable to theologians like Thomas Aquinas, who also granted apophatism a fundamental role in his approach.[104] Moreover, we can find traces of Tatʿewacʿi's spiritual experience and guidance even in his academic writings, which are aimed at instruction and apologetics. Apophatism is the beginning, foundation, and end of theology but, due to its nature, cannot be treated itself *in extenso*. As Tatʿewacʿi points out, mystical theology, the 'supreme summit of theology', carries us to the incomprehensible and ineffable One who 'is honoured by the whole creation with silence'.[105]

[104] Cf. e.g. *ST* I.12.7 ad 1; *SG* I.14.2; *De potentia* 7.5 ad 14; *In Boethii de Trinitate* I.2.1 ad 6; *In Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus* I.3.77–84.

[105] BQ III.8.18, p. 123; La Porta, '"The Theology of the Holy Dionysius"', pp. 164–6.