

Response to Knepper

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Abstract: Having cited Dionysius as one of the many Christian thinkers who affirm the ineffability, or transcategoriality, of God in God's ultimate inner being, I respond to Timothy D. Knepper's claim that this is a mistake. Whilst accepting much that he says about Dionysius, I still prefer the standard interpretation of the Dionysian texts as teaching the total transcategoriality of the Transcendent as 'surpassing all discourse and all knowledge'.

Most readers of this paper will probably not have read my article 'Ineffability' of nine years ago.¹ I should explain that only two and a half of its twelve pages are about Dionysius. He is one of the many thinkers whom I cite to illustrate the fact that the distinction between, on the one hand, the Ultimate in itself, which is transcategorial, and on the other hand its impingements on human consciousness, is found in all the main religious traditions. This is mainly in their mystical streams, where we find what Bernard McGinn calls, in the case of Dionysius, his 'fundamental distinction between God hidden and God revealed'.² It is in the course of this that I discuss some Christian theologians who stress the ineffability of God in His ultimate being: Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Margaret Porete, down to Paul Tillich, Gordon Kaufman, and Ninian Smart.

Timothy D. Knepper does not attack religious pluralism, but wants to drop Dionysius from the list of thinkers who affirm the ultimate transcategoriality, or ineffability, of the Ultimate. He presents his new interpretation of Dionysius' texts in terms of what he claims to be three misuses.³

The first misuse, according to Knepper, is to hold that that the divine names are not literally true of God, the misuse arising from a failure to distinguish between the intelligible and the perceptible names. Knepper believes that whilst the former (lower-case divine names) are metaphorical the latter (upper-case DIVINE NAMES) are causal powers which give their nature to all finite beings. Let us agree

that the DIVINE NAMES are not metaphors. (I did not suggest that they are.) But the essential point remains that God transcends, is *hyper* to, them. On the one hand, Knepper says that ‘the *hyper* being God cannot be *absolutely and unqualifiedly* transcategorical’, but on the other hand he holds that ‘God does not participate in the DIVINE NAMES’ (208) but transcends them. And so, ‘Dionysius can therefore deny both the DIVINE NAMES and the divine names of God’ (209). Surely, then, God *is* absolutely and unqualifiedly transcategorical. As Donald Duclow says, ‘Dionysius emphasizes the dissimilarities in sensible symbols and the limits of all intelligible divine names. His work *Mystical Theology* negates all language about God because divinity cannot be known in its transcendence’.⁴

In fact, in my article I do not discuss the nature of the divine names/DIVINE NAMES. It is not these that I claim to be metaphorical according to Dionysius, but biblical language. The relevance of this to divine ineffability is that Dionysius is responding to the contradiction between saying ‘that the Godhead is absolutely ineffable, transcending all our human categories of thought’, and ‘that the Godhead is self-revealed in the Bible as a trinity, one person of whom became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth’.⁵ Dionysius is rare among the theologians in that he is well aware of this problem, and confronts it directly. As I say in the article,

His answer is that the language of scripture is metaphorical: ‘the Word of God makes use of poetic imagery ... as a concession to the nature of our own minds’; the divine Light make truth known to us ‘by way of representative symbols’ Dionysius uses ‘symbolic’ with the same meaning as ‘metaphorical’. He emphasizes the metaphorical character of the biblical language by pointing to the absurdity of taking it literally.⁶

Denys Turner, in *The Darkness of God*, also and for the same reason equates Dionysius’ symbols with metaphors.⁷

Knepper’s second misuse is to hold that ‘Negation of divine names states their literal falsity of God’ (209). Again, I agree. I said that, according to Dionysius, the divine names do not apply to God in God’s ultimate transcendence either positively *or* negatively. He says that God ‘is beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion’.⁸ This is a more radical position than that the divine names are not literally true of God. They are not literally true, or literally false, because they do not apply to God at all.

However, Knepper holds that Dionysius attributes the divine names to God ‘pre-eminently rather than privatively ... it conveys God’s possession of these names in some mysteriously superabundant sense’ (209). As well as ‘superabundant’ and ‘pre-eminently’ Knepper also uses the term ‘unknowable excess’. ‘God is the divine names in a mysteriously superabundant sense insofar as God gives substance to the DIVINE NAMES’ (212). The text, he says, strongly suggests this. He admits that the outcome of his interpretation ‘may seem hopelessly vague’ (212). This seems to me to be its problem.

Nevertheless, Knepper's interpretation may be correct: God may in some unintelligible way have these attributes in some unspecified 'pre-eminent' sense. In that case God cannot, according to Dionysius, be totally transcategorical, though the sense in which he has attributes remains mysterious. But I find it hard to accept an interpretation which hinges upon an idea that cannot be made clear. I prefer the standard understanding of Dionysius as teaching the total transcategoriality of God in God's ultimate nature.

In the end Knepper says, 'if Dionysius does claim that God is in some sense "transcategorical", he does so in a particular way and from a particular perspective' (216). Of course. As Knepper himself points out, *all* thinking has this character. He adds that 'if Dionysius does claim that God is in some sense "transcategorical", he does not do so by drawing upon the contemporary category of transcategoriality' (217). But although Dionysius uses different language, the contemporary sense of transcategoriality or ineffability *does* seem to me to correspond with what he says: 'the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge. It abides beyond the realm of mind and of being. ... escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, discourse, apprehension, or understanding'.⁹

Knepper's third alleged misuse is that 'Negation of divine names is not the sole or ultimate means by which humans are saved or divinized' (213). He apparently assumes that to point to Dionysius' statements that the scriptural symbols of God serve as useful means for uplifting souls, is to assert that for Dionysius this is the sole or final means of salvation, to the exclusion of the Church and its rituals. But this is a mistaken assumption. Dionysius had a high view of the Church, although it is not one that I share.

Coming now to Knepper's final section, I am not doing comparative theology but philosophy of religion – which stands back from all religious commitments (whatever commitment the philosopher may personally have) and, in my case, seeks a field theory of religion globally. It seems to me that this requires the concept of the Ultimate Reality, or the Real; its total transcategoriality; and the consequent distinction between the Real in itself and the Real as varyingly human perceived. I find the first two of these in Dionysius, but not the third, in that he never considered the status of religions other than his own. For Dionysius the Ultimate Reality is the God of Christianity.

But whether Knepper is right or not, the pluralistic hypothesis – that the great religions are different human responses, in their different culturally determined forms, to the same ultimate transcendent reality, which is itself transcategorical – remains unaffected.

However, Knepper's problem with the pluralistic hypothesis is that it concentrates on similarities and overlooks differences. He says, correctly, that my 'use of the Kantian phenomenal should provide for an appreciation of religious difference' (217). And it does. It enables us to see each in its unique individuality,

as very different human responses, each formed within a different historical and cultural context, to the one divine noumenon. It leaves the religions as they are, except that it requires each to come to accept that it is not the one and only true faith, and so to gradually filter out any doctrines which entail that it is. It is true that all this does not come in the article on 'Ineffability', which was about one particular aspect of the hypothesis. But my *An Interpretation of Religion* includes a very full account of the differences between the religions.¹⁰ Taking account of religious differences is not an alternative to pluralism but part of it.

Finally, Knepper says that 'the Dionysian corpus does not stand witness to the metaphorization of *all* religious beliefs, the *absolute* transcategorization of ultimacy, and the utilization of *all* religious practices' (217). I agree with this on two of the three counts. Dionysius does not say that all religious beliefs are metaphorical, and the only one that I have myself treated as metaphorical is the concept of divine incarnation. Whether Dionysius taught the absolute transcategoriality of the ultimate is the question at issue in Knepper's article. He argues that Dionysius did not teach this. Most scholars who have written about Dionysius think that he did, and I am inclined to follow them. And Dionysius did treat religious practices, particularly ecclesiastical rituals, as useful means, as well as our use of the scriptures. Here I go further than Dionysius. I see all religious practices as 'skilful means' of spiritual development, opening us to the Transcendent.

Notes

1. John Hick 'Ineffability', *Religious Studies*, 36 (2000), 35–46.
2. Bernard McGinn *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 163.
3. Timothy D. Knepper 'Three misuses of Dionysius for comparative theology', *Religious Studies*, 45 (2009), 205–221. All in-text references are to this article.
4. Robert Baum 'Dionysius the Areopagite', in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 10 vols (Woodbridge CT: Macmillan, 1987), IV, 357.
5. Hick 'Ineffability', 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 39.
7. Denys Turner *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 37.
8. Dionysius *The Mystical Theology*, ch. 2 in *The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 36.
9. Dionysius *The Divine Names*, ch. 1 in *Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, 53.
10. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993).