

Transformative Light and Luminous Traditions in Early Christian Mysticism and Monasticism

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Lux, light, is a favourite expression for the divine and for the encounter with divinity in almost any religious tradition. The sun and fire, as the two basic sources for light as well as heat, are and have been interpreted as revelations and expressions of the divine throughout human history.¹ Early Christian monasticism and mysticism is no exception. Although expressed in models and language shaped by the Bible, the texts reveal a basic anthropological fascination and awe in front of the burning light of the sun and the burning flames of fire. As humans we all depend on light and fire, and depend on them for sight but also for warmth, that is for our survival.

In this article I would like to invite you to look into the importance of the concept of light in the textual world of some of the most influential writings of the early Christian centuries, texts that have been read and reread throughout the centuries, texts that are intensely debated not only in theology but also in philosophy, history and literature. Instead of presenting a survey I want us to look closely at a few examples of the building blocks of Christian monastic and mystical tradition.

It is by our rereading of the past and our reuse of what has been said and written that we create

our interpretations and our expressions. By presenting texts that has proven useful in previous centuries I hope that I can contribute also to our present attempts to make sense of our existence in a world that is not only superabundant in light and life but also marked by darkness and death.

Due to the limitations I will here only introduce examples taken from two very different but closely interrelated corpora of the early Christian monastic and mystical tradition, the monastic collections of sayings and stories attributed to the first generations of monks, and the corpus of writings by an anonymous author known as Dionysius the Areopagite.

The sayings:

*... he looked just like an angel. He was about ninety years old and had a snowy beard down to his chest. And his face was so radiant that the sight of him alone filled one with awe.*²

*A brother went to the cell of Arsenius in Scetis, and looked in through the window, and saw him like fire from head to foot.*³

¹ It might be noted that while the sun as manifestation of the divine is central in many of the religious traditions of the Near East, as well in Greek and Roman religion, fire is more prominent in the Hebrew Bible.

² *Historia Monachorum* 2.1. (tr. by Norman Russell in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, London: Mowbrays 1980, 63).

³ *Apophthegmata Patrum* PJ XVIII.1. The translation is my own based on the Latin text as found in *Patrologia Latina* 73:978. The same text with very minor variations is also present in the Greek, Coptic, Syriac,

Dionysius:
*Trinity beyond all,
 beyond divinity,
 beyond goodness,
 guide to divine Christian wisdom,
 lead us beyond all light,
 beyond unknowing
 up to the highest peak of mystical Scriptures,
 where the simple, absolute and incorruptible
 mysteries of the godhead are revealed
 in the dazzling darkness of a secret silence
 that even in total gloom
 outshines the brightest light.
 Intangible and invisible
 it fills our blinded minds
 with a brightness more beautiful than beauty.*⁴

In spite of the radical difference in language, genre and focus, we are, as will become clear, dealing with texts that actually share a lot. In both cases we are dealing with material that has had a profound influence on the history of Christianity, the former texts by their popularity, the latter text by its centrality in the history of theology due to its pretended first century origin. But the monastic florilegia and the Dionysian corpus do not only share popularity, albeit in different contexts, but also their origin in the fifth-sixth century Palestinian monastic milieu, their anonymity as to the authors, as well as their philosophical background. We should thus not, as has often been done, dismiss the monastic florilegia as theologically unimportant, or dismiss the Dionysian texts as irrelevant for the history of early monasticism.

1. The Monastic Collections

Stories and sayings about the early monastic fathers have come down to us in numerous collec-

Armenian, Georgian, Old Slavonic and Ethiopic traditions.

⁴ Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* I.1. The translation is my own and is based on the Greek text edited in *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, 2nd ed., *Patristische Texte und Studien* 67, Göttingen: Walter de Gruyter 2012.

tions containing a mixture of sayings, anecdotes, biographies, travelogues and excerpts from monastic teaching literature. Among the most popular are the collections of sayings and anecdotes traditionally called the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, “the sayings of the fathers”, or in Latin the *Vitae Patrum*, “the lives of the fathers”. These are preserved in a variety of collections in all the languages of Christian tradition.⁵ As has been demonstrated by Lillian Larsen the sayings belong to the classical pedagogical tradition with its emphasis on the learning, repetition and use of models of speech.⁶ As part of the institutionalization of the monastic traditions, sayings from a wide variety of sources were organized in larger collections to be read both privately and publicly in the monasteries to transmit the heritage. The abundance of manuscripts in all the languages of early and medieval Christianity manifest their popularity and the role they have played in forming ideals and models for Christian life and transmitting a heritage of education that predates Christianity.⁷

During the last century they have been translated into almost any language used by Christians all over the world. In scholarship they are often used as the most authentic and valuable source material available for interpreting the world-view, motives and lives of the monastic tradition that emerged in Egypt in the mid-fourth century, a tradition that became hugely influential on the development of monasticism throughout Christianity.⁸ In monastic life throughout the

⁵ For more details and references to research history and the different editions, see Rubenson, “The Formation and Reformations of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers” in *Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia* (ed. S. Rubenson), in *Studia Patristica*, Leuven: Peeters 2013, 5–22.

⁶ Lillian Larsen, *Pedagogical Parallels: Re-reading the Apophthegmata Patrum*. Ph.D. Dissertation: Columbia University, 2006

⁷ Research on the reception and impact of the sayings in later tradition is still in its infancy. A research tool for the complex transmission of the sayings is being created at Lund University by the research program “Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia”. See <http://mopai.lu.se>.

⁸ On the role of the Egyptian tradition for the development of monasticism see Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism. From the Desert Fathers to the*

centuries, as well as in present-day spiritual revivals, they are read for meditation, spiritual guidance and inspiration.

Notwithstanding their influence it is obvious that the sayings cannot be taken literally, as accurate historical description of certain persons or advice to be followed to the point. The reference to light and fire are not intended as simple reports but interact with known texts and concepts that give them their meaning. Let us look at a few more examples:

*Abba Joseph said to Abba Lot, 'You cannot become a monk unless you become like a fire that consumes everything.'*⁹

*It was said of Abba Pambo that as Moses took on the image of the glory of Adam when his face shone, Abba Pambo's face shone like lightning and he was like a king sitting on his throne. Abba Silvanus and Abba Sisoës were of the same kind.*¹⁰

*An old man said: "The monk's cell is that furnace in Babylon in which the three children met with the Son of God; it is the pillar of cloud out of which God talked to Moses."*¹¹

The references to Moses and to the furnace in Babylon makes it clear that our texts do not stand alone. Throughout the sayings we find allusions to and quotations from the Bible, often, as in this case, to a figure, an idea or a setting rather than to specific verses. Thus the meaning of the saying depends on the reader's knowledge about, but also relation to, the Biblical material.

Early Middle Ages, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, and William Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004. A more critical view is found in Rubenson, "Mönchtum", Art. in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Band 24, Stuttgart: Hiersemann 2012, 1009-1064.

⁹ *Apophthegmata Patrum G* Joseph of Panepho 6, printed in *Patrologia Graeca* 65, 228. Translation my own.

¹⁰ *Apophthegmata Patrum G* Pambo 12 printed in *Patrologia Graeca* 65, 368. Translation my own.

¹¹ *Apophthegmata Patrum PJ* VII.38 printed in *Patrologia Latina* 73, 902. Translation my own.

In his dissertation Per Rönnegård, a member of the Early Monasticism research team, has analysed the way biblical material is used in the AP.¹² Instead of analysing how the Biblical texts are interpreted in the sayings,¹³ he asks more fundamental questions about how biblical texts and figures are agents and actors in the sayings, and how this creates an interaction which influences the Biblical material as well as the saying. In a first step Rönnegård shows that the Bible is not just interpreted, it is also used to interpret the lives of the monks. The sayings are not simply stating something, but they are also inviting the reader to read their own context through the lens of the biblical material. What is said here about Pambo, Silvanus and Sisoës, well-known Egyptian monks of the fourth century, and even about becoming like a fire, is to be understood on the background of biblical stories only hinted at.

In detailed analyses, Rönnegård shows that the intertextual use of biblical material in the sayings informs the reader's understanding of the biblical texts.¹⁴ The better-known figures of the desert tradition become keys to understand the persons and stories mentioned in the Bible. Moses and the children in the furnace are contemporized and seen through the lens of the reader's experiences. In a way similar to how the reading of the saying depends on the biblical text, Rönnegård maintains that the reading of the biblical texts is influenced by how they are used in the saying. The sayings shape the understanding of what the Bible is about.

For the reader of the AP Moses is no longer a historical figure mentioned in the Bible, but the peer of better-known figures of the reader's own tradition. The furnace in Babylon, known in monastic tradition mainly through the liturgical use of the hymn of the three young men in the deu-

¹² Per Rönnegård, *Threads and Images: The Use of Scripture in Apophthegmata Patrum* (Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series, 44), Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2010.

¹³ For this approach see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993.

¹⁴ Compare Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation. Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999.

terocanonical texts of the Septuagint, is not part of an ancient historical event, but an image of the present experience of what a monastic cell feels like. The concepts of light and fire are filled with meaning that draws on biblical texts as well as personal experience, and are transmitted as sayings in order to be read in relation to the biblical texts, to one another and to daily experiences.

Reading the sayings as sources for historical facts runs the risk not only of creating an unrealistic and idealized image of early monasticism, but also of missing the wider literary context in which the sayings were formed and transmitted, and thus missing what they actually convey about early monastic experience and how these were transmitted to new generations of monks. The use of light, fire and furnace in the sayings are part of a larger conversation in which multiple traditions are blended, and differently blended dependent on the context of the reader.

Building on the works by earlier scholars who have questioned the view that the sayings are “authentic” representations of what the fourth century monks said and did – first transmitted orally and only later collected, written down and systematized – Lillian Larsen, another member of the research team on Early Monasticism, has shown that the sayings should be read as parallels to the educational material used in the elementary schools in antiquity.¹⁵

As demonstrated both by her and Rönnegård the bulk of them adhere to the basic genre used in education, the *chreia*, a pointed piece of wisdom attributed to a person and placed in a historical frame. Their historical context, their *Sitz im Leben*, is most probably the monastic school. They should thus by us as modern historians be read primarily as sources for how older educational patterns were used and transformed in early monasticism. This does not deny that the images present in the stories are taken from real every-day life, only that the purpose of the encoding of this is education, not historical accuracy. As emphasised by Larsen we should not fo-

cus simply on content, but start by looking at the form. The sayings can thus no longer be seen as the pristine products of a radically new phenomenon, monasticism, but as part of a broad genre of educational material known in both pagan and Jewish circles. Thus, they are important sources for how early monasticism is part of the society.

In the Syriac collection of sayings we find an example of how the above-mentioned reference to the furnace of Babylon, and the “pillar of light” is used pedagogically.

The brothers said: “What does the saying of Abba Anthony ‘A monk’s cell is the furnace of Babylon, and it is also a pillar of light’ mean?” The old man said, There are two things peculiar to the cell; one heats and sets on fire, the other gives light and rejoicing. To novices the cell is oppressive and troublesome, by reason of the struggle and the gloom therein, but it rejoices the full-grown and makes them glad, with purity of heart, and impassibility, and revelations of light; and it is even thus with those who begin to live in silent contemplation, for although at the beginning they are for a considerable time afflicted by the wars of the passions, and by demons, they are never forsaken by the help of divine grace. For our Lord himself, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, comes to them secretly, and he becomes to them a helper and a companion, and after they have overcome both passions and devils, He makes them worthy of the happiness that is in His perfect love, and the revelation of His glorious light.¹⁶

In a rather bold and innovative way the author of this saying uses the previous saying to illustrate his teaching about certain aspects of how monastic life proceeds. The consuming fire from which the three children are protected by the presence of the Son of God (or in the biblical text the angel of God) is here radically reduced to the familiar experience that fire in a cell, often a cave, is the source of heat and smoke. It is easy to see that the saying captures the experience made by many novices, that their cells are like furnaces, are full of sweat and gloom, from which you would like to escape. To them it is an image of the war of the passions and demons trying to

¹⁵ Lillian Larsen, “The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monostichs of Menander: Learning a New Alphabet Using Classical Models” in *Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia* (ed. S. Rubenson), in *Studia Patristica*, Leuven: Peeters 2013, 59-77.

¹⁶ *Apophthegmata Patrum* SS II.668, tr. Budge, printed in E.A.W. Budge, *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, London: Chatto & Windus 1907, vol II, 324.

make them give up. The same fire of the furnace is, however, to others a source of light and joy, and even of revelations due to the presence of the helper and companion. The furnace and the cell are experienced differently depending on who you are. But who you are will depend on your experience in it, on how the struggle with the fire transforms the person but also transforms the fire itself.

The interpretation of the elder in the Syriac saying prompts us to look for a wider context for the anthropology behind and the ideas about passions and contemplation. In his research within our research program Henrik Rydell Johnsen has demonstrated that the early monastic movement inherited not only the forms but also the teachings of a variety of schools of philosophy.¹⁷ The virtues promoted and the vices warned against are to a high degree the same in classical treatises of moral philosophy and in monastic teachings, as are also the ways of argumentation. The authors and collectors of monastic teachings were steeped by traditional philosophy and thus their texts should be read against this background. If we limit our comparisons to the biblical texts that the sayings and monastic teachings refer to we lose the link to the educational material that shaped the society in which they lived.

In relation to our theme one could, for example, think of the allegory of the cave used by Plato in his *The Republic*.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and

his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows, which he formerly saw, are truer than the objects, which are now shown to him?

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

He will require growing accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.¹⁸

Here we encounter a basic form of the idea of transformative light, as well as *metanoia*, a turn away from the well-known material world to what is spiritual, to ideas encountered throughout the AP. What we see if we don't convert, that is turn around, are only the shadows projected on the wall, shadows created by the light outside our cave. If we turn around we are almost blinded by the dazzling unknown light and thus tend to turn back again. It is only with pain that a person is able to leave the cave in the direction of the light. He is, however not able to watch the sun directly, but is slowly able to see first the

¹⁷ Rydell Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus: Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation*, PhD-diss., Lund University, 2007, and idem, "Renunciation, Guidance and Confession in Early Monasticism and Ancient Philosophy," in S. Rubenson, ed., *Early Monasticism and Classical Paideia*, in *Studia Patristica*, Leuven: Peeters 2013, 79-94.

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic* VII.

shadows of reality, then the proper images of reality and finally reality itself. The exposure to light illuminates and makes it possible to see the light itself, not only its effects.

It would take too much space to exemplify how this allegory and its afterlife is an important background to the use of light and illumination in early monastic texts. Here it might suffice to point at how one of the basic monastic texts, *The Life of Antony* in its depiction of a debate between the monk and some Greek philosophers, sees the relation between knowledge and argument, between mind and skill. It isn't argumentation that leads to knowledge, but faith that creates a basis for arguments. It is light that shows us reality and makes it possible for us to explain it, not our explanations that make it possible for us to see. Thus it is the disposition of the mind, whether it is enlightened or not, that counts.

They did not know what to say and were turning this way and that. Antony smiled and said—again through an interpreter—'Sight itself bears proof of what I have said. But as you prefer demonstrative arguments, and as you are masters of this you do not want us to worship God without arguments, tell first how precise knowledge of things, especially knowledge of God is gained. Is it by verbal argument or an act of faith? And which comes first, active faith or verbal proof?' When they replied that active faith comes first and is the accurate knowledge, Antony said, 'You have answered well, for faith arises from the disposition of the soul, but dialectic from the skill of its inventors. Thus, to those who have active faith, demonstrative argument is needless, or perhaps even superfluous. For what we know through faith this you attempt to prove through words, and often you are not even able to express what we understand. So active faith is better and stronger than your professional arguments.'¹⁹

2. The Mystical tradition - Dionysius

*Trinity beyond all,
beyond divinity,
beyond goodness,*

¹⁹ *Vita Antonii* 77 (tr. Robert Meyer in *St. Athanasius. The Life of Antony*, New York: Newman Press 1950, 83-84).

*guide to divine Christian wisdom,
lead us beyond all light,
beyond unknowing
up to the highest peak of mystical Scriptures,
where the simple, absolute and incorruptible
mysteries of the godhead are revealed
in the dazzling darkness of a secret silence
that even in total gloom
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Intangible and invisible
it fills our blinded minds
with a brightness more beautiful than beauty.'*²⁰

Moving from the sayings and stories to the Mystical Theology of Dionysius seems to be a giant step from one world to a totally different. But even though scholars haven't been able to agree on the identity of the author of the Dionysian Corpus (DC) texts there is today a general consensus that the author must be a Syrian or Palestinian monk who wrote his texts in the first decades of the sixth century, that is at the same time as the first large collections of AP were produced in the monasteries of Palestine and Syria.²¹ What makes Dionysius different is that he not only was a student, direct or indirect of the Athenian Neo-Platonic philosopher Proclus (412-485), but also remained faithful to his Athenian philosophical heritage. Thus, in contrast to the AP, most widely diffused in monasteries and modern centres of spirituality, the DC has been a major source for theologians and philosophers throughout the centuries, and still remains so, not the least because of his reflections on language, to which I will return. In the history of Christian mysticism he is counted as perhaps the most influential.

In order to unpack his poetic introduction to his rather short text *The Mystical Theology* I would like to turn to two of his predecessors, likewise two of the most important foundational figures in Christian mysticism, Ephrem of Nisibis and Gregory of Nyssa. In rather different ways they anticipate some of the bold and radi-

²⁰ Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* I.1.

²¹ For his indebtedness to the monastic tradition see Alexander Golitzin, *Et introibo ad altare dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with special reference to his predecessors in the Eastern Christian tradition*, Thessaloniki 1994.

cal interpretations of Christian faith proposed by the DC.

Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) was a deacon and teacher in Nisibis, present day Nusaybin (on the Turkish side of the present day border of Syria and Turkey) who had to leave the city for Edessa, present day Urfa, when the city was handed over to the Persians after the death of emperor Julian in 363.²² Extremely influential in Syrian, but also Greek, Armenian and Ethiopic Christian tradition, he has been largely unknown in the West until an outpour of scholarship in the last decades.

His use of poetry for theology and his vivid use of metaphors links him closer to Semitic than Hellenic literary tradition. Ephrem is not steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition. He shuns definitions and the use of logic in theology. His texts are governed by symbolism and paradoxes that circumscribe what cannot be said in words. But like Plato, and for example Origen, the founder of Christian Biblical exegesis, he regards revelation as only partially visible and illumination of the eyes of the beholder as necessary before he can see. A crucial metaphor for Ephrem is clothing and in different ways he uses the fact that clothes both reveal and hide. In the Scriptures God clothes himself in human language, he "puts on names", names that are borrowed and invite the reader to search and find. If the eyes have become luminous the reader can move beyond the names to a true image.

The Scriptures are laid out like a mirror, and he, whose eye is luminous, sees therein the image of Truth.²³

If there existed a single sense for the words of Scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labour of searching, nor the joy of finding. Rather each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. Each in-

dividual understands according to its capacity and interprets as it is granted him.²⁴

God has made small his majesty by means of these borrowed names. For we should not imagine that he has completely disclosed his majesty. This is not what his majesty actually is, but it represents only what we are capable of: what we perceive as his majesty is only a tiny part, for he has shown us a single spark from it; He has accorded to us only what our eyes can take of the multitude of his powerful rays.²⁵

Light is for Ephrem not just a medium that makes an object visible to someone looking at it. Light is a power in itself, a power originating with God but given to humans. By possessing this light, by having a luminous eye, it is possible to see truth. But since this luminosity has to be gained the rays of the true light are adapted to the human condition by being clothed in a variety of forms and senses.

A similar emphasis on the need for purification of the eye to see the real beauty in what is clothed in a semblance of beauty is found in a younger contemporary of Ephrem, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-395). Gregory was consecrated bishop of the small town of Nyssa by his older brother, Basil of Caesarea, but seems to have devoted his time mainly to his authorship. His influence in the history of theology has been marginal, but the last century has seen a growing interest, not the least by those interested in Christian mysticism and by several modern philosophers.²⁶

Gregory, like the Syriac commentator to the short saying, puts much emphasis on training. It is only the trained and purified eye that is able to behold true beauty. Like Plato and Origen Gregory sees visible beauty as a vehicle to behold invisible, spiritual beauty, through contemplation.

'The Kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17.21). From this we learn that by a heart made pure ... we see in our beauty the image of the

²² On Ephrem, see Brock, *The Luminous Eye. The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publication 1992.

²³ Ephrem, *Hymns of Faith* 67:8, tr. Brock, 47.

²⁴ Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 7:22, tr. Brock, 49.

²⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns on the Heresies* 30:4, tr. Brock, 65.

²⁶ See Sarah Coakley, "Introduction" in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (ed. Sarah Coakley), Oxford: Blackwell 2003, 1-13.

godhead ... You have in you not the ability to see God. He who formed you put in your being an immense power. When God created you he enclosed in you the image of his perfection, as the mark of a seal is impressed on wax – So when people look at themselves they will see in themselves the One they are seeking. They are looking at their own translucency and finding the model in the image— You cannot contemplate the reality of light; but if you rediscover the beauty of the image that was put in you at the beginning, you will obtain within yourself the goal of your desires.²⁷

What is new in Gregory and more akin with CD is his insistence that since God is infinite the ascent is also infinite.

At each instant, what is grasped is much greater than what had been grasped before, but, since what we are seeking is unlimited, the end of each discovery becomes the starting point for the discovery of something higher, and the ascent continues. Thus our ascent is unending. We go from beginning to beginning by way of beginnings without end.²⁸

The ascent is however not a simple flight from human reality into the divine in which the goal is everything and the ascending soul nothing. Like the sayings and the ascetic tradition in which they stand, Gregory stresses the effect the ascent has on the soul itself. The approximation to truth and light transforms the soul into its likeness.

The soul is transformed into that which it discovers, continually making fresh discoveries.²⁹

This brings us back to the desert father becoming fire and radiant light. The ascent to light is linked to a descent of light. Thus the process of purification, mentioned above, is linked to a process of enlightenment or transformation.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes* 6, Translated by Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, New York: New City Press, 1995, 237.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 8, tr. Clément, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 240.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogue on the soul and Resurrection*, tr. Clément, Clément, *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 241.

In the CD the legacy represented by the ascetic tradition, the poetry of Ephrem and the philosophical mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa is integrated into a unified system. In revelation God is revealed in borrowed clothes, in order to be seen and talked about. This is *kataphatic* theology. But, in order for man to be enlightened by this revelation the borrowed clothes needs to be taken off, revelation denied in order that man does not end up by worshipping an idol shaped by clothes. This is *apophatic* theology. This is precisely what is illustrated in the drastic imagery of the sayings. The revelations in Scripture about Moses, about the pillar of light and about the burning furnace, are not historical information, but ways to reveal the transformation that is taking place.

In spite of the differences in genre, historical setting and milieu the desert fathers, the Syrian deacon and poet Ephrem, the rhetorically well educated bishop of Nyssa and the anonymous author of the CD all shared a basically Platonic view of the interrelation between an ultimate spiritual and invisible truth identified as pure light and the limited reflection of this in all visible things, as well as the capacity for the human soul to become purified in order to reflect and become a mirror of this true light through transformation. For them there was no problem to integrate into this view the Biblical texts with their emphasis on an invisible God that had created man and woman into his image and likeness. They had no difficulties in identifying the world as a revelation and the world as a creation, and to them the call for conversion and return seemed to be very much the same in both traditions.

Instead of a conclusion, let me end with an attempt to interpret this text in four points:

1. Light is necessary for travelling, but the goal of Christian pilgrimage is beyond that light, that is the goal is not visible. Thus the pilgrim has to trust the guide.
2. Increased knowledge of what is visible dismantles itself in its quest for the ultimate beyond the particular and thus ends in unknowing.

3. In other words, the highest peak of revelation is beyond what can be seen and known, the seen and known are only the road.

4. The goal, the encounter with the simple, absolute and incorruptible mysteries, is thus paradoxically blinding and silencing by a darkness that outshines the brightest light.

Summary

The article deals with the use of light as a metaphor as well as an expression of divine presence in two different early Christian contexts, the sayings of the desert fathers, and the writings of early Christian mystics, and shows how they share the same basic ideas, but use different means of expression.