

THE DARKNESS OF GOD: NEGATIVITY IN WESTERN MYSTICISM,
by Denys Turner, *Cambridge University Press, 1995, 278pp.*

The animating principle behind Turner's study of mysticism is what he calls dialectical apophaticism. His book begins by tracing the genesis of mystical theology in the fusion of the motifs of Plato's cave allegory and the Exodus of Moses. The dialectical interplay of the cataphatic and the apophatic is set against the conceptual relationship between the metaphors contained in the cave allegory and Exodus ascent. In the first half of the book these interweaving themes are fleshed out through Turner's crisp assessments of the mysticism in Denys the Areopagite, Augustine and Bonaventure. Here Turner spares little in his attention to the contextual and historical formulations of such classic mystics. Different emphases within these paradigmatic thinkers are all worked out around the dialectics involved in the metaphors of 'interiority', 'exteriority' and 'ascent.' This first part of the book concludes with Bonaventure's attempt to synthesise a thoroughly Dionysian ontological hierarchy with a more Augustinian existential anthropology. As he does throughout the book, Turner constantly highlights the theological-epistemological character of such mysticism. Whilst the two chapters on Augustine cover *De trinitate*, *De doctrina Christiana* and *Confessiones*, Turner is less concerned with a systematic appraisal than with Augustine's notion of experience forged in the shadow of God. The contemporary approbation of mystical experience in our own century is contrasted every step of the way with Augustine's own vision of experience mediated as participation.

Whilst *The Darkness of God* never shies away from rigorous historical analysis, it actually has its sights set quite clearly in the present. 'Experientialism' is the real subject of the book, and ironically, the lack, or absence, of any such idea in the apophaticism of the medieval and patristic mystics. In the second part of the book Turner addresses the contributions of Eckhart, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Denys the Carthusian and John of the Cross. Once more Turner brings an historical sensitivity to his sources that enables him to draw out the crucial concerns of the various apophaticisms. Here, as before, the dynamic and deconstructive nature of apophasis is highlighted: providing yet more fire against the stasis of Turner's targeted 'experientialism.' The chapters on Eckhart, the Cloud Author and Denys are all impressive reminders of the subverting character of mysticism, the apophatic always militating against conceptual stability. So much was breathtaking here that the contrast between St John of the Cross's dark night of the soul and the despair of depression stuck out as less than convincing. The determination of depression as a state intrinsically opposed to the dark night of the soul seemed to contradict the earlier Dionysian and Eckhartian truth that God can admit no distinctions. Whilst Turner is surely right in stressing the difference

between mystical praxis and therapeutic management of depression this does not in itself preclude any association between depression and mysticism. However, this is a minor, and somewhat niggardly, gripe about a chapter that in itself adds considerable weight to Turner's rejection of the 'experientialism' of the likes of Dom Cuthbert Butler.

The final chapter recapitulates arguments against the contemporary adoption of the language of experience shorn of its dialectical negativity. Almost as a footnote, Turner draws on Louth to add more credence to his own portrayal of the contemporary distortion of the role of experience in Denys the Areopagite. Both see liturgical movement as crucial to Denys' dialectic, whilst downplaying the more common affirmations of a nebulous experience in Denys. Unfortunately, Turner's engagement with Louth, as with other current writers in the book, is fleeting, and little time is given to the type of close textual analysis that characterises the historical chapters. The liturgical nature of the Dionysian dialectic deserved wider and earlier attention, especially since the themes of cave allegory and Exodus ascent both lack a peculiarly Christian theological content. Similarly, I had unanswered questions when Turner differentiates his concept of 'negativity of experience', as against a lingering 'experientialism' in McGinn's view of the experience of absence. Turner's postmodern colours are certainly flying here, as he repudiates a quintessentially modern ossification of the dialectical apophatic metaphors. However, the extent to which McGinn actually falls foul of a repristinated mystical experience did not seem as evident to me as Turner suggests. However, the problem here is one of space rather than of content.

Turner's book deserves a much wider welcome than I have been able to hint at here. The economy of his argument is a masterpiece of precision, whilst his pages betray a deep historical learning. Any serious student of mystical theology should engage with *The Darkness of God* at once. Turner has paradoxically reconstructed an important part of the mystical tradition at the same time as pointing the way ahead for future theology. This is a book that sets out as critique, and ends up as the herald of a deconstructive recuperation of theology.

GUY COLLINS

BOOK NOTES

New College, created in 1846 as the theological college of the Free Church of Scotland when it divided from the Kirk at the Disruption but housing the divinity faculty of the University of Edinburgh since 1935, celebrated the anniversary in many ways, with a conference, shared Sunday pulpits, a special graduation, and much conviviality, but also with *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996* edited