

## The Classical View of God and Greco-Hellenistic Influence

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Central to establishing the open view of God (i.e. Open Theism, Freewill Theism or Neotheism) is its claim that the classical understanding of Theology Proper has been significantly distorted through an uncritical acceptance of pagan Greek and Hellenistic philosophies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this chapter will examine the Greco-Hellenistic philosophical influence on the classical concept of God by closely examining significant ancient non-Christian and Christian sources. Moreover, I will discuss and critique the open valuation of these sources to determine the nature and extent of the influence, if any, on the classical notion of God. I will argue that the classical attributes of God are more closely aligned with the early patristic witness, while the open paradigm finds no widespread support among ancient and medieval orthodox Christianity. I will argue that this charge is a result of open theism's misinterpretation of the ancient texts and the overemphasis of the similarities (and the disregard of the essential differences) between the classical view and pagan sources. This chapter seeks to determine the degree of influence and corruption sustained by the patristic concept of God. This discussion will clear the way for a theological-philosophical examination of the divine attributes themselves within a Christian context, which will be presented in the next chapter.

The charge of corruption was not unknown to the early church fathers and was first noticed in the works of Irenaeus' pupil, Hippolytus of Rome (A.D. 170-236). He charged the heretics of his day with drawing on Greek philosophy in order to form their doctrines instead of apostolic tradition and the scriptures. Hippolytus explains:

In order, then, as we have already stated, that we may prove them atheists, both in opinion and their mode (of treating a question) and in fact, and (in order to show) whence it is that their attempted theories have accrued unto them, and that they have endeavored to establish their tenets, taking nothing from the holy scriptures—nor is it from preserving the succession of any saint that they have hurried headlong into these opinions;—but that their doctrines have derived their origin from the wisdom of the Greeks, from the conclusions of those who have formed systems of philosophy, and from would-be mysteries, and the vagaries of astrologers....In the commencement, therefore, we shall declare who first, among the Greeks, pointed out (the principles of) natural philosophy. For from these especially have they furtively taken their views who have first propounded these

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<sup>1</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65-79; Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 59-100.

heresies....Assigning to each of those who take the lead among philosophers their own peculiar tenets, we shall publicly exhibit these heresiarchs as naked and unseemly.<sup>2</sup>

In the modern age, similar challenges to the classical concept of God can be seen in Samuel Clarke's *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (1705), Adolf von Harnack's *Outlines of the History of Dogma*<sup>3</sup> and *What is Christianity?*<sup>4</sup> and William Temple's *Christus Veritas* (1924). Among contemporary philosophers of religion, charges of negative philosophical influence can be seen in Nelson Pike,<sup>5</sup> Richard Swinburne<sup>6</sup> and Nicholas Wolterstorff.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne apparently agrees with Pinnock's charge of pagan corruption when he says, "The doctrine of his [i.e., God's] total immutability, the doctrine of divine timelessness seems to have entered Christian theology from neo-Platonism, and there from Augustine to Aquinas it reigned".<sup>8</sup> The preface to *The Openness of God* asserts that the traditional formulation of God is "the result of coupling of biblical ideas about God with notions of the divine nature drawn from Greek thought",<sup>9</sup> and therefore, Pinnock asserts that "reform in the doctrine of God is required....Piecemeal reform will not do the job; we need some thorough rethinking".<sup>10</sup> Though Pinnock et al. are the most vocal in calling for reform, they are not alone. Several traditional theologians such as Millard Erickson, Ronald Nash and Terrance Tiessen note their concerns regarding immutability, impassibility and divine timelessness and call for renewed discussions on the topics. Nash and Pinnock appear to share this opinion, which is seen in Nash's personal perspective of divine timelessness when he explains:

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<sup>2</sup> See the preface of Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Volume 5. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1886 [reprint edition], 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Adolf von Harnack. *Outlines of the History of Dogma*. (English edition) Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> Adolf von Harnack. *What Is Christianity?* (English edition) New York, NY: Harper, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, 1993 [revised edition]).

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes, eds., *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975). Wolterstorff has since disassociated himself with this view of the negative philosophical influence on the early fathers for a number of reasons (see Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," in Gregory E. Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 210-211.

<sup>8</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 225.

<sup>9</sup> Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65, 72.

Is God a timeless or an everlasting being? At this time I don't know. Like many theists, there was a time when I simply took the timelessness doctrine for granted. After all, it had a long and honored history and did offer a solution to problems like the apparent conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. I then passed through a stage where my confidence in the theory wavered....But the jury is still out and presently I see no reason why theism cannot accommodate itself to either interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Nash leaves little ambiguity when he explains his views concerning “Thomistic Theism” when he asserts:

I introduced a particular package of attributes that is frequently referred to as ‘Thomistic Theism.’ The elements of that package include pure actuality, immutability, impassibility, necessity, simplicity, timelessness, omnipotence, and omniscience. *This* concept of God, I believe, does have serious problems and requires modification. My own study has indicated those points where alterations could be made. Pure actuality, impassibility, and simplicity could be eliminated, and the status of timelessness is questionable. Immutability must be carefully reinterpreted as a property that applies to God's real being.<sup>12</sup>

This departure, or in some cases a “rethinking” of the classical notion of God, appears to be a powerful argument in favor of open theology, which seeks to remove itself from being isolated among theological movements. Due to the collaborative effort in *The Openness of God*, we can assume the charge of negative Greek philosophical influence is a universally agreed upon thought, in greater or lesser degrees, among open theists. Furthermore, Greco-Roman corruption is viewed by open proponents as the root cause for incorrectly describing God as *static immobility* rather than being *dynamically relational*. Pinnock elucidates the influence of Pagan thought when he says:

We need to identify the type of divine perfection envisaged by the biblical witness and consider how better to conceptualize certain of the attributes of God based upon that witness. The main direction is already clear – we need to be more affirming of God as a living person involved in history and less as a remote absolute principle. In one sense, there is nothing new about this: ordinary believers have always relied upon God's dynamic interactivity in the life of faith. But the situation in theology has been less positive: from early times, under the influence of alien ideals of perfection, theology has lost somewhat the biblical focus. A package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness.<sup>13</sup>

Boyd identifies this problem to be the fundamental issue at the heart of his *God of the Possible* when he writes:

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<sup>11</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God: An Exploration of Contemporary Difficulties with the Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1983), 83.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. According to Pinnock, though Tertullian “rejected a number of pagan assumptions, he accepted the most damaging – the concept of the absolute unchangeableness of God” (*Ibid.*, 73).

My fundamental thesis is that the classical theological tradition became misguided when, under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy, it defined God's perfection in static, timeless terms. All change was considered an imperfection and thus not applicable to God.<sup>14</sup>

While addressing historical-philosophical considerations, Sanders asks "Where does this 'theologically correct' view [i.e., classical concept of God *not* changing His mind] of God come from?" He replies:

The answer, in part, is found in the way Christian thinkers have used certain Greek philosophical ideas. Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God. But the classical view worked out in the Western tradition is at odds at several key points with a reading of the biblical text....<sup>15</sup>

In most cases, those sympathetic to open theism follow Pinnock's lead in describing the classical formulation of God as a "virus" or "perfect being theology". To openness advocates, this appears to eliminate God's relational involvement with his creation. Instead of the contaminated classical approach, Pinnock opts for a "metaphysic of love".<sup>16</sup> He offers this as his "ontology" of God, which in his estimation, preserves the liveliness of the Trinity and the relational interaction between God and man.<sup>17</sup> It is precisely here that the classical concept of God threatens any vital and meaningful relationship between Creator and creature. Therefore, a philosophical liberation, or even reformation, is necessary to free the open God from the bondage of "classical-Hellenistic" thought. Pinnock summarizes the *relational* cost resulting from an adoption of the classical view of God's attributes when he avers:

Having made this move, philosophy goes to work. As Being itself, God is an absolutely perfect and pure actuality and is not subject to any deficiency. This entails God's immutability and simplicity and means that, in relation to time, God is timeless and does not realize his essence in successive moments. God's eternity means simultaneity not everlastingness. It means that God is always in full possession of the perfection of his being. God does not owe his being to any other; he exists by himself as completely unconditioned. Pure actuality means there is no becoming in God. God cannot change because change would presuppose a transition from potency to act and require change either for the better or the worse. This affects God's relationship with the world. God cannot have real relationships with a changeable world because that would involve give and take. God can impact us, but we cannot impact him in any mutual way otherwise he would change. But God never changes and cannot change in relation to the world – only the world can change in relation to God. There cannot be reciprocity of relations between God and the world because then

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<sup>14</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> John Sanders has a similar concept known as a "relational metaphysic", see *The Openness of God*, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 27, 113-151; Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 21. More on the "metaphysics of love" in the next section dealing with the metaphysical attributes of God.

the world would be able to affect God....The Greek definition is incapable of rendering the living God and his intensely personal nature....One cannot relate to such a God.<sup>18</sup>

*Pre-Socratics and Plato.* According to open theism, the taproot of the problem is found in the philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle. These ideas, were passed down like heirlooms through the Stoics to the first-century Jewish thinker, Philo, culminating in the ideas of middle-Platonism and neo-Platonism and finally, making its way into the theology of Augustine and Aquinas.<sup>19</sup> For open theologians, the cycle of corruption began with the pre-Socratic philosopher's attempt to make sense of the physical world and its pursuit to identify their first principle(s) (*arche*). The notion of discovering that which is permanent and unchanging dominated their thought. Thales posited water as his *arche* to which even the gods are dependent, Heraclitus offered *logos* as the unchanging principle of order and reason behind all flux, and Parmenides believed the monistic One (i.e., Being) was the uncreated, simple, timeless, eternal and unchangeable first principle. Sanders, like Pinnock,<sup>20</sup> believes that many of these ideas made their way into the thinking of Plato.<sup>21</sup> Plato's concept of God stems from his view of the *Agathos* (i.e., the Good) as described in his *Republic* and *Timaeus*.<sup>22</sup> The impersonal Good is the most real, immaterial, eternal and unchangeable Essence, Form or perfect Idea. Though it is not altogether clear as to the precise role the *Agathos* plays in the cosmic order, and the inner workings of the Form, we can be certain that the Good appears to be ultimate and that it is not in itself in need of another and considered perfect. Perfect is defined as timeless,<sup>23</sup> changeless<sup>24</sup> and impassible;<sup>25</sup> experiencing no joy, sorrow, pleasure or love;<sup>26</sup> and all-knowing and all-powerful.<sup>27</sup> Regarding Plato's influence on the classical notion of God, Boyd asks why the open view of God is rare in church history. He explains that it "is because almost from the

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<sup>18</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 117.

<sup>19</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 59-60.

<sup>20</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> The Demiurge is not a "creator" in the sense of *ex-nihilo* creation, rather it is *ex-materia* since God merely gives form to pre-existing matter which is co-eternal with the Good and the Demiurge.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 381.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, 33b.

<sup>26</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 63; *Symposium* 200-203.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that Plato does qualify God's knowledge and power, and the rest of the attributes, as far as they can be applied to the material universe; see *Laws*, 901, and *The Openness of God*, 64.

start the church's theology was significantly influenced by Plato's notion that God's perfection must mean that he is in every respect unchanging, including his knowledge and experience".<sup>28</sup> Plato's concept of God would not be confined to himself, but would undoubtedly influence all of Western philosophy, even providing an intellectual challenge to his student from Stagira.

*Aristotle.* Though a student of Plato, Aristotle disagreed with his teacher on many points including his view of God, epistemology and the radical dualism between the material and immaterial domains. However, many similar characteristics of Plato's philosophy of God are present. According to open theists, these similarities have found their way into the classical doctrine of God.<sup>29</sup> Aristotle seemingly arrived at his notion of "God" from his accounts of motion and substantial and accidental change in the universe. He viewed the world in terms of change, with all change moving from a state of real potency (i.e., a capacity) to actuality (i.e., actualized capacity). However, according to Aristotle, things cannot actualize themselves. For example, wood cannot make itself into a house, and a bucket cannot fill itself with water. Therefore, these processes are in need of a mover or Actualizer(s) who actualizes everything passing from potency to act. This "mover", however, must not itself need to be moved by another since this would lead to an infinite regress, something Aristotle rejected as impossible.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, all change/motion is moved by a prime mover as a formal cause, which is not part of the series of change known as the unmoved mover.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle describes this innovative approach in his *Metaphysics* and *Physics* when he writes:

Since there must be continuous motion in the world of things, and this is a single motion, and a single motion must be a motion of Magnitude (for that which is without magnitude cannot be in motion), and of a single magnitude moved by a single mover (for otherwise there will not be continuous motion but a consecutive series of separate motions), then if the mover is a single thing, it is either in motion or unmoved: if then it is in motion, it will have to keep pace with that which it moves and itself be in process of change, and it will also have to be moved by something: so we have a series that must come to an end, and a point will be reached at which motion is imparted by something that is unmoved. Thus we have a mover that has no need to change along with that which it moves but will be able to cause motion always...since the mover is never subject to any change.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 115.

<sup>29</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 256-258; *Metaphysics* 994.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1071-1075.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, "Physics," VIII.267a-b in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, volume 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 446. Also see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV.256a. All references to Aristotle's work/quotes are from this source.

Unlike Plato who saw a separation between the Good Form (*Agathos*) and the Demiurge (*Demiurgos*) who fashioned the world as its efficient causal agent, Aristotle believed that his ultimate mover was a single pure and simple Form substance that accounted for change in all moving bodies through *attraction* as the *telos*, which he defined as the *final* cause.<sup>33</sup> The mover is pure actuality without any potency whatsoever since for Aristotle, potency meant the ability to change. Therefore, as pure act, Aristotle's mover was pure platonic form possessing no matter that could easily change and corrupt, making it immutable. It also follows that if the mover is immutable, it must be eternal, and therefore, free from being effected ontologically with the "befores" and "afters" in the flow of time. Without the possibility of ontological change, the Mover must also be simple and indivisible not subject to alteration.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Aristotle's metaphysical substance was a thinking mind which eternally pondered its *own* thoughts and beauty, which ultimately provided the *telos* (goal or end) to which all other things were attracted and moved.

Sanders enumerates several conclusions that follow from Aristotle's "self-thinking" unmoved mover when he asserts:

This self-thinking thought is so radically independent (aseity) and is such pure actuality that it cannot *receive* the knowledge of other beings. To receive anything would imply dependency and deficiency. Second, because God cannot receive anything (including knowledge) from any other being. God is unaware of the existence of anything but himself. Aristotle's supreme God is unaware of the existence of the world and certainly has no need of entering into relations with others. 'Since he is in need of nothing God cannot have need of friends, nor will he have any.' God is literally apathetic toward the world as he has no concern or feelings toward it. God does not interact with the world nor enter into covenantal relations with humans – God only 'contemplates.' God is neither providential nor righteous in regard to the world.<sup>35</sup>

His assessment clearly identifies Aristotle's mover as an impersonal, myopic and metaphysical necessity to account for motion and change. According to Sanders, Aristotle's "God" is far from being religiously satisfying, yet many of the attributes Aristotle describes "have found their way into the Christian tradition".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The *final cause* (i.e., the goal, end, or purpose for which a body moves) should be distinguished from his two *intrinsic* causes, which are *formal* (i.e., that *of which* something is made, its form or essence) and *material* (i.e., that *out of which* something is made such as its material or stuff), and his extrinsic efficient cause (i.e., that *by which* something is made or moved such as the causal *agent* responsible).

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics 12*, 1072b-1073a.

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

*Stoicism.* According to open theology, Stoicism<sup>37</sup> provides yet another corruptive influence on how classical theologians describe the nature of God.<sup>38</sup> As an outgrowth of Stoic monistic physics, which is identical to their theology, they believed the rational order that harmonizes all things was the eternal, uncreated, and impersonal God (a.k.a. Zeus, *logos, law of nature, destiny*). Moreover, the material universe had no *qualitative* difference from God, though a *logical* distinction could be made, just as a soul is distinct from a body. Since God is the very stuff of the *kosmos*, including human beings, to which the divine rational order is distributed in seed form (*rationes seminales*), the world *must* act and exist according to its order or destiny. Therefore, Stoic philosophy and ethics are viewed through the lens of *determinism*, which believes that the world and its inhabitants are absolutely predestined with only a kind of inner sub-sovereignty that allows for man to develop virtue. Along with cultivating the virtues, human beings at best are resigned to live their personal and political life as orderly as the regular laws of the *kosmos*, being impotent to affect any change or gain relationships other than what is part of the one absolute causal system. For Stoicism, free will is impossible. However, resignation and acquiescence to one's destiny is commendable. It is Sanders' recognition of this radical determinism, perhaps associated with classical theism with some variation, that causes him to question the goodness of God when he asks, "Yet the belief that God causes everything exterior to us raises the problem of evil: How can God be said to be wholly good if such evil things happen to us?"<sup>39</sup> Theodicy is not the only issue emerging from Stoic thought. Even *Human freedom*, which is crucial to the open theology of God, is at risk or eliminated altogether. Nash states the obvious when he claims the Stoic God is impersonal and incapable of love,

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<sup>37</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks: Did the New Testament Borrow from Pagan Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992, 2003 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]), 57-58. Nash says that Stoicism covered nearly 500 years and can be roughly divided into three periods, Early Stoa (c.300-200 BC) led by Zeno of Citium (c.334-262 BC) and subsequently, Cleanthes (c.331-232 BC); Middle Stoa (c.150-30 BC) developed mostly at Rhodes under Panaetius (c.185-110 BC) and Posidonius (c.135-50 BC); and Roman or Late Stoa (c. 30 BC- AD 200) is associated with Seneca (AD c.1-65), Epictetus (AD c.55-135) and Marcus Aurelius (AD c.121-180). Though the philosophy of Stoicism underwent minor change and had distinct emphasis on particular subjects through the centuries, their thoughts on *determinism* and *human freedom*, which is the main issue concerning the classical-open debate, has remained a stable tenet.

<sup>38</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. For an expanded answer to this question see the revised and updated version of John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*.



divine-human relations and providential acts,<sup>40</sup> and according to open theism, this is something all too familiar in classical theology.

In no uncertain terms, Sanders summarizes the tendencies emanating from Hellenistic rational theology that “had a profound impact on Jewish and Christian thinking about the divine nature.”<sup>41</sup> He states:

- 1) The Greek philosophers were looking for that which was stable and reliable in contrast to the earthly world of change. Something of this attitude had perhaps been anticipated in the myths where Chronos (time) devoured his children: Time destroys what it creates. It seems an almost cultural value they shared that change and time denotes weakness and corruption while immutability and timelessness represent strength, immortality and perfection.
- 2) This leads to the distinction between being and becoming or reality and appearances. Appearances involves time and change while reality is timeless and immutable.
- 3) The ‘world’ was understood as a ‘natural order,’ a system of universal relations that implies an eternal, immutable order.
- 4) Above the personal gods exists the impersonal principle of sufficient reason, which is the ultimate explanation for why the world is the way it is. Deity, in this sense, is the universal principle of order presupposed to explain the natural order. God, then, is characterized by rationality, timelessness and immutability.<sup>42</sup>

According to Sanders, many of these ideas would come to a synthesis point in the works of the Jewish scholar Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC – AD 40) who would serve as “the bridge from the Greeks to the Christians”.<sup>43</sup>

Though several attempts have been made to show Paul’s dependence on Stoicism (cf. Acts 17:28) such as John Herman Randall Jr., *Hellenistic Ways of Deliverance and the Making of the Christian Synthesis* (1970) and William Fairweather’s *Jesus and the Greeks* (1924), openness advocates do not appear to be making this claim.<sup>44</sup> Some have tried to show a link between Seneca of Corduba (c. A.D. 1-65) and Paul. However, at the turn of the century, Albert Schweitzer effectively dismissed this idea by arguing that the similarities between the two are only “external” and superficial in their resemblance.<sup>45</sup> In contemporary times, J.B. Lightfoot in his *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*<sup>46</sup> argues

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<sup>40</sup> Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> See Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 64.

<sup>45</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters* (1912). See Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> J.B. Lightfoot. *St Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes and Dissertations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978.

against the idea that Seneca and Paul ever met. Furthermore, it is evident that Paul and Seneca's works are very different in content; the former being active, compassionate, and *deontologically* centered in *agapism*, whereas the latter appears preoccupied with *practical* ethics being unaware of the basic ethical concepts developed by Paul.<sup>47</sup> Nash describes these crucial differences when he asserts:

When properly understood, Seneca's ethic is repulsive to Pauline Christianity. It is totally devoid of genuine human emotion and compassion; there is no place for love or pity or contrition. It lacks any intrinsic tie to repentance, conversion and faith in God. To be sure, there are coincidences of language and imagery between Paul and Stoics like Seneca. But even though Paul used such images and language, he transformed and purified the ideas. If Paul did actually use Stoic language, he gave the words a new and higher meaning and significance.<sup>48</sup>

*Philo of Alexandria* (c. 20 B.C. – A.D. 40). There is a universal agreement among classical and open theologians regarding Philo's attempt to reconcile the Jewish scriptures with Greek Philosophy, particularly regarding that of Platonism.<sup>49</sup> In addition, most have concluded that this philosophical influence did not wholly corrupt traditional Jewish theology<sup>50</sup> (more specifically, the doctrine of God), but did in fact color Philo's hermeneutic, causing him to adopt an allegorical approach to scripture.<sup>51</sup> Sanders describes Philo's philosophical presuppositions as being "placed over the God described in the Bible and so serve as the preunderstanding that guided his reading of the scripture".<sup>52</sup> This certainly may be the case, and for this reason, Sanders et al. view Philo as the vital connection that forges the classical-Hellenistic synthesis.<sup>53</sup> Sanders points to Philo's doctrine of God, in particular, his favorite designation for God as "that which is", which Philo renders by the Greek neuter *to on*, rather than the Septuagint's translation of Exodus 3:14 using the personal *ho on* (*he* who is).<sup>54</sup> Since Philo saw God's existence and nature as

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<sup>47</sup> Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Volume I Greece and Rome* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 428-429.

<sup>48</sup> Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 65.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> See Philo's *De cherubim* and *Allegorical Commentary on Genesis* for an example of his application of the allegorical approach to scripture. Apparently, Philo viewed the presence of anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament as a legitimate cause for discovering the hidden meaning in the rest of the passages. This is not to say he denied the literal truth of these passages such as the Israel's exodus from Egypt. See Gordon H. Clark, *Selections from Hellenistic Philosophy* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, n.d.), 152.

<sup>52</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, see footnote 31, 183.

“anonymous being”, there is no way to define or describe the nature of God, for to do so would place limitations on God who cannot himself be limited in any way. If God cannot be defined and is unnamable (*akatonomastos*), then he is also incomprehensible (*akatalaptos*), which foreshadows the agnosticism of neo-Platonism of the third-century under Plotinus and Origen.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, any names attributable to God such as “Justice” and “Love” cannot be understood as *essential* properties of God’s nature; rather they are descriptions of how God works in the world.<sup>56</sup> According to Philo, it appears that human knowledge of God’s *existence* is possible. However, knowledge of his nature is “wholly impossible” since there is nothing in our experience that conveys the knowledge of God. Hence, there is no analogy of being or language,<sup>57</sup> which effectively ensures an impassible gulf between our thoughts and being from God’s mind and existence. Thus, God cannot have a direct reciprocal relationship with the world. Philo attempts to overcome this problem by positing intermediary beings, the greatest of which is the *Logos*.<sup>58</sup> For open proponents, God’s radical transcendence and unknowability poses a problem for divine-human relations. Sanders understands the Philonic concept of the unnamed God as replacing the named personal God of scripture when he says “the God revealed in the Bible is subordinated to the ‘true’ God of Greek thought”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Pinnock explains how Philo’s doctrine corrupted later Christian thought when he claims Philo defined “the divine essence as ‘that which is’”. This is a non-relational term that displaces the personal God of the biblical revelation and causes God’s attributes to acquire meanings they would not otherwise have had”.<sup>60</sup> That is to say, because Philo’s God is impassible, incorporeal, unknowable, immutable, simple, eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and

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<sup>55</sup> See “On the Unchangeableness of God” in Philo of Alexandria and Charles Duke Yonge, *The Works of Philo : Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1993), 158, and “On the Change of Names,” 341. At this point Philo provides an theological environment for describing God “by way of negation” (*via negativa*).

<sup>56</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 70.

<sup>57</sup> Meaning there is nothing characteristic or attributable of God found in any created thing intrinsically or extrinsically, nor metaphysically or linguistically, and although Philo described human reason as a divine quality, human beings cannot know their own mind, and therefore, remain ignorant of God’s essence. The doctrine of analogy (primarily of *being* though language is implied) appears to be the core issue with Philo’s concept of God, opting for God’s equivocal being, and the attempt to preserve Divine-human relations may have caused an over reaction by OT by adopting God’s *univocal* being.

<sup>58</sup> It is unclear whether Philo viewed the *Logos* as a thinking soul, the image of God, or simply the realm of Ideas.

<sup>59</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 69-70.

<sup>60</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 69.

ineffable, he remains “totally other”, and therefore, cannot be acted upon by another. Thus, this eliminates any Divine-human relations by *necessity*.<sup>61</sup> For open theism, Philo’s philosophical theology of God provided the “method and content for arriving at the biblical-classical synthesis...that would become so prevalent in Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought”.<sup>62</sup> According to Pinnock, the charge of syncretism leveled at classical theology is not a “crude charge”. In fact, some synthesis is good. For example, the Greek idea of perfection rose against the backdrop of the changing fickle gods of the day, which was an improvement “relative to that context”.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, the “Hellenistic assumptions place God so far away from us and as high above us as possible. They lead us to a one-sidedly transcendent deity...It is not wrong to exalt God’s otherness, except at the expense of divine relatedness”.<sup>64</sup> Here, Pinnock exposes his own bias in favor of relationship, rather than primarily substance metaphysics, which is a reversal of the traditional approach of “being before relating”.<sup>65</sup> In the final analysis, all could agree that Philo did what no other had done, synthesizing Hellenic thought with the scriptures,<sup>66</sup> something that would alter the course of theological studies in the centuries to come, reaching its apex in the thought of Augustine and Aquinas.

*The Patristic Fathers* (A.D. 100-400). Between the time of Philo and Augustine, the church fathers in the Western and Eastern empires began to address questions crucial to early formulations of orthodox Christian doctrine. Among these were issues involving the incarnation of Christ and the relationship between the divine and human natures, the relation of the Father to the Son and the continued formulations of the nature of God. Within these discussions/debates, it is common knowledge that the fathers utilized Greek philosophy in an effort to communicate in the most clear terms possible the distinctions between paganism and the Judeo-Christian deity. Similar to open theism, H.P. Owen

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<sup>61</sup> See Philo, *On the Unchangeableness of God*.

<sup>62</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 72. According to open theology and despite Philo’s negative influence on later classicists, they are quick to note that Philo was also greatly influenced by the scriptures and that his Theology Proper was not entirely given over to Greek thinking.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> See *Ibid.*, 113-152, where Pinnock presents his “Metaphysics of Love.”

<sup>66</sup> Pinnock says that the influence of Philo on the early patristic tradition was “immense”, teaching them “how to interpret the Bible in the manner through of Middle Platonism” (*Most Moved Mover*, 71). See Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 74-82.

believes that the Western world has seen a “double origin” of theism, “the Bible and Greek philosophy”.<sup>67</sup> G.L. Prestige seems to agree when he says “early Christendom sought both to establish and safeguard the supremacy of God in ways appropriate to a people trained to think in the schools of Greek philosophy, from which modern European thought is derived...”.<sup>68</sup> According to Sanders, “despite the different attitudes taken by the fathers toward philosophy, the influence of Greek philosophical notions of God is universal, even among those who ‘repudiate’ philosophy”.<sup>69</sup> While discussing how to overcome a “pagan inheritance”, Pinnock suggests, as does Sanders, that though several good things emerged from Greek influence, it also required early theologians to pay a great price. Pinnock states:

Greek thinkers offered the early Christian theologians a worldview in which the divine could be seen as the unifying principle. This was no small gift, though it exacted a considerable price. It set up a tension between Greek and biblical ideals of perfection, requiring theologians to reconcile the incomparable God of the Bible, ever responding to changing circumstances and passionately involved in history, with something like the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, a God completely sufficient unto himself. The exact relation between ancient Greek philosophy and conventional theism is certainly complex, but one does not have to be an expert to sense the significant struggle to align these two orientations.<sup>70</sup>

Pinnock is careful not to overstate his case by acknowledging that the “Hellenization of doctrine” is too strong a description to characterize what occurred. He accepts a “correlation” between scripture and Greek thought, which was “inevitable and right”.<sup>71</sup> However, he continues to say “there was as much dehellenization as there was Hellenization. The fathers stood up to pagan influences more often than they succumbed to them”.<sup>72</sup> Sanders concurs that the synthesis was not total. Rather, the fathers did retain many of the features of the biblical God and successfully critiqued certain aspects of Greek philosophy. However, they failed to allow these features to “question the philosophical understanding of the divine nature”.<sup>73</sup> For Sanders, as well as most open proponents, the early fathers such as Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clemente

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<sup>67</sup> H.P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 1. See Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 72.

<sup>68</sup> G.L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 25.

<sup>69</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 72.

<sup>70</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65-66.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, footnote 2, 66. Later in the same work, Pinnock argues that there has been a “Christianization of Greek, and a Hellenization of Christian, thought” (p. 71) and that there are aspects of the synthesis that are “not always bad” (p. 72).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 72.

of Alexandria and Origen all reflect, to a greater or lesser degree, the Hellenistic synthesis. At certain times, there appeared to be departures by Tertullian and Origen from the bonds of Greek thought. For example, Tertullian was careful to distinguish Christian doctrine from the alien philosophical systems of his time.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, he appears on occasion to advocate a personal God's responsiveness to humans and the suffering of the theanthropic Christ. In addition, Origen emphasizes the variety of emotions God experiences such as suffering and love. However, according to open theism, in the end both held for the most part to the classical notion of God, including exhaustive foreknowledge. This was achieved by explaining the ways of understanding anthropomorphic vocabulary and its acceptable application to the nature of God. Hence, for classical theology, any discussion of the proper descriptions of God in the open/classical debate must involve a discussion addressing the doctrine of analogy of language, something that Aquinas (1224-1274) and John Duns Scotus (1265-1308) would correctly touch upon in the thirteenth century.<sup>75</sup> There appears to be a fundamental difference between openness and classical theology regarding the crucial issue of analogy, which in my estimation, is the primary way to satisfactorily bring a solution to this debate. There is little disagreement between a classical and open theologians' understanding of what is written in the biblical text, though disagreement does surface in how to *apply* what is written to God. In other words, the crucial issue at stake is a hermeneutical/philosophical problem informed by one's doctrine of analogy; not only one's view of time, immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge, which can only be results (or symptoms) of one's reading and application of the text. That is to say, the issue at hand is discovering how biblical language relates and is applied to the ontological metaphysics of God. The importance of analogy, or the lack thereof, has a direct bearing on the crucial questions dealing with the nature of God's essence and will. Sanders' approval of Origen's student, Gregory Thaumaturgus, who advocated that God may suffer through Christ while possessing an impassible nature, may be indicative of Sanders' desire to remove any restraint God's nature imposes upon the divine will. For

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<sup>74</sup> See Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, I.2 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Volume 3. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885 [reprint edition], 272-273.

<sup>75</sup> It is my position that the open/classical debate must involve one's view of analogy, and cannot be satisfactorily debated merely on the merits of language apart from how it relates to God's nature lest we debate the superficial symptoms of open theism. This is explored in chapter 2 when treating analogy and religious language.

Gregory, traditional impassibility places “necessity” on the divine nature, which is repugnant to him since God may do as he *wills* and not as he *must* as dictated by his nature. The inability to do as God wills would ultimately, according to Gregory, allow even greater suffering in God since the nature cannot do what the will desires.<sup>76</sup> Sanders believes “Gregory forged an important path that, had it been followed, might have allowed Christian thinkers to be more open to divine responsiveness”.<sup>77</sup> The statement reveals a deeper question: If God’s will and nature do not necessarily function in accordance with each other, how do we know that God’s revealed will in scripture necessarily reflects God’s nature (i.e., what God is)? If the will and nature are independent, how then does one maintain simple perfections within the divine *ousia*? One could theoretically conclude, as Gregory does, that God’s nature is impassible while through his will, he can choose to suffer.<sup>78</sup> The only way this seems possible is to separate God’s will from his nature, thus destroying any concept of divine simplicity. Boyd, in his *God of the Possible*, hints at this kind of separation when he says God “never changes his perfect character, of course, for this would not be praiseworthy. But as Scripture indicates, he is wonderfully willing and able to adjust his plans and emotions as his relationship with us calls for it”.<sup>79</sup> From this statement, it would appear that God’s *unchanging* perfect character has no ontological connection with God’s *changing* plans, emotions, will and relationships. Hence, all passages in scripture pertaining to God’s change, emotions, temporality, will and responsiveness need not be explained as anthropomorphic language referring to God’s nature, but rather as the responsiveness of his will, which is separate from his nature. What is more, the overemphasis on the will of God, and possibly its fundamental separation from his nature, may yield a further problem for open theism—voluntarism. If God’s will is not ontologically anchored in his nature, one can conclude that God’s will and his relationship to creatures are arbitrary. This would subsequently call into question

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<sup>76</sup> St. Gregory Thaumartugus, *Tractatus ad Theopompum* in *Analecta Sacra Patrum Anteniceanorum* translation by J.B. Pitra (Paris: Roger and Chernovicz, 1883), 2.364. Gregory’s work appears to have originally been written in Greek and subsequently translated into Syriac. Pitra’s Latin translation is what I am referring to by my above source as cited in the English by Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 47.

<sup>77</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 76.

<sup>78</sup> See Thaumartugus, *Tractatus ad Theopompum* in *Analecta Sacra Patrum*, 4:363-76. See *Ibid.*, 2.364; 3.264; 5.366; 6.366; 8.369; 12.372; 13.272; 17.276. Also see discussion on this topic in Hallman, *The Descent of God*, 46-49.

<sup>79</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 78.

the nature and basis of moral commands enumerated in scripture along with the unchanging faithfulness open theists often posit as God's greatest aspect. The lack of proper analogy between the meaning of biblical words in their mundane uses and their meaning as applied to the nature of God has at least contributed to this unorthodox view, and perhaps is its fundamental root cause.

*Augustine* (c. A.D. 354-430). Classical doctrine formulated under Augustine is acknowledged by both traditional and open protestant theologians as well as Roman Catholics. This doctrine reached an apex during the fifth-century AD. For openness advocates, Augustine is the theological focal point that reflects at its highest form the pagan influences on the doctrine of God that began under Plato, grew under Plotinus and entered the stream of orthodox Christianity. Sanders highlights Augustine's significance in joining revelation with pagan-classical thought:

For the history of the biblical-classical synthesis there is no more significant Western theologian than Augustine. He was deeply influenced by the neo-Platonism he learned from Plotinus, which, even in his mature years, he used to interpret the Bible. The neo-Platonic notions of God as creative force rather than one who fashions the world, the immutability of ultimate reality, seeking the truth by turning inwards into our souls, and evil understood as a lack of goodness (connected to mutability and finitude) all vied with Augustine's biblical sensibilities for preeminence in his thinking.<sup>80</sup>

Pinnock is in agreement with Sanders regarding neo-Platonic influences, but emphasizes a "deep and lasting" effect on Augustine's hermeneutic which "put God in a kind of box".<sup>81</sup> This influence on Augustine is identified by Sanders to be the root cause for Augustine's notion of God being self-existent,<sup>82</sup> immaterial,<sup>83</sup> eternal,<sup>84</sup> simple,<sup>85</sup> immutable,<sup>86</sup> impassible and omniscient.<sup>87</sup> Pinnock clearly describes what he sees as a theological and relational setback due to Augustine's view of God nature when he says, "It preferred stability to change and being to becoming. It meant that immutability and impassibility took precedence over God's suffering love. It spelled God's immunity to time, change, and real relations with creatures. It requires that God's knowledge and will be

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<sup>80</sup> Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 80.

<sup>81</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 69.

<sup>82</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, I.6; *Confessions*, VII.10; XI.2-5.

<sup>83</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.6, 10; XI.4.

<sup>84</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, 121.5; *On the Trinity* XIV.15; *Confessions*, XII.11.

<sup>85</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, VIII.6; XI.10, 28-29.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, XI.10; XII.1-2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, V.9.



unchangeable”.<sup>88</sup> Of particular importance to open theism is the perceived damage incurred to divine–human relationships and the issue of exhaustive foreknowledge. Augustine insisted that God has no “real” relations with his creation as this would affect the being (substance) of God. As a result, this means that only “accidental” relationships are possible.<sup>89</sup> According to Augustine, real relations would contradict divine simplicity, and alternatively, the latter would be consistent with simplicity since *substantial* change is not in view. Open theologians view this distinction as detrimental to God’s real personal relationships with His creatures, aligning itself more with Plotinus’ distinction between *substance* and *relations* than with sound biblical exegesis.<sup>90</sup> Sanders offers a summary of Augustine’s “problematic” position in this way:

His emphasis on divine immutability and simplicity takes precedence over God’s suffering love and faithfulness. Augustine always believed in the biblical God, but in my opinion he allowed neo-Platonic metaphysics to constrain that God. He quotes the Bible extensively but interprets it with the neo-platonic framework. His consistent rejection of any sort of changeability or possibility in God leads to problems in understanding the nature of God’s love for his creatures and how God can have any sort of covenant relationship with them. ‘The immunity of God to all ‘real relationship’ with creation will become axiomatic in scholastic theology.’<sup>91</sup>

Open theists claim that Augustine incorrectly viewed divine-human relations in “mechanistic terms” due to negative philosophical presuppositions, which effectively sealed the fate of interpersonal love and covenant with God.<sup>92</sup>

The second issue of importance in Augustine’s theology is how timeless eternity and immutability relates to God’s knowledge. Augustine says:

For, not in our way does God look forward to the future, see the present, and look back upon the past, but in a manner remotely and profoundly unlike our way of thinking. God’s mind does not pass from one thought to another. His vision is utterly unchangeable. Thus, He comprehends all that takes place in time—the not-yet existing future, the existing present, and the no longer existing past—in an immutable and eternal present. He does not see differently with the eyes of the mind, for He is not composed of soul and body. Nor is there any then, now, and afterwards in His knowledge, for unlike ours, it suffers no change with triple time—present, past, and future.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, V.16.17. Augustine deals with the question of God *becoming* “Lord” over all creation in contrast to *being* Lord of creation. Like Aquinas, he says that God *became* Lord in an *accidental* way after He created, which did not affect His substance/nature in any way.

<sup>90</sup> Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God*, footnote 113, 186.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 85, and final quote in LaCugna, *God For Us*, 87.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>93</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XI.21, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1887 [reprint edition]), 216.

Augustine's view is perceived by open theism as necessarily eliminating genuine divine-human freedom that is necessary for meaningful relationships of give and take. The arguments against this position follow along the same line mentioned earlier in this chapter, and therefore, will not be elaborated upon here. Currently, there is little debate as to the Platonic and neo-Platonic influences on Augustine's notion of God, though there are ongoing discussions as to the extent to which this influence negatively affected his doctrine of God.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, Augustine appears to summon the *Enneads* to make correlations with the Bible at key points (e.g., *Confessions* VII.9). While in Milan (AD 384), he acknowledges his own indebtedness to reading "those books of the Platonists and being admonished by them to search for incorporeal truth" and for contributing to the transformation of his thoughts of God from Manichean dualism into simple monotheism.<sup>95</sup> Augustine makes it clear that these "books" were directing him to truths already revealed in scripture. One cannot underestimate the extent to which Augustine argued against neo-Platonism by associating it with the most prideful and presumptive approach to union with God.<sup>96</sup> Whatever pagan philosophy he may have held, his detractors would do well in acknowledging that it in no way was in opposition to the essential truths of scripture. In the final analysis, Augustine is viewed by openness thinkers as the most influential philosopher who secured the Hellenistic biblical-classical synthesis until the thirteenth century when Thomas Aquinas would continue the syncretistic pattern by interpreting God's nature through the philosophy of Aristotle.

*Aquinas* (c. 1224-1274). According to open theism, by the thirteenth century, Christian doctrine had been hardened into the biblical-classical synthesis by John Scotus Erigena's (c. 810-877) reliance on the work *pseudo-Dionysius*, Anselm's (c. 1033-1109) perfect being ontological argument, Boethius' (c. 480-525) divine timelessness and brought to a zenith by Aquinas' integration of the works of Aristotle.<sup>97</sup> Sanders says, "Aquinas epitomizes the tensions of the biblical-classical synthesis in attempting to reconcile the God of historical action depicted in the Bible with the understanding of God

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<sup>94</sup> This will be explored in the evaluation section of this chapter.

<sup>95</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.20, in Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1886 [reprint edition]), 113-114.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.8-20.

<sup>97</sup> Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 85-86; Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 152.

as metaphysical principle, which was needed to explain the cosmos”.<sup>98</sup> Swinburne concurs with this Thomistic synthesis when he writes, “The belief that God is immutable in this sense...came, I suspect, from neo-Platonism”.<sup>99</sup> Pinnock says of Aquinas that he “was a marvelous Christian thinker in so many ways; this is an illustration of how not to proceed. Thomas derives divine attributes from reason rather than revelation”.<sup>100</sup> Open theism’s main concern with Aquinas is his over reliance on Aristotelian thought and his knowledge gained through human reason and natural theology. For Aquinas, God is pure and simple actuality (*actus purus*), possessing no passive potency.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, God’s nature must be free from all accidental and substantial change since passing from potency to act implies gaining or losing something, making all divine change for the worse. From Act comes simplicity, immutability, timeless eternity, impassibility, infinity and exhaustive knowledge, none of which is dependent on man’s actions nor the temporal world. Openness advocates reject the Thomistic formulations since it would effectively eliminate God’s “becoming”, and would subsequently remove any possibility of dynamic divine-human relations.<sup>102</sup> Pinnock avers that “because of God’s complete actuality of being, God must not be really related to creatures because to be really related would imply a kind of imperfection in God. Furthermore, the fact that there are creatures makes no real difference to God”.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Aquinas believed that terms and things could be related to each other. However, pertaining to God’s relationship to creatures, this relationship is “real” only for the creature, for God the relation is “logical”, much like the relation of words to their real physical referent. Aquinas explains:

Since therefore God is outside the whole order of Creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him...as a column is on the right of an animal, without change in itself, but by change in the animal.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 87

<sup>99</sup> Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 215.

<sup>100</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 70.

<sup>101</sup> This does not mean God has no “active potency”, which allows God to act in the world without necessitating change in God. An example of this is creation.

<sup>102</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 87.

<sup>103</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 70-71.

<sup>104</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.13.7. See I.28.1.

For open theism, Aquinas' notion of God as self-sufficient pure actuality is equivalent to inert, static and immobile existence.<sup>105</sup> There appears to be a fundamental breakdown in understanding, and/or outright rejection, of Aquinas' thought on God since much of his theology is the result of careful deliberation based on his doctrine of analogy, both of language and of being.<sup>106</sup> In Aquinas' thought, immutable does not mean "immobile" (static), nor does the idea of changelessness mean there can be no positive descriptions available to humans to describe God.<sup>107</sup> Rather, he applies the language to a being (whether God or creatures) in accordance with their respective natures. For example, if applied to the Creator, it must be predicated of God as the infinite Cause, which has no part of the effect in its ontological constitution. That is, any perfection in the effect (creation) exists in the Cause in an ontologically different and more eminent way. In contrast, open theism approaches Aquinas, as well as the philosophical and biblical texts describing God, through a radically *univocal* and *ultra-literal* hermeneutic filtering of religious language through *relational* metaphysics rather than *substance* metaphysics. As a result, we are left with a God who appears to be a temporal and changing being, albeit with considerably more power and intellect than his creation, but nevertheless limited in most respects and indistinguishable from his effects. This implies that God is somewhat dependent on the world, at least for his knowledge, and the world is dependent on God. In addition, because of their univocal approach to language and being, this same God would have an aspect to him that would also resemble the classical descriptions mentioned in scripture. Ultimately, it seems that God lacks a qualitative difference from his creation, leaving questions of his knowledge and nature to those of *quantity* and *extent* rather than *kind*. Consequently, the God of open theism suffers from an identity crisis by residing halfway between classical theism and process theism, which risks being labeled as an ontological category mistake

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<sup>105</sup> Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, 15; *Most Moved Mover*, 30. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I: God*. Translated by Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), I.31-35; *Summa Theologica*, I.13.10.

<sup>107</sup> See this bias in Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 79, where he says, "We ought to view God in personal not absolutist terms. The primary category in Christian theism is person not substance". For Aquinas, though inadequate to describe the divine essence in itself, positive descriptions of God are possible through analogy.

never before seen in the history of the orthodox church, that is, until the rise of process theology under Alfred North Whitehead.<sup>108</sup>

*An Evaluation of Open Theism's View of Greco-Hellenistic Influence.* Though Christians, whether open or classical, have always been influenced to various degrees by the philosophies of their time, the openness charge of negative Greek corruption of the classical notion of God's attributes and foreknowledge is unfounded and unproven. Classical Christianity has on occasion succumbed to alien thought, though for the most part, it has waged a successful battle against pagan ideas. There are several reasons for rejecting the open theists' charge of Greek-Hellenic corruption of the classical doctrine of God.

*Genetic Fallacy.* Rejecting the classical position on God due to its source or association with undesirable philosophy is both illogical and unhelpful to the debate. Similarity, or even identity, with Greek thought would not necessarily make one's concept of God false. Surprisingly, Pinnock claims to offer open theism as a healthy synthesis of classical and process thought which is not burdened by pagan elements.<sup>109</sup> However, many of the ideas that open theology promote have been developed in prior Greek philosophy including Aristotle's formal structure of the laws of logic and his, and Cicero's (106-43 BC), insistence that future tense statements have no truth value.<sup>110</sup> In addition to these, open advocates endorse the principle of change developed by Heraclitus, and Plato's belief in an eternal world of properties (Forms) in the Ultimate. In the modern times, process philosophy under Alfred North Whitehead, who has said Western thought is indebted to Plato, along with John Cobb and Charles Hartshorne, has contributed considerably to the formulation of openness ideas.<sup>111</sup> Pinnock identifies several points of agreement with process theology:

The fact is that process and openness theists share important convictions. We both value natural theology and appreciate the contribution of process philosophy to modern versions of it....As is rare among modern philosophers, process makes the love of God a high priority and a central theme....It recognizes bipolarity in God, human self-determination, and divine persuasion. We both accept the

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<sup>108</sup> See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929 [corrected edition 1978]); *Adventures of Ideas* (1933); *Religion in the Making* (1926).

<sup>109</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 150.

<sup>110</sup> Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 9; Cicero, Marcus T., *On Divination*, Translated by H.M. Poteat (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

<sup>111</sup> See John Cobb Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 166.

need to critique classical substantive metaphysics and we both reject the notion that God is an absolute being, unaffected by the world....We believe that God not only affects creatures but that creatures affect God. We both think God suffers when things go badly for creatures....We can utilize process insights to help us communicate the Christian faith without accepting the total system.<sup>112</sup>

Openness authors regularly refer to the corruption of classical doctrine by referring to the pagan influence, but offer no clear explanation of the exact connection between Greek and classical thought beyond the general similarities. To assert a resemblance and/or overlap between Greek philosophical ideas and classical doctrine is insufficient to establish the case that there was indeed a direct negative influence. Therefore, this approaches the fallacy of false cause, which attributes an effect to a cause without establishing the direct connection between the two. In addition, Hellenistic thought is much too diverse to apply specific influences to classical thought. For example, Platonism differs in many ways (e.g., Plato versus Plotinus and the Stoics). Open proponents have never precisely identified which particular aspect of “Greek Philosophy” to which they are referring. To pinpoint the ideological contact from one thinker to the next, without mentioning the influence explicitly or offering a detailed analysis of their works, is an overestimation of one’s ability to discern influence. On the other hand, very general influences can easily be discerned by careful analysis. At best, open theism has only established a general charge of influence, which may be healthy or unhealthy, without explicitly identifying the details of contact. Basing corruption charges on mere citations of pagan philosophers or utilizing philosophical vocabulary in the early works of the church fathers is not enough to substantiate the claim that one’s doctrine is thoroughly corrupt in *substance*. That is to say, the question of influence simply cannot be solved by a casual perusal of the conceptual and philosophical categories one employs in reasoning and communicating the nature of God. It can only be discovered by careful and prolonged deliberation and comparison between classical theology and the complex world of Greek philosophical thought in its very *substance*. Moreover, open theology offers unclear notions of what broad categories such as “Greek philosophy”, “Hellenistic influence” or “Platonic” thought actually entails. Depending on the individual philosopher, most thinkers change their views considerably and incorporate new ideas into their paradigms. For example,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., ix-xi.

Augustine's thought prior to A.D. 417 is different in many instances. Similarly, Plato's early thoughts differ when compared to his later *Dialogues*, and the development of Stoic and Aristotelian philosophy have appeared in various forms through the centuries. There simply is no reason to believe the majority of Greek and Hellenistic influence was anything more than early Christians employing the conceptual and linguistic framework for philosophically communicating an essentially new theological message in an environment that required explanation in the vernacular of the Greco-Roman philosophical world.<sup>113</sup>

*Early Fathers Rejected Alien Philosophical Substance.* Though not always successful, as was the case with Origen, the vast majority of the early fathers recognized the philosophical environment in which Christianity emerged and developed. Based on the personal revelation of Jesus Christ and the propositional revelation contained in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Christianity came into existence as a religion (1 Cor. 1:17ff), not a philosophical system *per se*. The apostle Paul spoke and wrote at great lengths in order to communicate the distinction between Christian wisdom and knowledge in contrast to human wisdom and the philosophies that are substantially opposed to Christian doctrine. To the Colossians he said, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (2:8). The only time the word "philosophy" (*philosophias*) is used in the New Testament is in the context of warning, with a clear distinction between that which is "according to Christ" and the inimical philosophies described as the "principles of the world". Moreover, lest the early church adopt the mistaken notion that Paul forbid any association with philosophy, there is grammatical justification here for claiming Paul did not deprecate all philosophy, nor prohibit the usage of its tools/categories (cf. Philip. 4:8). The presence of the definite article (*tas*) which modifies *philosophias* suggests Paul was speaking of a *particular* philosophy, perhaps referring to an incipient form of Gnosticism, mysticism, asceticism and/or legalism (Col. 2:8-23). In other Pauline passages, the distinction between

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<sup>113</sup> Not all these influences were extrinsic to the Bible. For example, Paul's articulation in Athens of the "Unknown God" in Acts 17:16-34 employs *approvingly* philosophical statements borrowed from pagan poets (Aratus and Epimenides cf. Titus 1:12) such as "in Him we live and move and have our being" and "for we are also His offspring". There is also an appeal to the following: 1) apophatic language (v 23, 25); 2) distinction between cause and effect; 3) God's transcendence; 4) God's self sufficiency; 5) God's independence (v 25); 6) God's purpose and intelligence (v 26-27); and 7) the analogy of being (v 29). Apparently, Paul's communication was not familiar to the Epicurean and Stoics of his day (v 19-21).

“human wisdom”, the “wisdom of this world” or “wisdom of words” is presented in clear *substantial* contrast to the “power” and “wisdom of God” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-31; 2:6-16). It is also true that the early fathers saw the need to “contend earnestly [*epagonizesthai*] for the faith” (Jude 3) and to “always *be* ready to *give* a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).<sup>114</sup> The early fathers quoted the New Testament over 36,000 times in the first few centuries, and though unsophisticated, they were well aware of the scriptural admonitions and distinctions between Christian theological substance and the prevailing philosophical systems (cf. Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 1:22). In Thomas Weinandy’s work on the patristic doctrine of God, he highlights the distinction between Greek and Christian ideas employed by the early fathers when he comments:

Because the early fathers lived and worked within the environment of the New Testament and Jewish/Hellenic ‘bridges,’ they did not think it inappropriate to use language and concepts that were prevalent among their contemporary philosophical colleagues, even though they wished to be faithful to the Jewish and Christian revelation. They too, saw themselves as apologetic and evangelistic ‘bridges’ to the pagan and philosophical world in which they lived. They instinctively did what they believed the New Testament did, and they did so by design.<sup>115</sup>

Since the philosophical distinction was pronounced, it was inevitable that Christianity needed an apologetic against attacks that employed sophisticated pagan philosophical systems (Acts 17:16-34).<sup>116</sup> Among those who defended the faith in the second-century A.D., often by utilizing Greek philosophical categories, were Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Of these, Justin and Clement emerged as the objects of criticism in most of open theism’s publications due to their knowledge and prolific exercise of philosophy throughout their works. Indeed, Justin spoke highly of Stoic and Greek philosophers and was well-versed in Platonism, Pythagoreanism and Stoicism.<sup>117</sup> In addition, Justin in his *First Apology* to the Roman senate claims that those philosophers who lived “reasonably” (*meta logou*), such as Socrates and Heraclitus who had the *logos* diffused among them, could be considered “Christians”. Some would object to his lofty view of what reason could convey to the pagan mind regarding redemption, bringing into question the

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<sup>114</sup> Italics in original New King James Version text; brackets added.

<sup>115</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>116</sup> See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Volume II Medieval Philosophy: From Augustine to Duns Scotus* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 13-16.

<sup>117</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, II, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885 [reprint edition]), 195; *Ibid.*, *Second Apology*, VIII, in *Ibid.*, 191.



necessity of Christ's redemptive work and special revelation. Others could understand Justin as repeating the essence of what Paul says to the Roman church when referring to Abraham as being righteous by faith some 450 years before special revelation (Mosaic Law) was given to Israel (Rom. 4:1-4). Others suggest that the heathen do indeed have a witness of God through his attributes, moral commands and through what had been made known in creation (Rom. 1:19-21; 2:15). Since modern commentators have no evidence that Socrates and Heraclitus were "Christians" in the absolute sense of the word, unless Justin possessed works that report them as such (which are no longer extant), one can assume that he is perhaps mistaken. Justin is simply incorrect. However, one cannot miss the point of Justin's statement that *if* Socrates and Heraclitus were Christians, they would have to have the knowledge of the Word (*logos*, Christ), making Justin's observation correct in *substance*, but perhaps incorrect in *application* to Socrates and Heraclitus. After all, Justin was biblically correct concerning this same appellation to Abraham. One cannot assume that Justin has capitulated to the negative influence of Greek philosophy on this particular point. Though Justin made strong statements about the role of philosophy in defending the Christian faith, he did discern between which philosophies were consistent with Christianity, concluding that Christianity is superior to ancient philosophy and human wisdom. Justin said:

We know that the wicked angels appointed laws conformable to their own wickedness, in which the men who are like them delight; and the right Reason, when He came, proved that not all opinions nor all doctrines are good. Wherefore, I will declare the same and similar things to such men as these...Our doctrines, then appear to be greater than all human teaching; because Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being, both body, and reason, and soul. For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves.<sup>118</sup>

Justin continues when he writes:

And our doctrines are not shameful, according to a sober judgment, but are indeed more lofty than all human philosophy; and if not so, they are at least unlike the doctrines of the Sotadists, and Philaenidians, and Dancers, and Epicureans, and such other teachings of the poets...<sup>119</sup>

Justin again elevates the doctrines of Christianity over philosophy produced by human wisdom by making a distinction in philosophical substance when he asserts:

I confess that I both boast and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian; not because the teachings of Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects similar, as neither are those of the others, Stoics, and poets, and historians. For each man spoke well in

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., *Second Apology*, IX-X, in Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., XV, in Ibid., 193

proportion to the share we had of the spermatic word [the word disseminated among men, James 1:21], seeing what was related to it. But they who contradict themselves on the more important points appeared not to have possessed the heavenly [literally, dimly seen at a distance] wisdom, and the knowledge which cannot be spoken against. Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. For next to God, we worship and love the Word who is from the unbegotten and ineffable God, since also He became man for our sakes, . . . For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them. For the seed and imitation imparted according to capacity is one thing, and quite another is the thing itself, of which there is the participation and imitation according to the grace which is from Him.<sup>120</sup>

Justin is a far reach from being uncritical of alien philosophies, and though he not only employed philosophy at key junctures in his argument, he actually passes judgment on it where it departs from revelation. In his work on early Christian thought, Henry Chadwick declares:

What is central in his [i.e., Justin's] thought is the way in which the biblical doctrine of God and his relation to the world provides him with a criterion of judgment, in the light in which he evaluates the great names in the history of Greek philosophy. Justin does not merely use Greek philosophy. He passes judgment upon it.<sup>121</sup>

Whatever may be said of Justin regarding his philosophy, it cannot be safely asserted that he viewed Greek thought as substantially influencing Christianity, but rather, the Hebrew Scriptures and the divine word greatly influence the Greek history of Philosophy.<sup>122</sup> Further, he regularly makes distinctions between pagan philosophy and Christianity, arguing if any truth was discovered through human reason, albeit seen dimly, it was attributed to the spermatic word placed there by God.<sup>123</sup> These characteristics can only be said of someone who believed the Christian revelation was the basis and fullest expression of knowledge. Hence, it is unreasonable to assume Justin, who represents one of the most philosophic individuals among the early fathers, replaced core Christian notions of God's nature with the dimly lit knowledge in opposition to the teaching of Christ. In fact, it appears that Justin believed the scriptures influenced and forms the basis for Greek thought. Lloyd Gerson agrees with Augustine when he declares:

Natural theology was given a primacy among the pagan philosophers which it could never have among Christians or, for that matter, for anyone who recognized the authority of revealed theology.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., XIII, in Ibid., 192-193.

<sup>121</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 20.

<sup>122</sup> For examples of how Justin posited the Hebrew scriptures as a great influence on the thought of Plato in the *Timaeus*, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LX, in Roberts and Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 183. f

<sup>123</sup> See Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 9-23.

According to orthodox Christians, natural theology could never occupy anything more than an auxiliary role, elucidating and supporting the deliverances of Scripture.<sup>124</sup>

Eminent patristic scholar Prestige says, “Christianity was eclectic in its philosophy, though its choice was always controlled by Scriptural teaching and precedent”.<sup>125</sup> In Chadwick’s comparison of Justin’s approach to philosophy and religion with two of his pagan contemporaries, Lucian of Samosata and Numenius of Apamea,<sup>126</sup> Lucian is bewildered with the multitude of religious and philosophical schools, and he says it can only be guesswork as to which is correct. Unlike Lucian, Numenius seeks to synthesize all philosophies and religious positions, thus viewing everything as true. Justin is neither extreme, rather reflecting judicial independence. Chadwick elucidates:

It is on this ground that Justin must be asserted to have some measure of genuinely independent status as a thinker. It is a naïve mistake to suppose that because the diffused philosophy of his time was eclectic, inserting Stoic ethics into a framework of Platonic metaphysics, Justin is *merely* reflecting this popular synthesis in his view that Plato was mainly right about metaphysics and the Stoics about ethics. Precisely what one means by the misty term ‘eclecticism’ it is never very easy to say. There is no philosophy that does not draw together elements from diverse sources. But if eclecticism merely means a kind of weak intellectual syncretism without any principle of judgment (such as that exemplified by Numenius), endeavouring to harmonize differing positions with the prime end of achieving concord rather than discord, and compromise rather than truth, then it is clear that Justin does not fit into this category.<sup>127</sup>

Chadwick understands Justin’s moderate philosophical views as demonstrating a judicious approach to the relationship between Greek metaphysics and Christian doctrine when he says “we see Justin’s Christian faith impelling him to reject metaphysical positions that he thinks incompatible with the Bible”.<sup>128</sup> There simply is no reason to suggest Justin, or any other early father regularly and uncritically accepted Greek philosophy without being guided by the scriptures. Copleston explains the dynamic interaction between Christianity and her selective use of philosophy when he writes:

Since on the one hand pagan philosophers were inclined to attack the Church and her doctrine, while on the other hand Christian apologists and theologians were inclined to borrow the weapons of their adversaries when they thought that these weapons could serve their purposes, it is only to be expected that Christian writers should show a divergence of attitude in regard to ancient philosophy, according as they chose to regard it as a foe and rival of Christianity or as a useful arsenal and storehouse or even as a providential preparation for Christianity.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> L.P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990, 1994), 1.

<sup>125</sup> Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 27.

<sup>126</sup> Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 20-22.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>129</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume II*, 15.

The early fathers began with a fundamental premise of defending the faith from pagan attack, which often called for philosophical weaponry that allowed the church to clearly articulate its revealed scripture. For example, Gerald Bray notes several crucial theological words such as substance, nature, essence, *prosopon*, theology and others, which were understood in a very different way until they were given new meanings and applied according to scriptural teaching.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, Tertullian's usage of the Latin word *persona* (*prosopon* in Greek) and its application to the Trinity was understood incorrectly by the Greeks to mean "mask", which led many Greeks to believe Christians were asserting that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were merely masks worn by God in the drama of human history (i.e., modalism).<sup>131</sup> However, Tertullian's *persona* was what was meant by the Greek's *hypostasis*, which no Greek philosophical system associated with *ousia*, or more precisely, three persons in one essence/substance.<sup>132</sup> Bray describes the distinction in the Greek and classical meanings regarding crucial theological terms that apply to the nature of God such as *hypostases*, *ousia*, *substantia* and *persona* when he says:

The important point here is that no pagan philosopher could have spoken in these terms, even if the words the Christians were using would have been familiar to him. A pagan Greek would not have said that God (or anything else) was one *ousia* in three *hypostases* because he would not have understood what the distinction between these terms was supposed to be. He might have been able to accept it once it was explained (as many in fact did), but that explanation depended on the preaching of the Christian gospel, which made the distinction meaningful in the first place....Moreover, a Roman would never have concluded that God was three *personae* in one *substantia* because, to his mind, the terms belonged to different worlds.<sup>133</sup>

According to Bray, the Trinitarian formula and the nature of God were unique to Christianity and were the earmark of a movement that could not have substantially tolerated the corruptive influence of pagan philosophy.<sup>134</sup> This crucial point led him to claim that "...the church fathers also had to recognize that the Bible spoke of a Creator God who is essentially different from his creation and, in his nature, incompatible with it.

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<sup>130</sup> Gerald L. Bray, "Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?" in Huffman and Johnson, gen. eds., *God Under Fire*, 108-111. Also see Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Volume I (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1953, 1975), 250.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>133</sup> Bray, "Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?" in Huffman and Johnson, eds., *God Under Fire*, 111.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-117.

This belief may have had some connection with different strands of Greek philosophy, but it was not dependent on any of them”.<sup>135</sup>

Regarding open theism’s claim pertaining to Clement of Alexandria, there is undoubtedly a reverence for philosophy in his works. In them, he clearly viewed the truths gained by the philosophers, especially those of Plato and the Stoics, as preparatory to revealed truth in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>136</sup> His application of Platonic philosophy did indeed affect his interpretation of Scripture, leading to the view that God is beyond positive knowledge, accepting only descriptions by way of negation (*via negativa*).<sup>137</sup> However, this apophaticism can hardly be said to be “pagan” since it has been present in the very roots of Christian learning through early Jewish and biblical revelation, which often pre-date formal philosophy by hundreds of years.<sup>138</sup> In this, he anticipates Neoplatonism and its extreme transcendence of the One. Alternatively, Clement had his reservations about philosophy, citing that Scripture is the source of true *gnosis* (knowledge) and that it is the criterion in the discovery of things.<sup>139</sup> In addition, he asserts the superiority of faith over reason, the limitations of philosophy to which faith is not susceptible and that righteousness attained by the Greeks through philosophy is incomplete. Clement says, “Well, Sensation is the ladder to Knowledge; while Faith, advancing over the pathway of the objects of sense, leaves Opinion behind, and speeds to things free of deception, and reposes in the truth”<sup>140</sup> and that the “heresies of the Barbarian philosophy,...speak without accuracy, not in accordance with truth;...and receive Christ not as the prophecies deliver”.<sup>141</sup> Like Justin, Clement held the Scriptures as his ultimate authority and sought to reconcile philosophy with revealed theology. Though not always successful, it is difficult to see how he substantially differed in his core theological conclusions from those other major early fathers, medieval scholastics or the modern

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>136</sup> Clement, *Stromata*, V, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885 [reprint edition]), 305.

<sup>137</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume II*, 26.

<sup>138</sup> See Exodus 3:14 (“I AM”) and John 8:58 (“I am”) and the Hebrew covenantal divine name (YHWH) which is unpronounceable. Also, see my discussion of the apophatic tradition at the end of this chapter.

<sup>139</sup> Clement, *Stromata*, II.11; VII.16.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., II.4, in Roberts and Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 2, 350.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., VI.15, in Ibid., 509.

classical position on God.<sup>142</sup> Clement, who lived in the second and third century when Gnosticism confronted Christianity with its intellectual sophistication, sought ways in which to render Christianity believable to thinking Christians.<sup>143</sup> Naturally, Clement would employ the philosophical reasoning with which he was accustomed in order to clarify and offer a sound intellectual foundation for Christian theological concepts,<sup>144</sup> while simultaneously seeking to avoid heresy and the disdain leveled by the anti-intellectual Christians of Alexandria.<sup>145</sup> Whatever may be said of Clement's integration of Hellenic philosophy, his pastoral care of the "Church" and love of the authoritative scriptures guided his reasoning. Chadwick avers:

Clement is Hellenized to the core of his being, yet unreserved in his adhesion to the Church in the sense of being wholly opposed to Gnosticism and bound to the authority of scripture as inspired revelation by which alone he has certitude concerning God's will and purpose.<sup>146</sup>

Because of the Gnostic threat in Alexandria and his distance from Italy, which appears to have clearly marked a distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, Clement found himself in an awkward situation of clearly defining the Christian faith in intellectual/philosophical terms. This was necessary not only to match the sophistication of the Gnostics in the eyes of the Christian intellectuals who were attracted to the new movement, but to also clearly mark the point at which heresy could be clearly defined.<sup>147</sup> Though Clement was Hellenized, he did not capitulate to the distinctive marks of Gnosticism or alien doctrines that would compromise the core tenets of the classical doctrine of God and of the essentials of Christianity. This is confirmed in Chadwick's assessment of Clement's work:

But Clement never loses his Christianity in a sea of Hellenism, even when he is treating of popular ethics, where the pull towards a colourless and undistinctive neutrality is powerful.... Yet unreserved in his adhesion to the Church in the sense of being wholly opposed to Gnosticism and bound to the authority of scripture as inspired revelation by which alone he has certitude concerning God's will and purpose.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Despite the fact he was influenced by Platonic philosophy, Clement held to variations of the core classical concept of God as espoused by the classical church through the centuries, particularly in his hermeneutic. See David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998).

<sup>143</sup> Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 33.

<sup>144</sup> Emile Brehier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 16.

<sup>145</sup> Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 33.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 64

In the final analysis, Clement's core doctrines of God, though reflecting some tertiary similarities to previous thinkers, do not match in core *substance* with any Greek or Hellenistic philosopher of the past, but rather his doctrine of God finds a good fit within the classical tradition.<sup>149</sup> The same can be said of classical Theology Proper as a whole, meaning the nature of God finds no resting place within any one tradition spanning the entire history of philosophy. To force a fit, as open theism does, is like identifying all automobiles as the same in *quality* simply because they all have wheels, tires, engines, paint, fenders and lights. To cite pagan influences among the early fathers as the reason for classical formulations ignores the overwhelming evidence that their philosophical speculations were by greater majority governed by revealed theology<sup>150</sup> and distinct in their very substance. To ignore this overestimates the power of the Greek philosophical tradition during the time of the patristic writings. Recognizing this, Nicholas Wolterstorff has since disassociated himself from his earlier statements<sup>151</sup> that had advocated negative Greek philosophical influence citing a number of factors. Wolterstorff reasons:

From this claim I insist on disassociating myself, and that for a number of reasons. For one thing, not everything the Greek philosophers said was false; to observe that some Greek philosopher held that the divine is timeless leaves open the question whether he was right about that. More important, the objection distorts what happened in the formation of Christian theology; it represents it as having simply been a matter of resisting or succumbing to cultural power....What impresses one about the church fathers, however, is how weak had become the cultural power of Greek philosophical thought over their thinking. Rather than simply giving voice to a supposed indoctrination into Greek philosophical thought, they had arguments for their theological convictions concerning God. Some of those arguments were no doubt first formulated by one or another Greek philosopher. But it's obvious to anybody who looks that the church fathers were already sufficiently removed from the cultural power of Greek philosophical thought to be eminently capable of sifting through that part of their inheritance, agreeing with what they judged themselves to have good reason to accept and reject the rest.<sup>152</sup>

It is the unremitting reliance on Scripture that presents itself as the fundamental reason why the vast majority of major theologians/philosophers during the first 1600 years of church history, whether they are, end up in essentially the same metaphysical place

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<sup>149</sup> Though influenced by Philo and holding to a radical view of divine transcendence, similar to Justin Martyr, and his unique view of all passions, Clement holds to nearly all the classical attributes of God. See *Stromata* II.11; IV.23; V.11-12; VI.7, 9; VII.3; *Paedagogus*, I.8-12; *Protrepticus* I.8, 12; V; X.

<sup>150</sup> This is true even among the most "philosophically influenced", Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Aquinas and so forth.

<sup>151</sup> See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis B. Smedes, eds., *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

<sup>152</sup> Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," in Ganssle, ed., *God and Time: Four Views*, 210-211.

concerning God’s nature. This is true regardless of whether these individuals were Platonist (Clement, Augustine), Aristotelian (Aquinas), or uninfluenced. Furthermore, this metaphysical phenomenon, though broadly defined at certain points, stretches across the major branches of Christianity including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant, despite their philosophical persuasion. Even within the openness movement, there are some consistencies with classical theology such as their belief that God is omniscient (of the present and past), omnipresent, has fixed points that must come to pass in the future,<sup>153</sup> possesses an unchanging character,<sup>154</sup> is personal and all-powerful, is Creator, is self-existing, is Necessary<sup>155</sup> and that love is the very essence of God’s being.<sup>156</sup> Though Boyd and other open theists believe God is “Necessary”, even quoting Aristotle’s belief that whatever is eternal must also be necessary, fails to acknowledge that Aristotle also believed that whatever is necessary must also be immutable and simple.<sup>157</sup> Aristotle writes that what is “necessary in the primary and strict sense is the simple; for this does not admit of more states than one”.<sup>158</sup> What is more, if Christianity was so similar to pagan philosophy, why did pagan philosophy (e.g., Acts 17:18; Celsus) vehemently reject Christianity as Celsus did in the late second century? The best answer has been, and continues to be, because they were substantially different. Chadwick describes Celsus’ view of the dissimilarity of the Christian and Greek tradition:

In his [i.e., Celsus] eyes Christianity is at no point and in no sense continuous with the classical Greek tradition except in so far as it may have borrowed from it and distorted it. The gulf is unbridgeable. Platonism and Stoicism do not point forward to any sort of consummation and fulfillment in Christianity. Christ is not the keystone of an arch formed by Judaism and Hellenism. No such arch exists, and even if it did, Celsus would advise the builders to reject the offer of this stone.<sup>159</sup>

Celsus described Christianity as barbaric superstition and irrational, and he could not see how Christianity could dignify itself with pseudo-philosophical terminology.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 15.

<sup>154</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 27.

<sup>155</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 137.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>158</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V:1015b9-15, in Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, volume 2, 1603.

<sup>159</sup> Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 30.

<sup>160</sup> Bray, “Has the Christian Doctrine of God Been Corrupted by Greek Philosophy?” in Huffman and Johnson, gen. eds., *God Under Fire*, 110. Bray suggests the influence of Christianity was on Greek philosophy rather than the other way around for the neo-Platonists of the third and fourth centuries. They appear to have absorbed more of Christianity than many people realize.



Furthermore, no pre-Christian philosopher ever held to a personal, triune God that possessed the classical attributes enumerated throughout church history. The pre-Socratics were consumed with natural philosophy, usually by identifying some form of matter as their first principle; Parmenides' univocal view of the world (Being) led him to posit an impersonal monistic Being; Plato held to a metaphysical dualism in the form of a dependent *Demiurgos* and an Ultimate impersonal *Agathos*, not to mention his belief in transmigration of the soul (i.e., reincarnation)<sup>161</sup> and the denial of God's real immanent involvement in time-space events; and Aristotle's first principle was an impersonal metaphysical necessity that was absorbed in self-thinking to account for motion in the cosmos. Though Aristotle posits his unmoved mover, he gives no lengthy description of this first cause he calls "god". Only a brief description of what appears to be an eternal thinking cause of pure actuality that meditates on itself as the supreme object of thought. Aristotle describes this cause as:

And thinking in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thinking in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks on itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into to contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is *capable* of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the essence, is thought itself. But it is *active* when it *possesses* this object. Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain, and the act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God *is* in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this *is* God....It is clear then from what has been said that there is a substance that is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things....But it has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place.<sup>162</sup>

There is no hint at anything remotely close to the core notion of the classical Christian God besides what is metaphysically *necessary* for there to be a creative first cause of any kind.<sup>163</sup> There are several reasons why Aristotle's "god" is substantially different from the

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<sup>161</sup> See Plato, *Meno*, 81, in Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, 870. Also see the detailed treatment on this subject by Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 2-7.

<sup>162</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.1072b-1073a, in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World: The Works of Aristotle*, volume 1, translated by W.D. Ross (Chicago, IL: William Benton, 1952), 602-603.

<sup>163</sup> That is, whether it's pagan, Greek, Hebrew, Indian and so forth, there are certain requirements necessary in any first cause to account for finite existence. For example, a first cause must itself be uncaused since it would be a dependent being requiring a cause of its own existence. It must be unchangeable since all

classical view. First, the god of Aristotle simply accounted for the efficient causality of all motion, or becoming, by the concept of attraction through eternal and uninterrupted self-thought (*noesis noeseos*), whereas the Christian God accounted for the creation and preservation of one's very being. Second, there is no interaction between human beings and this remote Self-Thought, let alone a divine mark of involvement in human history. Third, we must not jump to the conclusion that Aristotle's God was righteous, holy or possessing any divine attributes that demanded worship. Fourth, there is no mention of a universal *telos*, or purpose, for which this self-thinking being thinks beyond the motion Aristotle describes. What is more, it appears Aristotle's cause is self-absorbed (as pure thought thinking on thought itself) and detached from any possible creature relations. In his *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (1957), distinguished historian of ancient philosophy, F.M. Cornford, sums up Aristotle's notion of the self-contemplating "God", explaining:

In the system of Aristotle... God is sublimated to the topmost pinnacle of abstraction, and conceived as Form without Matter—a pure Thought, cut off from all active or creative energy, for the Ultimate End can have no other end beyond itself. It cannot even think of anything but itself, for no other object is worthy of its attention. It is shut up in unceasing and changeless contemplation of itself.<sup>164</sup>

The assertion that Aristotle's unmoved mover is the source of the traditional view of God is simply mistaken—an egregious error to say the least. It also is not fair to the Greek philosophers and Christian theologians/philosophers who described the first principle/God in their own unique ways.

Furthermore, the openness conclusions gained from Aristotle's texts in his *Metaphysics XII* reveal a shortsighted approach to understanding the complex material in this section by disregarding alternative viewpoints of the content. Open proponents have overemphasized a reading of Aristotle that views his work as primarily "theology" and have interpreted the classical view of God through the lens of Aristotle's unmoved mover. Helen Lang has soundly argued that this view of Aristotle's content is unlikely and highly

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change implies composition of what changes and what does not change, therefore, making temporal passage measured in "before" and "afters", thus requiring an act/potential cause which cannot account for its own being since it has the potential to not-be. The first cause must also be simple since parts could fall apart and could not explain the unity of parts in the cause. Moreover, a cause with parts has the potential to change, but the first cause must be purely actual to account for its own being. Therefore, these kinds of similarities between the Aristotelian and classical notion of God are insufficient to prove negative dependence.

<sup>164</sup> F.M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), 261.

debatable. She asserts that Aristotle's clearly expressed topic in *Metaphysics XII* is "ousia" (substance).<sup>165</sup> Joseph Owens agrees when he says it is "a study of Entity [ousia], first in sensible Entity and then in immobile Entity".<sup>166</sup> Lang is quick to point out that there indeed appears in the text arguments about "god", though this is not the primary focus of the section, and rather a subset arising out of Aristotle's inquiry of "substance". Lang says, "They [i.e., the unresolved ambiguities which include god] function solely within and as a completion of the investigation announced in the opening line [of *Metaphysics XII*]: the investigation of substance".<sup>167</sup> According to Lang, to interpret Aristotle's treatment of substance as theology and its primary subject as god simply misses the mark for several reasons. That is, if God is the subject, particular arguments must be interpreted relative to this subject, and if these particulars do not fit the larger whole of *Metaphysics XII* they must be changed. This includes: 1) rearranging the order of the arguments by largely eliminating XII.8 from the treatise; 2) expanding the translation so that the text discusses what is required of it (i.e., divine mind rather than mind); 3) interpreting away difficulties that remain (e.g., how the divine mind can be found among observable things); and 4) the origin of the difficulties that generate such changes lies in a misfit between the proposed topic of *Metaphysics XII*—the *logos* [main idea] is theology culminating in the account of god in chapter 7—and the *logos* itself, which announces an investigation of *ousia*.<sup>168</sup> Alternatively, the results differ if one approaches the text as a treatise on substance. Namely, the arguments are in the right order, the text reads as it stands without introducing "divine", and the arguments for a consistent pattern emerge.<sup>169</sup> If Lang is correct in her assessment, open theists would find it difficult to form a strong link to the traditional view of God from Aristotle's *Metaphysics XII*.

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<sup>165</sup> Helen S. Lang, "The Structure and Subject of *Metaphysics XII*" in *Phronesis*, volume XXXVIII/3 (1993), 280.

<sup>166</sup> Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), 453.

<sup>167</sup> Lang, "The Structure and Subject of *Metaphysics*", 275-280.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 275. Lang here is answering W.D. Ross' approach to *Metaphysics XII* as theology in his *Aristotle's Metaphysics: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* Vol. I, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), cxxx-cliv, his view is fairly representative of this approach in general. This view is also found without argument in D. Graham, *Aristotle's Two Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 266.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* Lang is speaking of instances when W.D. Ross has introduced the word "divine" in the English translation when it was absent in the Greek text.

In addition, the Stoics, as deterministic materialists, believed in the materiality of spirit and the impersonal *rationale seminales* incapable of love or relationships. For example, Plotinus posited an impersonal and unknowable One that necessarily emanates itself. To be sure, any similarities between classical theology and pagan philosophy were purely incidental or due to the necessity of universal truths to form a correct understanding and explanation of the first principle(s) along with the attributes that necessarily follow this explanation. That is, where the scriptures and Greek philosophy were in agreement, ways and means were sought to express spiritual and metaphysical truths for apologetic reasons and in philosophical terms understandable to the intellectual culture.<sup>170</sup> There is unanimous agreement that the early fathers were influenced to some degree by the philosophical milieu that surrounded them. However, the result focused on ways to communicate the gospel and explain the nature of God in philosophical terms that their contemporaries could understand. The aberrations that developed in Origen (reincarnation), Tertullian (spirit as forms of matter), Augustine (grace and freewill), Gregory of Nyssa (universalism) and others revolved mostly around secondary issues and eventually were tested over time and for the most part eliminated from church dogma.<sup>171</sup> Open proponents must ask how every major church father in the entire history of orthodox Christianity could have been wrong on the core doctrine of the nature of God? Either the church must have been seen as extremely gullible to be influenced on such a mass scale or there must have been a conspiracy to alter beliefs. Alternatively, the entire history of classical Christian theology is sincerely wrong, all of which are difficult to accept.

*The Classical God is Unique.* The insistence that the classical view of God should be identified with Greek notions of deity is mistaken for several reasons. First, unlike Christian monotheism, the Greeks and Romans were ardent polytheists who believed in a pantheon of gods. J.N.D. Kelly describes monotheism as the dividing line between Christianity and pagan thought:

The classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth. The monotheistic idea, grounded in the religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the church and paganism.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> See Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, xiii.

<sup>171</sup> Huffman and Johnson, eds., *God Under Fire*, 112.

<sup>172</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960, 1965, 1968, 1978), 83.

Kelly continues to argue the distinction between the pagan and classical view of God when he asserts:

The doctrine of one God, the Father and creator, formed the background and indisputable premises of the Church's faith. Inherited from Judaism, it was her bulwark against pagan polytheism, Gnostic emanationism and Marcionite dualism.<sup>173</sup>

Of crucial importance is Kelly's insistence that the Christian view of God was a barrier to polytheism, emanationism and dualism, which are the defining characteristics of Greek philosophy in general, and specifically, the emanation of neo-Platonism and the dualism of Plato.<sup>174</sup> It would seem strange to assert that Plato, or Greek philosophy for that matter, negatively affected the substance of the classical view of God, yet did not transfer its most fundamental characteristics of Platonic eternal dualism, neo-Platonic impersonal emanationism and the rejection of the personal conscious immortality of the soul.<sup>175</sup> Plotinus' philosophy, which dates more than two hundred years *after* Christ, is completely absent from the first 200 years of the Christian record as far as comparable substance is concerned. Moreover, a casual comparison between the pre- and post-Plotinus fathers of the church will reveal conclusions that are essentially the same regarding the nature of God, though the rise of *apophaticism* is clearly seen by the fourth-century Cappadocians.<sup>176</sup> For example, the One is completely beyond being, unknowable, impersonal and unaware of the things that *necessarily* emanate from it, viewing material existence as being farthest from the One, which is something Christian theologians would never adopt (Psalm 19:1-8; 139).<sup>177</sup> Etienne Gilson insightfully comments, "the world of Plotinos and the world of Christianity are strictly incomparable; no single point in the one can be matched with any single point in the other one, for the fundamental reason that their metaphysical structure is essentially

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>174</sup> At this point, open theism is remarkably similar to Platonism in that it shares a dualistic view of God (e.g., God has unchanging and changing natures, and there are separate properties in the Ultimate; more about this in the next chapter).

<sup>175</sup> See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The One God* (New York: B. Herder Book Company, 1943), 42-43, when he says "This latter [i.e., divine revelation in Genesis] surpasses the philosophy of the more profound Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, especially in two respects, namely, as regards the unwavering certainty concerning the most free creation of all things from nothing and the personal immortality of the soul".

<sup>176</sup> For the usage and rise of *apophatic* descriptions, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3-56, 169-183.

<sup>177</sup> See Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3.2.2; 6.6.13

different...his philosophical thought remained wholly foreign to Christianity".<sup>178</sup> Any affinity between Plotinus and Christianity, as Augustine may have thought, was purely superficial, resulting from reading Christianity into Plotinus and not vice versa. This is evidenced by Augustine's departure from Plotinus when scripture disagreed, as is the case when describing the believer's union with God in his *Confessions*.<sup>179</sup> Andrew Louth explains:

This leads him [i.e., Augustine] at length to the doctrine of the Mediator: only through the Incarnation of the Word is the possibility of union with God opened to us. This is very important, for here Augustine cuts himself off completely from his neo-Platonist background....So, in Augustine's treatment of the soul's ascent to God in the *Confessions*, we find that, though he owes a very great deal to neo-Platonism, yet, in his fundamental appreciation of the soul's way, his understanding of the Incarnation is more important.<sup>180</sup>

Undoubtedly, by the fourth and fifth century, Augustine had read the *Enneads* and perhaps saw Christian notions of the Father, the Word and creation as evident in Plotinus' One, Nous and World Soul. However, this association does not exonerate Augustine from error, nor should Augustine's comments be taken as if he exchanged the classical attributes of God for neo-Platonism.<sup>181</sup> Instead of exchanging substance, Augustine viewed the truths of Greek philosophy as something to appropriate in a sanctified Christian way to the clear revelation of scripture. He saw all truth as God's truth (Philippians 4:8). Augustine writes:

Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it...in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel....Human institutions such as are

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<sup>178</sup> Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1941, 1969, [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]), 49. Though Gilson's insight is helpful in its own way to show an essential difference between the two, some would say it is not that simple, especially in light of the works (*Corpus Apologeticum*) of Dionysius the Areopagite (i.e., Pseudo-Dionysius) who had learned much from Plotinus' One and the chain of being emanating from it. Dionysius' Neoplatonic influence would eventually spread far and wide in Byzantine Christianity, Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa. My point here is not to divorce Plotinus' influence completely from Augustine or Christian theological and philosophical thought, but to show there is not an *essential* identity within the Christian tradition.

<sup>179</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.8-9.

<sup>180</sup> Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 145; Augustine, *Confessions*, X.6-33.

<sup>181</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.20.

adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life,—we must take and turn to a Christian use.<sup>182</sup>

In this pericope, there is a clear distinction between the heathen and their ideas and those who follow Christ and their ideas—never the two shall meet except on the common ground of truth/scriptures. This distinction appears at various junctures in Augustine’s work, which suggests the judicious use of the philosophers for the sake of Christ and that they filtered his ideas through scripture.<sup>183</sup>

If the church rejected these core assumptions of Greek philosophy, one may conclude that the influence, at best, was one of secondary issues such as using philosophical vocabulary rather than substance. In this case, it could be argued that Greek influence on core theological issues was minimal at best, and not altogether negative. Further, according to Kelly, the classical view of God was inherited from Judaism, which pre-dates the pre-Socratic philosophers by centuries. This point may be the most insightful statement by Kelly. In other words, the Christian metaphysic of God was conceived in the religious environment of the Hebrew Scriptures centuries before Homeric gods made their way into the Greek consciousness. The unique contribution to the history of philosophy is found in the self-revelation of God’s “name” (i.e., character/essence/nature) as “I AM WHO I AM” (HB: *ekyeh ser ehyeh*) (Exodus 3:14). The Greek translation (Septuagint) of the statement is *ho on*, “He who is”, understood as the eternal, self-existing One (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4). Though open theists read this text as “I will be who I will be”, which is grammatically possible, it is contextually implausible.<sup>184</sup> This appears to be a popular interpretation that arose late following the rise of process theology and ignored the majority of Hebrew and Christian scholars from the earliest times who interpreted this description in the classical sense.<sup>185</sup> Pinnock denies the classical interpretation and offers an interpretation of “he will be a faithful God to His people”. Certainly, God’s nature involves faithfulness to his people, but Moses anticipated the Israelites’ question demanding to know God’s “name”. God said, “This is My name forever...” (Exodus 3:15). Oriental culture has customarily associated

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<sup>182</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II.40.60, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1887 [reprint edition]), 554.

<sup>183</sup> See Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.22, in *Ibid.*, 415, where he describes Porphyry, Plotinus’ close associate and fellow philosopher as the “bitterest enemy of the Christians”.

<sup>184</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Volume II*, (MN: Bethany House, 2003), 38.

<sup>185</sup> See “*eimi*” and its usages and relation to “*ho on*” in Geoffrey W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Fascicle 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

“name” with nature/essence, making the name equivalent to *who* and *what* someone *is*. Arthur Preuss insightfully refers to this passage when he says, “The more general and more ancient opinion among theologians favors the view that aseity constitutes the metaphysical essence of God...Sacred Scripture defines YHWH as *ho on*, and it would seem therefore, that this definition is entitled to universal acceptance”.<sup>186</sup> This is what distinguishes the Judeo-Christian thought of God from Greek philosophical notions of the relationship between their first principles and their deities. That is to say, *the Greeks never identified their first principle as the same metaphysical substance as their god(s) of worship*.<sup>187</sup> Gilson explains:

Any Christian convert who was at all familiar with Greek philosophy was then bound to realize the metaphysical import of his new religious belief. His philosophical first principle had to be one with his religious first principle, and since the name of his God was “I am,” any Christian philosopher had to posit “I am” as his first principle and supreme cause of all things, even in philosophy.<sup>188</sup>

The pre-Socratics never identified their first principle(s) or *arche*, whether it was fire, water, indeterminate, matter, or *Logos*, with their gods or worship. Later, Plato never identified his Ultimate (the Good) as God, and the *Demiurgos* was considered less than ultimate. For Aristotle, the impersonal unmoved mover was a thinking being, though only of itself without any awareness of the world and never being worshipped as deity. Rather, he saw it as an explanation of the motion in the cosmos. Gerson, in his *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology*, notes that “there is no necessary connection in ordinary Greek between an *arche* and popular theological concepts. The gods, I believe, are never called *archai*. Greek philosophers frequently, however, but by no means always, identify the *arche* they are seeking as god”.<sup>189</sup> Gerson is using the term “*arche*” in its technical sense, thus implying “god” referred to in this quote is not a personal divine being worthy of worship as a metaphysical substance; rather, it should be understood as an explanation of the principle of cause and effects in the context of Greek natural theology. In contrast to how the Greeks used the term “god” in relation to their first principle, Jesus’

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<sup>186</sup> Arthur Pouhle Preuss, *God: His Knowability, Essence and Attributes* (Saint Louis: Herder, 1911), 172.

<sup>187</sup> This implies that the direction of influence occurred from the earlier Judeo-Christian religious tradition based on Exodus 3:14 onto Greek metaphysics during the early centuries of the church.

<sup>188</sup> Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 41.

<sup>189</sup> Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy*, 6. Gerson’s use of the term “god” here should not be understood as a proper name; rather, it is used in a technical sense (see page 240-241 notes in this same work).



words in John 8:58, “Before Abraham was born, I AM! [*ego eimi*]”, ring with a fresh reminder of the present tense in Exodus 3:14 with the form of the verb “to be” (*ho on*, *YHWH*). If open theism is correct in its assertion, Jesus should have said “I will be who I will be”.<sup>190</sup> It is clear that classical formulations of God do have a precedent much earlier than the origin of Greek philosophy and, therefore, would constitute a continuation of belief in God’s pure actuality as the personal *ekyeh ser ehyeh* or the *ho on*, something the Greeks never adopted as part of their metaphysical construct. A simple comparison of the differences between the major Greek concepts of God is ample evidence to establish the traditional notion of God as a unique contribution to the history of thought.

In conclusion, opponents of classical theology have not sufficiently demonstrated why one ought to reduce the classical nature of God to one of super-relational deity characterized by passibility, change and dependence on the world,<sup>191</sup> something to which no orthodox Christian theologian has ever embraced. Thomas Weinandy explains the long-standing early patristic environment regarding these attributes:

For the Patristic Theologians the immutability of God, as philosophically understood, is taken for granted....Thus, the early Christological controversies and debates were never concerned with the immutability and impassibility of God as such, but rather they centered around the reconciliation of God’s immutability and impassibility with the new reality of Christ.<sup>192</sup>

Jaroslav Pelikan concurs when he comments that “the early Christian picture of God was controlled by the self evident axiom, accepted by all, of the absoluteness and impassibility of the divine nature”.<sup>193</sup> Moreover, modern detractors of classical theism have not demonstrated the necessary metaphysical link between Pagan notions of God and the classical view of God. At best, they have summoned accidental and superficial similarities, which are common to most streams of thought to one degree or another. That is to say, open theologians have overestimated the amount and kind of philosophical influence and underestimated the power of revealed theology to anchor the theological and philosophical reflections offered by patristic theologians.<sup>194</sup> What remains now is to offer an account of the

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<sup>190</sup> Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Volume II*, 18.

<sup>191</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 31.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, MA: St. Bede’s Publications, 1985), xxi.

<sup>193</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition I: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University Press, 1971), 229, in Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, xxi.

<sup>194</sup> See discussions by Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 51, 54-66.

apophatic roots of Christian learning as a guard against idolatry and a preservation of the transcendence and essential otherness of the divine nature.

*Apophaticism and the Church: What God is Not.* One of the most significant characteristics within the Jewish, biblical, patristic, Byzantine and medieval periods was the use of apophatic language in its talk of the attributes of God. Instead of using positive descriptions of God, which tended to diminish the divine nature with a vocabulary suited more appropriately for the created world and man's limited intellect, negative language was preferred in order to reveal what God *essentially* is not. By stripping away the ontological condition of the effect, including all finitude, materiality, temporality, dependence, multiplicity and anything else that is inherent to the created order, one could avoid idolatry on the one hand, and not exhaust the divine nature with less than adequate knowledge or threaten the divine transcendence on the other. This way of thinking is seen in the pre-Christian Jewish literature as well as the biblical authors themselves.

Historically, there is very little indication that the Christian concept of the ineffable divine nature was inconsistent with what pre-Christian Judaism had held, albeit in an undeveloped form. The Hebrews, informed by God's self-revelation in Exodus 3:14 as "I AM" (*haya*) and the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 that declared God as numerically "one" (*'ehad*), were bound to see descriptions of God's nature as expressive of his existence and presence.<sup>195</sup> They saw God as the Creator who is far above human limitations and distinct from the creation as a painter is distinguished from his painting, yet so near in personal relationship to his people. This ontological distinction between God and his people cannot be said to be in location and interaction with creatures only, but in God's very mode of being, emphasizing the uniqueness of the divine nature itself (Isa. 44:6, 8; 45:5-6, 21). Louis Jacobs describes early Jewish thinking on the ontological distinction between God and creatures enumerated in the Talmud:

The two most frequently found names for God in the Talmud are *Ribbono shel 'olam* ("the Lord of the universe"), used when addressing God in the second person, and *ha-Qadosh barukh hu'* ("the Holy One, blessed be he"), used when speaking of God in the third person....The implication of this change of person is that while God can be addressed directly in prayer, his true nature is beyond

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<sup>195</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1980), 30, 214; See discussion on the meaning of the divine name in C.F. Keil and Franz J. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint), 74-76, 442.

human comprehension. He is wholly other, totally distinct from any of his creatures, and of him it is permitted to say only that he is the Holy One.<sup>196</sup>

The biblical revelation is equally impressive. Isaiah, speaking for God, says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). Jesus said, “No one has seen the Father at any time” and that an incarnation has revealed him (Jn. 1:18). Paul’s Jewish understanding of the incomprehensible God made its way into the New Testament when he asserts that God’s judgments are “unsearchable”, his ways “past finding out” (Rom. 11:33) and “the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding” (Phil. 4:7, REB). It is not difficult to understand that the Talmudic Jews’ vision of God’s nature entailed ontological “wholly otherness”, which indeed warranted certain linguistic expressions such as *ki-ve-yakhol* (i.e., “if it were really possible [to say such a thing]) and ‘*shelo ke-middat basar wedam middat ha-Kodesh baruk hu*’ (i.e., “not like the motive and conduct of flesh and blood is God’s manner”) when encountering anthropomorphic language.<sup>197</sup> Since God was seen as wholly other, it is reasonable to assume this ontological belief pertained to the most basic Jewish understanding of the simplicity (i.e., without parts) of the divine nature as well, lest God possess the same multiplicity as his creation. Simplicity appears to be the driving mechanism for the Jewish understanding of the ineffable and incomprehensible divine nature. While there is no indication the Hebrews understood the oneness of God as implying ontological *composition*, there is good evidence to suggest that the *shema*, which stressed God’s unity, was being read twice daily by the first-century B.C. in order to guard against pagan polytheism and dualistic ideas present in the Near East, which included Persia.<sup>198</sup> What is more, the earliest charges emanating from post biblical Rabbinic and Talmudic Judaism (first-century B.C. to the sixth-century A.D.) against Christianity was that of *polytheism*, which would appear inconsistent if the Hebrews did not hold to some

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<sup>196</sup> Louis Jacobs, “God: God in Postbiblical Judaism,” in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume 5, (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson-Gale, 2005 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]), 3547.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*; Emil G. Hirsch, “God”, in Isidor Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, volume 6 (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc, n.d.), 7; See Arthur Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 3548.

notion of the ineffable indivisible nature of God.<sup>199</sup> That the Hebrews held to absolute monotheism is evident not only through their literature, but also by observing later Muslim attitudes towards the Hebrew God. Islam had adopted absolute monotheism, with extreme aversion to any form of composition or association in or with Allah. Despite this, Muslims make few, if any, charges against the “composite” nature of the Jewish God as Islam often articulated in the latter centuries against Christianity. Later Jewish notions of God’s unity in the middle ages, particularly those formed under Moses Maimonides (Mosheh ben Maimon, 1135-1204), which utilized new philosophical expressions imported from the Greeks through the Arabs, re-asserted God’s transcendent, uncompounded unity in a formal and systematic way. This was not seen in rabbinic and Talmudic Judaism, which was largely confessional.<sup>200</sup> The Jewish and biblical emphasis on the ineffable simplicity of God was an indirect acceptance of the separation between the simple cause of creation and the multiplicity inherent to the created effects themselves. Thus, separation and transcendence of the ineffable from the lower level effects would take a significant step forward in Neoplatonism under Plotinus and Proclus towards the systematic Christian formulation of negative theology.

Apophaticism continued to develop and gain greater prominence in a more systematic way during the patristic and Byzantine period. Reflective of the patristic period is Tertullian’s statement in the *Apologeticus*:

He is incomprehensible, though in grace He is manifested. He is beyond our utmost thought, though our human faculties conceive of Him...but that which is infinite is known only to itself. This it is which gives some notion of God, while yet beyond all our conceptions—our very incapacity of fully grasping Him affords us the idea of what He really is. He is presented to our minds in His transcendent greatness, as at once known and unknown.<sup>201</sup>

Cyril of Jerusalem asserts, "For of God we speak not all we ought (for this is known to Him only), but so much as the capacity of human nature has received, and so much as our weakness can bear. For we explain not what God is but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the

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<sup>199</sup> See Hirsch, “God”, in Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 5, where Hirsch writes, “To controvert their [i.e., Minim, Gnostics, Christianity] departures from the fundamental positions of Judaism, the Palestinian synagogue, as did all later Judaism with the exception of the Cabalists, laid all the greater stress on the unity of God, and took all the greater precaution to purge the concept from any and all human and terrestrial similarities...The Shema was invested with the importance of a confession of faith”.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 3548-3549.

<sup>201</sup> Tertullian, *The Apology*, XVII, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885 [reprint edition]), 31.

best knowledge".<sup>202</sup> By the fourth century, the Cappadocians in the East were using a strong apophatic approach to theological vocabulary and epistemology. Jaroslav Pelikan has adequately demonstrated its widespread use by the Eastern fathers in his work *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*.<sup>203</sup> Worthy of note is that Byzantine Christianity, particularly the Cappadocians, dominated their thinking with the notion of apophatic theology as seen in their responses against Eunomios, who held the human intellect could comprehend the *ousia* of God. This followed from the Cappadocians' deeply rooted belief that man is fallen and God's *ousia* is unlike his creation and, therefore, transcendent and incomprehensible by the human intellect. From Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and others, we learn that "It [God] is above beginning, and presents no marks of its inmost nature: it is to be known of only in the impossibility of perceiving it".<sup>204</sup> There is, within the Byzantine thought, the notion of *knowing by not knowing*, which brings one closer to the truth of God. For the Byzantine Church, humans could know and experience the "activities" of God through his justice, providence, wisdom, goodness, power and the like as they occur in the world.<sup>205</sup> However, an intellectual grasp of these perfections is never to be thought of as knowing the very essence (*ousia*) of the divine being itself.<sup>206</sup> As a result, the Cappadocians' use of negative theology drew charges of skepticism. How does one know what they are worshipping if no knowledge of the essence of the object is possible? Basil's answer is that God is known from the qualities manifested in his *operations* which are distinct from his essence.<sup>207</sup> Basil explains:

The operations are various, and the essence is simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach....So knowledge of the divine essence involves perception of His incomprehensibility, and the object of our worship is not that of which we comprehend the essence, but of which we comprehend that the essence exists.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lectures", in Schaff and Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 7, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, [1894 reprint edition]), 33.

<sup>203</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>204</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, I.26, in Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1893 [reprint edition]), 70.

<sup>205</sup> Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 55.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> Basil the Great, *Letters*, CCXXXIV.1, in Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1895 [reprint edition]), 274.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, CCXXXIV.2.

It would appear then, that the knowledge of God begins in faith that he exists, and that there is revealed something intelligible from the operations of God in the created world, which in turn, we may consider to be positive indirect knowledge of God. Pelikan points out the driving force behind the notion of a transcendent God and the sharp line drawn between God and his creatures. The Cappadocian concept of creation, particularly as stated in the Nicene Creed as the “Maker of all things...both visible and invisible”, meant that for God to be truly Creator, he must also be truly transcendent in every way over all creatures.<sup>209</sup> Since God’s transcendence is above *all* creatures (i.e., visible and invisible), the need for separation was not primarily due to the sinfulness of man’s intellect as Eunomius argued, but because we are separated by virtue of our created substance. For the most part, this Platonic form of apophaticism, and eventually Denys’ Neoplatonic negative theology, would be pervasive (though not all-pervasive) in the monastic tradition of the Byzantine church. However, very little impact has been found in the Byzantine humanist tradition.<sup>210</sup>

A similar, though not identical negative theology, would develop out of Neoplatonism in the works of Denys the Areopagite, which would eventually have a tremendous influence on the thoughts of Aquinas<sup>211</sup> and Nicholas of Cusa. By the late fifth and early sixth century, the highly influential body of writings known as the *Areopagiticum Corpus* set in motion Denys’ contribution and influence in the area of apophaticism. Andrew Louth’s path-breaking research in *Denys the Areopagite* on the subject of Denys’ works and contribution to the church’s formulation of negative theology informs our discussion.<sup>212</sup> Originally, the *Areopagiticum Corpus* was thought to be the work of Paul’s first-century convert on Mar’s Hill described in Acts 17:34, Dionysius the Areopagite. It is now believed by most to be a late fifth or early sixth-century work by who many know today as pseudo-Denys or Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>213</sup> Denys’ contribution is most visibly understood in

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<sup>209</sup> Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 51-52.

<sup>210</sup> Andrew Louth, “The Reception of Dionysius in the Byzantine World”, in Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Chichester, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 55-56. Louth describes the Byzantine monastic tradition in areas of theological reflection expressing key Dionysian themes. This general enthusiasm for Dionysian themes can be seen in a “sense of the mystery of God expressed by a delight in apophatic, or negative, language applied to God...”. (p. 57).

<sup>211</sup> According to some estimates, Denys is referred to or quoted over 1,700 times in the *Summa Theologica*; for example, see Bishop Kallistos, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Group), 73.

<sup>212</sup> Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989).

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

a section of the *Corpus* known as the *Divine Names*. This work is largely an outgrowth of the perceived triumphs and dangers offered by Neoplatonism's view of reality and the One. In one sense, Denys is repulsed by the notion of emanation (which for Neoplatonism refers to the communication/derivation of being in successive stages down a scale of being) beginning from the One, to Nous/Intellect and to World Soul since it would blur the difference between God's Being and his creatures' being. Additionally, The system is also unmistakably pagan and caters to polytheism and pantheism. Alternatively, Denys is attracted to the subtle way in which Neoplatonism offers an apophatic/negative view of reality, especially as it pertains to the indescribable One and the dependence of a lower being upon a higher being. What is left for Denys to do in order to maintain orthodoxy is to eliminate those aspects of Neoplatonism that are contrary to Christianity. His solution is to adopt the scale of being and the Neoplatonism idea that lower beings are dependent upon higher beings, while simultaneously rejecting the notion that being is passed down this scale of being in the Neoplatonic fashion.<sup>214</sup> Instead of a scale of beings communicating being, Denys sees the world as God's self-manifestation, much like a theophany. That is, the world is revealing the glory of God to a certain extent, which implies a distinction in things; they are multiple, and therefore, different. He also deviates from Neoplatonism in his understanding of the divine names. Instead of viewing the divine names as referring to the individual gods (henads) as in Neoplatonism, Denys imports his view of monotheism into the picture and reassigns the divine names of Neoplatonic henads as the divine attributes of the one Christian God. In his *Divine Names XI*, Denys makes a clear break from Neoplatonism by centering the all-important question of the nature of "being itself" squarely in the *source* of being (thus making being itself *identical* with the source of being), the one God who is the cause and creator of all being as *distinguished* from those beings he creates. Denys' task is now to show how God can be *being itself* as well as the *source* of all being. Andrew Louth describes the Procline (Proclus) Neoplatonist solution to this dilemma as an attempt to identify the *source* of being that is beyond any attribute—the One. Then, the describable attributes are applied to beings (henads) that proceed from the One, thus separating the source from any attributes.<sup>215</sup> From this position, Proclus offers a completely

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 87.

“apophatic” theology of the indescribable One and a kataphatic theology of the beings that proceed from the one (henads); nothing can be said of the former, though describable attributes may be spoken of the latter. From this separation of being(s) and the application of apophatic and kataphatic theology by Proclus in the context of *multiple* beings which are ontologically separate (i.e., the One and the manifestation of other beings - henads), Denys boldly and ontologically unites apophatic and kataphatic theology to speak of the attributes of the one Christian God who is beyond all attribution.<sup>216</sup> That is, Denys sees God as manifesting/revealing himself through his creation, but what God manifests about himself is not *essentially* himself.<sup>217</sup> One must take these revealed knowledge/affirmations of God and deny them of God. Denys explains:

God is known in all things and apart from all things; and God is known by knowledge and by unknowing...He is not one of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are;...he is known to all from all things and to no-one from anything. For we rightly say these things of God, and he is celebrated by all beings according to the analogy that all things bear to him as their Cause.<sup>218</sup>

Thus, Denys introduces a three-fold way (causal affirmation, negation and eminent application) by which creatures comprehend and affirm what God reveals about himself (kataphatic). He then moves beyond that knowledge about God through a denial and transcendence of what he has revealed about himself to God himself (apophatic). The influence of Neoplatonism through Denys’ apophaticism upon Aquinas as well as his *Triplex Via*<sup>219</sup> and Nicholas of Cusa and his *coincidence of opposites* are barely to be overestimated. Indeed, this approach managed to avoid agnosticism and circumvent idolatry and became the driving mechanism in further descriptions of God by the Eastern and Western church.<sup>220</sup>

As an Aristotelian, it would seem sensible that Thomas follow Aristotle’s method of discovering the definition of the nature of a thing by deducing the characteristics and features of the thing’s being. For Aristotle, the definition arises from a positive analysis of the thing’s parts, essence, and function, as they fit into the Aristotelian categories by which the modes of being are signified. That is, it appears to be a straightforward analysis based on

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>218</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, transl. by C.E. Rolt (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), VII.3. Also mentioned in Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 88.

<sup>219</sup> See David Burrell and Isabelle Moulin’s treatment of this influence on Albert the Great and subsequently, Aquinas in Coakley and Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, 85-120.

<sup>220</sup> See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3-56, 169-183.



positive descriptions and essences. However, Thomas' investigation into the existence of God took him one step further to ask of the *manner* of God's existence in *STh.* I.3 prologue. He says, "Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not".<sup>221</sup> For Thomas, the "divine substance surpasses every form of our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing *what it is*. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not".<sup>222</sup> As creatures in this world, we are limited in our understanding and comprehension of the divine essence since the form of our knowledge is not intellectually adequate to the divine nature. While explaining whether God can be known in this life by natural reason, Thomas says:

Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen.<sup>223</sup>

At this point, Aquinas is consistent with his repeated assertions that the ineffable essence of God cannot be accessed by man natural knowledge (John 1:18). Consequently, we are confronted with the question of agnosticism and that of a radical separation of God's nature from his creation leaving him radically transcendent from his creatures' intellect and relations. There is no doubt that Thomas desires to avoid this problem and, therefore, he introduces some form of knowledge by "*knowing what it is not*". That is to say, Aquinas believes that humankind, who has an utter dependence upon empirical perception for the obtaining of knowledge, must *negatively* know (i.e., *via negativa*) God's nature through *indirect* means. The rationale is clear; this is necessary because God exceeds all creatures can say and know about him through sensible reality. However, to some knowledge by negation is not genuine and true knowledge at all, which would imply the impossibility of speaking anything meaningfully about God. It is precisely here that Thomas draws upon and refines Denys' three-fold approach in the *Divine Names* VII.3 to explain how the way of negation can offer real knowledge by knowing what God is not. Instead of falling into the abyss of intellectual darkness implied by the separation of our knowledge of creation and

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<sup>221</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.3 prologue.

<sup>222</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.14.2.

<sup>223</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.12.12

knowledge of God, Aquinas demonstrates how the two domains (i.e., God as Cause and creation as effect) work together by a *causal* continuity to bring us some knowledge of God. Thomas recognized that all negation must be based in a prior affirmation. Without this prior affirmation, there would be no basis for any negation. The affirmation in this case leads us directly to the first step in the *Triplex Via*: To recognize positively that God is the *cause* of the natural effects, implying that God is not those same things (i.e., effects). As such, effect's ontological make-up must be denied of the God. Rudi te Velde, who is often overlooked by some, has demonstrated that "the negation is part of the intelligible structure of the causal relationship between creatures and God, and thus part of how God can be known from his effects".<sup>224</sup> There are two important concepts in view here which lead to the way of negation (*remotio*). First, the *positive* knowledge and affirmation available to creatures is that God is the *cause of his effects* and is an intelligible structure that creatures may comprehend, and second, God is *not* the effect. From this indirect knowledge of God, one may proceed to the second step by negating of God (*remotion*) the predicates inherent in the effects so as to recognize that these predicates are not in God in the same way. The third move flows from the negation to a positive affirmation—there is a unique, higher and more *eminent* way in which the effect's perfections exist in God as their cause in a perfect, original and more excellent way. Aquinas writes:

But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God *whether He exists*, and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by him. Hence we know that His relationship with creatures so far as to be the cause of them all; also that creatures differ from Him, inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him; and that creatures are not removed from Him by reason of any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all.<sup>225</sup>

Therefore, the *Triplex Via* (i.e., causality, remotion and eminence) begins with recognizing the positive affirmation that God is the cause of his effects and proceeds to the negation that God is *not* the effect. Then one negates the ontological limitations inherent in the effect while gathering positive predicates of the effect, which exist in God in a more eminent way. By the fifteenth century, Nicholas will build upon the foundation of negative theology laid by Denys and Aquinas.

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<sup>224</sup> Rudi Te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologica* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 75.

<sup>225</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.12.12.

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) is well-known for his unique work regarding our knowledge and communication of God in *Of Learned Ignorance* which contains his notion of the ‘coincidence of opposites’. While acknowledging the idea of ‘coincidence’ present in Denys’ *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*,<sup>226</sup> Nicholas seeks to go further than mere negative or positive affirmations by offering his method as an alternative which moves beyond obscurity that the alternative approaches offer. Though important, negative theology can only tell us so much about God, namely, that He is Infinity. Cusa affirms:

Negative Theology, in consequence, is so indispensable to affirmative theology that without it God would be adored, not as the Infinite but rather as a creature, which is idolatry, or giving to an image what is due to truth alone.<sup>227</sup>

But even this is a negative assertion to separate God from his created world of finitude. Alternatively, positive affirmations are inadequate because they are named after the particular essences found in creation, and therefore, further from the truth than negative assertions. The problem becomes clear for Nicholas when he explains, “Every affirmation puts, so to speak, in God something of the thing it signifies: but He is as much all things as He is something; therefore, all affirmations are inappropriate”. These names are clearly seen as diminutives since they are so named after creatures and fall infinitely short of his real name.<sup>228</sup> The dilemma for Nicholas as he sees it is that any term applied through both negative and positive theology can supply an opposite, which in essence does not break free of the limitations of creation and human reason – and therefore, unworthy of God. For example, if we call God Truth, then falsity comes to mind; if we call him Substance, then accidents come to mind; if we know God as Virtue, then vice as its opposite enters our thinking, thus leaving God in opposition to the confines of finitude, creaturely essence, and human reason. This is because all analogical expressions borrows from the created world and are limited to the particular essence or qualities the term signifies, thus is anthropomorphic.<sup>229</sup> This holds true for every name applied to God (except the unpronounceable YHWH since it belongs to God alone and not to any creature). To extricate our knowledge from these limitations we must go beyond reason and opposition to

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<sup>226</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology and The Divine Names*. See, for example, this knowledge of Denys in Nicholas’ *Of Learned Ignorance*, XVI and XXIV.

<sup>227</sup> Nicholas of Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance*, translated by Fr. Germain Heron (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007 [previously published by Yale University Press, 1954]), XXVI, 59-60.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, XXIV, 54-55.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

God as, the Maximum, to which there is no opposition. Even here Nicholas is cautious enough not to “name” God since God is beyond all names and is also all names. More precisely, “God is a substance which is all things and to which nothing stands in opposition”.<sup>230</sup> Since this is the case, God is beyond the notions of nothing and something, he is beyond being effable and ineffable, beyond being and not-being, as God surpasses all these in his infinitely and excellently priority to all these things.<sup>231</sup> For Nicholas, he knows that everything he knows is not God and that everything he conceives is not like God.<sup>232</sup> It is precisely here that truer knowledge of God is gained through learned ignorance (i.e., knowing that you do not know). God is not to be found in the realm of creatures nor with creaturely conditions of composition and limitation and the sort, for all these things are not from themselves, but from that which precedes it in perfection to which no opposition exists.<sup>233</sup>

The ‘coincidence of opposites’ for Cusa is a method that resolves contradictions from the standpoint of infinity. From the premise there can be only one Infinite which precedes all else and which is all things and to which no opposition stands,<sup>234</sup> comes a reconciliation of contradictory descriptions and essences in and by infinity. This method does not ignore the nature of real contradictions nor does it seek to make these contradictions intelligible. Rather, it moves beyond the coincidence to infinity in order to: 1) move beyond the human intellectual limits of reasoning; 2) exceed purely negative, positive and analogical descriptions; 3) make intelligible the distinction between God (infinity) and the created world; and 4) offer a comprehensive and holistic view reality by uniting particular opposites diffused (i.e., contracted or explicated) in the world as antecedent perfections enfolded within the simple infinity of The Maximum (God).<sup>235</sup> The benefits are immense when applied to theological considerations since Cusa would in practice move beyond any contradiction to the antecedent source (which is prior to contradiction) where it exists in utter and simple harmony. This ‘coincidence’ (i.e., “coming or falling together”) calls for the

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>231</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, “Dialogue on the Hidden God (*Dialogus de Deo abscondito*)”, 9, in Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, with translation and introduction by H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 211.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>234</sup> Nicholas, *Of Learned Ignorance*, XXIV, 55.

<sup>235</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, 23.

knower to transcend empirical (i.e., sensible, discursive, and quantitative) reasoning in order to know there is a simple unity of substance in God. Consequently, theological dilemmas (for example, the apparent contradiction between God's foreknowledge and free will, between motion and rest, or between contingency and necessity) would become a pseudo-problem. Cusa would move past the force of creaturely words and transcendently reconcile the two by *coincidentia* within a simple form enfolded within its antecedent source (i.e., God). Nicholas' theology of coincidence encourages us to consider an alternative to purely negative and affirmative methodology, and to move beyond human modes of intellection beginning with learned ignorance and ending in the 'coincidence of opposites' within the simple infinite God of Unity.

As far as I can see, the insufficient rigor of openness that theologians have to account for why the apophatic tradition should be rejected within Judeo-Christian thought reveals that open theology remains overly impressed by kataphatic speculations and that the modern myth that apophatic classical theology was distorted by Platonism. To ignore or casually dismiss the apophatic tradition simply as a negative pagan influence upon Classical Christianity fails to see apophaticism as the basis of Judeo-Christian learning and communication pertaining to God. As a result of this rejection, there does not appear to exist within the openness system of God-talk any convincing criteria by which to make a qualitative ontological distinction between Creator and creature. Alternatively, the apophatic Judeo-Christian tradition has offered convincing arguments in an attempt to guard God's unique ontological status, maintain his transcendence over creation and to form adequate language for our understanding and communication about God. It now remains to be discussed in further detail how our understanding and communication of God is intelligible from a Christian apophatic tradition as well as to evaluate openness solutions to the issue of religious language.