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THE WAY OF ἈΝΑΛΥΣΙΣ: CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE PLATONIC TRADITION

Abstract. In Clement of Alexandria, the three ways of knowing God appear implicitly in the form: the way of analogy, the way of negation (in the mathematical version), and the way of eminence. A basic aspect of the negation appears as an expression of Clementine criticism on anthropomorphism. The Platonic traditional model of *via negativa* is related to the mathematical theory of abstraction and is defined as a denial of the material things in order to reach the contemplation of God through pure mind: “we start by abstracting the surface, and we are left with the line; we abstract the line, and we are left with the point; we abstract the point, or strictly speaking the monad, and we are then precipitated into the greatness of Christ” (*Stromateis* V.11.71.2). Clement of Alexandria is, also, one of the authors who emphasize silence and prayer as having great importance in the knowledge process. The cessation of the activity of the senses leads to the supreme state of contemplation with a pure mind. Silence becomes, in this way, a symbol of God, and knowledge – not a matter of speaking, but of being.

Keywords: Clement of Alexandria, Platonic Tradition, knowledge of God, abstractive way, *analysis*, *aphairesis*, silence

1. The geometrical method of ἀνάλυσις . 2. *Via negativa* and the theme of silence in Clement of Alexandria. 3. The origin of the mathematical model of *via negativa*.

St. Justin, martyr and philosopher (103 – 165 AD), was the first Christian thinker who claimed that God can be characterized only in negative terms.¹ His vision was familiar in the context of Hellenistic Judaism: Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 50 AD)² had already established the ideas put forward by Justin. Nevertheless, he is not

1 See D.W. Palmer, *Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, *Vigiliae Christianae* 37(1983), 234–259 and P. Widdicombe, *Justin Martyr’s Apophaticism*, *Studia Patristica* 36(2001), 313–319.

2 See S. Lilla, *La teologia negativa dal pensiero greco classico*, *Helikon* 28(1998), 229–242.

concerned about a negative mindset in a *systematic* manner, in the sense that he does not support a complete model of deconstructionist thinking. The language fails in the effort to describe God the Father,³ but we find neither the systematic articulation governing Late Platonism nor the “step by step removals method,” which was already known in Middle Platonism.⁴ The dominant note of the Middle Platonic theological model consisted in the existence of a first transcendent principle and of an intelligible world which is the paradigm of the physical world.⁵ Of the Middle Platonist authors, only Albinus (sec. II AD) and Celsus (sec. II AD) refer explicitly to the negative method; if we were to add a Christian writer to this category, we should mention the name of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215 AD).⁶

The scope of this study is to investigate the status and function of the systematic method of *analysis/aphairesis* in Clement of Alexandria. Likewise, to what extent mathematical procedure of abstraction, borrowed from the Greek philosophical tradition, could be integrated and valorized in the Christian theological horizon, as a method of removing material things to reach the contemplation of God through pure mind.

3 Early Christian writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria built their theologies on the idea that God by definition transcends our words, concepts, and capacities, such that all affirmations must be qualified and only negations are entirely true. See P. Rorem, *Negative Theologies and the Cross*, Harvard Theological Review 101(2008), 451.

4 D.W. Palmer *Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, op. cit., 234–259) demonstrates that Justin was not an isolated case, but that the use of negative definitions of God was widespread in the second century. The negative theology was at its embryonic stage. Cf. R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 2, *The Way of Negation*, Hanstein, Bonn 1986, 33.

5 Cf. E.F. Osborn, *Negative theology and Apologetic*, Prudentia (1981), Supplementary Number: *The Via Negativa*, 54.

6 See R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 24 sq.

We considered it important to evaluate the relationship between negation and silence, and the importance of prayer in the process of knowing God in Clement. Finally, we tried to discover the origin of the geometric method of abstractive way, to identify the specific elements of the Platonic and Pythagorean Traditions, and to underline the particularities of the Clementine version of the *analysis*.

1. THE GEOMETRICAL METHOD OF ἈΝΑΛΥΣΙΣ

In the eyes of Celsus,⁷ God was cognoscible by *synthesis*, *analysis*, and *analogy*: “we might get some conception of the nameless First Being which manifests him either by synthesis with other things, or by analytical distinction from them, or by analogy.”⁸

We could consider the term ἀνάλυσις from Origen, *Contra Celsus* 7.42, as an equivalent for the phrase κατὰ ἀφαίρεσιν⁹ from Albinus.¹⁰ The three ways of conceiving “the First God” appear in Albinus in

7 See A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose*, Librairie Lecoffre, Paris 1954, 115–123 and S. Lilla, *La teologia negativa dal pensiero greco classico*, *Helikon* 28(1998), 270–273.

8 Origen, *Contra Celsus* 7.42.9–11: ὡς ἂν τοῦ ἀκατονομάστου καὶ πρώτου λαβομένου τινα ἐπίνοιαν, διαδηλοῦσαν αὐτὸν ἢ τῇ συνθέσει τῇ ἐπὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἢ ἀναλύσει ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἢ ἀναλογίᾳ (trans. H. Chadwick, in *Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1980, 429).

9 *Didaskalikos* H 165.18 (Alcinoos, *Enseignement des doctrines de Platon*, Introduction, texte établi et commenté par J. Whittaker, et traduit par P. Louis, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1990, 24).

10 A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, 122: “La seconde méthode de Celse, ἀναλύσει (...), doit correspondre à la voie κατὰ ἀφαίρεσιν d'Albinus.” H.J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, P. Schippers, Amsterdam 1964, 105, n. 279: “Kelsos stimmt in den beiden letzten Wegen mit Albinos genau überein (ἀνάλυσις ~ ἀφαίρεσις).” R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, 24: “This ‘analysis’ is the equivalent of abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) and constitutes an alternative for it, which is also to be found in Clement of Alexandria.” Cf. C.W. Macleod, *Analysis: a study in ancient mysticism*, 53: “In one place ἀνάλυσις has the same meaning as ἀφαίρεσις, that is, Clem. Str. V.71.2. (...) It is possible to conceive ἀνάλυσις in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VII.42 as equivalent to ἀφαίρεσις.” Cf. also S. Lilla, *La teologia negativa...*, *Helikon* 28(1998), 270, n. 194.

the form of *via negationis*, *via analogiae* and *via eminentiae*, and these three might find correspondents in the three ways present in Celsus.¹¹

Even if Clement of Alexandria did not leave a manual similar to the Albinian one, the lack of the traditional formula does not have to prevent us from detecting its traces in the case of the Christian author. In this regard, the fragment of *Stromata* VI contains a clear summary regarding the three prerequisites of the Middle Platonic theory of knowledge: “This branch of learning, too, makes the soul in the highest degree observant, capable of perceiving the true and detecting the false, of (I) discovering correspondences and proportions, so as to hunt out for similarity in things dissimilar; and (II) conducts us to the discovery of length without breadth, and superficial extent without thickness, and an indivisible point, and (III) transports to intellectual objects from those of sense.”¹² R. Mortley¹³ associates the numbers in the text to the following methods:

- (I) *The way of analogy*;
- (II) *The way of negation* (in the mathematical version);
- (III) *The way of eminence*.¹⁴

11 The position of A.-J. Festugière (*La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, 122–123: “(...) la voie de synthèse de Celse répète, sous une autre forme, la *via eminentiae* d'Albinus.”) is not confirmed by C.W. Macleod (*Analysis: a study in ancient mysticism*, 54): “this casts doubt on Festugière’s interpretation (...) for Albinus the *via eminentiae* is a form not of synthesis, but of analysis.”

12 Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.11.90.4.1–6: οἰκοδομική. παρακολουθητικήν δ’ ὡς ἔτι μάλιστα τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ τοῦτο παρασκευάζει τὸ μάθημα τοῦ τε διορατικὴν καὶ τοῦ ψεύδους διελεγκτικὴν, ὁμολογιῶν τε καὶ ἀναλογιῶν εὐρετικὴν, ὥστε ἐν τοῖς ἀνομοίοις τὸ ὅμοιον θηρᾶν, ἐνάγει τε ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὸ εὐρεῖν ἀπλατὲς μήκος καὶ ἐπιφάνειαν ἀβαθῆ καὶ σημεῖον ἀμερὲς καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ νοητὰ μετατίθησιν ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθητῶν (trans. W. Wilson, in col. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, ed. Ph. Schaff, Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, NY 1885, 501).

13 R. Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d’Alexandrie*, Brill, Leiden 1973, 86.

14 According to J. Mansfeld (*Compatible alternatives. Middle Platonist theology and the Xenophanes Reception*, in: *Knowledge of God in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. R. van den Broek et alii, Brill, Leiden/ New York 1988, 115), “Clement conflates, or rather does

The latter method – which allows the transition¹⁵ from body beauty to the beauty of the soul, then to moral beauty and, eventually, to the ocean of Beauty – is defining for Clement: it claims the method of the transition from sensible things to comprehensive ones – *i.e.* the process which is the basis of his entire theory of knowledge.¹⁶

The theme of negation in Clement reminds us of the Philonian one, transmitted through the medium of Justin, but also of the Platonic tradition – whose main representative is Albinus.¹⁷ The basic form of negation is included in the Clementine approach of rejecting anthropomorphism: negation as a reaction against the materialism.¹⁸ God is above the sensible world, and imagination must purify itself from the concepts drawn from the sensorial experience. The criticism of anthropomorphism is coupled with the *moral* dimension¹⁹ of Clement's theology, whose perspective tends to soften the line between morals and knowledge.²⁰ Men learn erroneous ideas about God because they are slaves of their passion – which has as object material things. They must liberate themselves from passion and from any other material influence and to release the notion of “God” from everything that is not *simple unity*.²¹

The interest in negative theology can only be characterized by pessimism with regard to language effectiveness.²² Clement underlines

not distinguish, the *via analogiae* (e.g., ‘Father’) and the *via eminentiae* (e.g. ‘good’). Otherwise, his epistemology as concerned with the divine is the same as that of Irenaeus and Alkinoos.”

15 Albinus, *Didaskalikos* 10.5–6.

16 Cf. R. Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d’Alexandrie*, op. cit., 86.

17 See *Ibidem*, 87–88.

18 See *Ibidem*, 88 sq.

19 See *Ibidem*, 93.

20 Cf. *Ibidem*, 89.

21 Cf. E. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1957, 25.

22 Cf. R. Mortley, *The Way of Negation*, op. cit., 41.

this extreme difficulty, which is the expression of the impossibility of an adequate language about God:²³ “For how can that be expressed which is neither genus, nor difference, nor species, nor individual, nor number; any more, is neither an event, nor that to which an event happens? No one can rightly express Him wholly. For on account of His greatness He is ranked as the All, and is the Father of the universe. Nor are any parts to be predicated of Him. For the One is indivisible; wherefore also it is infinite, not considered with reference to inscrutability, but with reference to its being without dimensions, and not having a limit. And therefore it is without form and name.”²⁴

For that reason, we make use of “beautiful names” for God, such as: “the good,” “mind,” “being itself,” “Father,” “God,” “creator” and “Lord” – a combination of terms inspired by Philosophy and the Bible, typical of Clement²⁵ – only from the need to avoid misleading by using terms which are less adequate with respect to God. As for the traditional method of *via negativa* – which we have also noticed in Albinus or Celsus – it must be said that the base of the Clementine intellectual process is a purification rite established through negation:²⁶ “It is not possible to participate in Gnostic contemplations, unless we *empty* ourselves from the earlier ideas.”²⁷

23 See Clement of Alexandria, *Eclogae propheticæ* 21.1.3 (*Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. 3, ed. O. Stählin, L. Früchtel, U. Treu, 2nd edn., Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1970).

24 Idem, *Stromata* 5.12.81.5.1-82.1.2: πῶς γὰρ ἂν εἶη ῥητὸν ὃ μῆτε γένος ἐστὶ μῆτε διαφορὰ μῆτε εἶδος μῆτε ἄτομον μῆτε ἀριθμὸς, ἀλλὰ μηδὲ συμβεβηκὸς τι μηδὲ ᾧ συμβέβηκέν τι. οὐκ ἂν δὲ ὅλον εἶποι τις αὐτὸν ὀρθῶς· ἐπὶ μεγέθει γὰρ τάττεται τὸ ὅλον καὶ ἔστι τῶν ὄλων πατήρ. οὐδὲ μὴν μέρη τινὰ αὐτοῦ λεκτέον· ἀδιαίρετον γὰρ τὸ ἕν, διὰ τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ἄπειρον, οὐ κατὰ τὸ ἀδιεξίτητον νοούμενον, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸ ἀδιάστατον καὶ μὴ ἔχον πέρασ, καὶ τοίνυν ἀσχημάτιστον καὶ ἀνωνόμαστον (trans. W. Wilson, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, ed. Ph. Schaff, 1885, 463–464).

25 Cf. J.W. Trigg, *Receiving the Alpha: Negative Theology in Clement of Alexandria and its Possible Implications*, *Studia Patristica* 31(1997), 541–542, 543.

26 Cf. R. Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d'Alexandrie*, op. cit., 89.

27 *Stromata* 6.17.150.4.1–3: μεταλαμβάνειν οὖν τῶν γνωστικῶν θεωρημάτων οὐχ οἶόν τε, ἐὰν μὴ τῶν προτέρων διανοημάτων κενώσωμεν ἑαυτοῦς.

In *Stromata* – as well as in *Didaskalikos* of Albinus – *the negative way* – *i.e.* the gradual denial/ abstraction of the material things in order to reach the contemplation of God through pure mind – is associated with the mathematical theory.²⁸ Clement exposes his method in the following frame of reference: “We may understand the purificatory rite by comparison with confession, and that of the initiated visionary by *analysis* (ἀναλύσεως), advancing to the primary concept, beginning (through *analysis*) with the things which lie beneath it. We abstract from the body its physical properties, removing the dimension of depth, then that of breadth, and then that of length. The point remaining is a unit, which has position, so to speak. If we remove position, we conceive of unity itself. If then we abstract (ἀφελόντες) all corporeal things, as well as the so-called incorporeal things, we may cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ (τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ), and from there we move into the immensity of holiness: we may thus somehow attain a concept of the all-powerful, knowing not what he is, but what he is not (οὐχ ὃ ἐστίν).”²⁹

The geometric analysis invoked by Clement in *Stromata* V.71.1 corresponds to the exercise consisting of progressive extraction of the dimension, specific to things, starting from their various physical attributes, to reach the comprehensive and basic *essence*. Therefore, by removing “depth” from solid, we obtain the flat figure, by subtracting “breadth” from the flat figure we reach the line, finally suppressing the “length” from the line, we obtain “the point,” *i.e.*, a geometric

28 See H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, 223 sq.

29 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.2–3: δι’ ἀναλύσεως ἐκ τῶν ὑποκειμένων αὐτῷ τὴν ἀρχὴν ποιούμενοι, ἀφελόντες μὲν τοῦ σώματος τὰς φυσικὰς ποιότητες, περιελόντες δὲ τὴν εἰς τὸ βάθος διάστασιν, εἶτα τὴν εἰς τὸ πλάτος, καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις τὴν εἰς τὸ μήκος· τὸ γὰρ ὑπολειφθὲν σημειῖόν ἐστι μονὰς ὡς εἰπεῖν θέσιν ἔχουσα, ἥς ἐὰν περιέλωμεν τὴν θέσιν, νοεῖται μονὰς. εἰ τοίνυν, ἀφελόντες πάντα ὅσα πρόσεστι τοῖς σώμασιν καὶ τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀσωμάτοις, ἐπιρρίψαιμεν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ κάκειθεν εἰς τὸ ἀχανὲς ἀγιότητι προοίμεν, τῇ νοήσει τοῦ παντοκράτορος ἀμῆ γέ πη προσάγοιμεν ἄν, οὐχ ὃ ἐστίν (trans. R. Mortley, in: *The way of negation*, op. cit., 42).

reality which lacks “dimension” and only has “position.” If we continue the procedure by removing – in the case of the point – the position, we finally obtain *the monad* – which indicates the final product of abstraction – hiding one of the fundamental principles which entail all things. This type of geometric analysis was constantly practiced by Greek scholars and had as theoretical basis the belief that we could easily explain the reality starting from a limited group of elements, more specifically starting from the combined action of two principles: a principle of determination – identified in general with *the One* – and a principle of boundlessness – identified, in general, with the even number and, particularly, with *the dyad*.³⁰

Although, by repeating the theory of *abstraction* and the method of *analysis*, Clement merely replicates a “*doctrine d’école*,” yet he seems perfectly capable of integrating it into his own Christian doctrine³¹ and to render it a certain degree of originality.³²

To reach Christ, tangible and intangible realities must be overcome, which, in the philosophical language of the era, means the dialectical overcoming of the multiplicity of the sensible world and the intelligible world, to achieve the supreme principle which controls both of them.³³ “The greatness of Christ” may be assimilated to what, in Mathematics, is meant to indicate the position for *the monad*, *viz.*, what made the monad reach a visible point and an effective number. In other words, everything happens as if Clement had established a strong correlation between the intellection of the Almighty and the intellection of the One – the principle of determination of all

30 Cf. L. Rizzerio, *L'accès à la transcendance divine selon Clément d'Alexandrie: dialectique platonice ou expérience de l'union chrétienne?*, Revue des Études Augustiniennes 44(1998), 164.

31 Cf. *Ibidem*, 164–165.

32 E. Osborn (*The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*, op. cit., 184–186) responded to the W. Völker's (*Der wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus*, Akademie-Verlag/Hinrichs, Berlin/Leipzig 1952) objection that “Clement's teaching is not original, but is borrowed from Philo and has parallels in contemporary pagan philosophy.”

33 L. Rizzerio, *L'accès à la transcendance divine selon Clément d'Alexandrie*, op. cit., 165.

things and of the monad itself; as if it considered the relation between Christ – the λόγος of the Almighty – and the Almighty Himself as the mathematical equivalent between the absolute *simple unity* (the first principle of all reality) and the *derived unity*, i.e. the monad gifted with position – the actual principle of all numbers (or of all figures).

Faced with this illustration of mathematical theories of Greek origin, it is to accept the point of view of S. Lilla that the Alexandrian author must have been influenced by a Neo-Pythagorean interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*, which influenced Plotinus in formulating his doctrine on Νοῦς.³⁴ According to this view, there is a principle of unity which transcends plurality to such an extent that it refuses any predicate, even the one of existence;³⁵ which is neither motion nor rest, neither in time nor in space; about which nothing can be said, not even that it is identical to itself or different from other things; and – along with this one – a second principle of unity, containing the seeds of all opposites, a principle which – if we accept its existence – shall indefinitely multiply itself in a universe of existing units.³⁶ In short, there are two types of Units: One absolutely simple, transcending all existence and all knowledge, and one present in the Second Hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, which is the principle of all things and the complex unity which contains all in itself.³⁷

In other words, it is possible that “this passage expresses an element of Middle Platonism which persisted into Neo-Platonism and according to which God can be known only by stripping or abstracting all qualities from our idea of an existing thing. (...) It is foreshadowed

34 S. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1971, 205–206.

35 *Paedagogus* 1.8.71.1.8–2.1: „God is one and beyond (ἐπέκεινα) the one and above (ὑπὲρ) the monad itself” (ἐν δὲ ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ ὑπὲρ αὐτὴν μονάδα). See E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, 111 sq.

36 Cf. E.R. Dodds, *The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One*, *The Classical Quarterly* 22(1928), 132.

37 Cf. L. Rizzerio, *L'accès à la transcendance divine selon Clément d'Alexandrie*, op. cit., 167.

in the simple unity of the first hypothesis in Plato's *Parmenides*.³⁸ Clement has valued this idea in a Christian theological horizon: we start by a process of "confession and cleansing from sin and we end in holy union with Christ."³⁹ The final stage is that of an "immensity of holiness" beyond the unity which has been arrived at through the abstractive process. We could speculate – based on R. Mortley's⁴⁰ line of argument – that this last stage is the one of the Father – "the One beyond being and language, and without parts." The "greatness of Christ" would correspond to "one of the lesser unities," and would have as consequence the fact that the Father is *the pure unity*, while the Son – the unity which is *completeness of parts*.

A passage from *Protrepticus* seems to clarify even better the Clementine reading regarding the alternative *Parmenides*: "Let us, being made pod, pursue unity analogously, seeking the good monad (or "unit"). The union of many in one, arising out of polyphony and fragmentation, becomes one single symphony by taking on a divine harmony. We follow one choirleader and teacher, the Word, towards the same truth, and resting therein, crying, "Abba, Father".⁴¹

The Clementine statement conveys explicitly the fact that Christ is the unity of many parts and the giver of unity to discrepant elements. However, besides the unity thus accomplished, there is the realm of *pure unity*, recognized in the call to the beyond, "Abba, Father"⁴². The fragment from *Protrepticus* sheds light in the case of the text from *Stromata* in the sense that we might assume – again, together with

38 E. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*, op. cit., 27.

39 *Ibidem*, 27.

40 See R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 43.

41 Clement, *Protrepticus* 9.88.16.90–17.94: Αγαθοεργούμενοι ἀναλόγως ἐνότητα διώκωμεν, τὴν ἀγαθὴν ἐκζητοῦντες μονάδα. Ἡ δὲ ἐκ πολλῶν ἔνωσις ἐκ πολυφωνίας καὶ διασπορᾶς ἁρμονίαν λαβοῦσα θεϊκὴν μία γίνεται συμφωνία, ἐνὶ χορηγῷ καὶ διδασκάλῳ τῷ λόγῳ ἐπομένη, ἐπ' αὐτὴν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἀναπαυομένη, Ἀββᾶ λέγουσα ὁ πατήρ (trans. R. Mortley, in: *The way of negation*, op. cit., 43).

42 See also R.P. Casey, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Platonism*, *The Harvard Theological Review* 18(1925), 75.

Mortley⁴³ – that “that with Christ we have the lesser unity, which springs from wholeness and completeness: this is the unity envisaged in the second and third hypothesis of the Parmenides. The One pure, the Father, lies *still further beyond* this stage.”⁴⁴

2. VIA NEGATIVA AND THE THEME OF SILENCE IN CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement of Alexandria is one of the authors who emphasize *silence* as having great importance in the knowledge process.⁴⁵ In a passage from *Stromata*, it is established the argument that God’s transcendence assumes the fact that “He is beyond comprehension and description”: “(..) and among intellectual ideas, what is oldest in origin, the timeless and unoriginated First Principle, and Beginning of existences – the Son – from whom we are to learn the remoter Cause, the Father, of the universe, the most ancient and the most beneficent of all; not capable of expression by the voice, but to be revered with reverence, and silence (σιγή), and holy wonder, and supremely venerated.”⁴⁶

Starting from the recurring argument in the Middle Platonic thinking – according to which God cannot be understood through

43 See R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 43.

44 Cf. also J.W. Trigg, *Receiving the Alpha: Negative Theology in Clement of Alexandria and its Possible Implications*, op. cit., 541–542 and H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, op. cit., 227.

45 See R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 36 sq.

46 *Stromata* 7.1.2.3.1–6: παρ’ οὐ ἐκμανθάνειν ἔστιν τὸ ἐπέκεινα αἴτιον, τὸν πατέρα τῶν ὄλων, τὸ πρέσβιστον καὶ πάντων εὐεργετικώτατον, οὐκέτι φωνῇ παραδιδόμενον, σεβάσματι δὲ καὶ σιγῇ μετὰ ἐκπλήξεως ἀγίας σεβαστὸν καὶ σεπτὸν κυριώτατα. λεγόμενον μὲν πρὸς τοῦ κυρίου ὡς οἶόν τε ἦν ἐπαίειν τοῖς μανθάνουσι, νοούμενον δὲ πρὸς γε τῶν ἐξειλεγμένων εἰς γνῶσιν παρὰ κυρίον (trans. W. Wilson, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, op. cit., 523).

predication, but only through negation – Odo Casel⁴⁷ advocates the existence of an intimate relationship between the idea of negation and the theme of silence.⁴⁸

The transcendence of the First Principle, πατέρα τῶν ὄλων, calls for the need to abandon the predicates. As in the case of the *via negativa*, where abstraction aims at overcoming the realm of predicates, “the most appropriate response to the divine is *silence* (σιγή).”⁴⁹

The use of the verb σιωπᾶω⁵⁰ from *Stromata* 1.1.15.1 may be included within the scope of the same idea: “Some things my treatise will hint; on some it will linger; some it will merely mention. It will try to speak imperceptibly, to exhibit secretly, and to demonstrate silently (σιωπῶσα).”⁵¹

In the sequence above, the author seeks to demonstrate the value of hiding the truth in mystery and symbol.⁵² As in the case of the one initiated in mysteries,⁵³ Clement is reluctant to explicitly divulge the cardinal features of the Christian doctrine. Hence the need for a treaty with double purpose: which *discloses* without deviating from

47 See O. Casel, *De philosophorum graecorum silentio mystico*, vol. 16, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1967², 77.

48 On negation as metaphor, see J. Trouillard, *La purification plotinienne*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1955, 133 sq.

49 R. Mortley, *The theme of Silence in Clement of Alexandria*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 24(1973), 200.

50 *Keep secret, speak not of, silence* (cf. *A Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, with a revised supplement, revised and augmented throughout by H. S. Jones, new (ninth) edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, 1603). Cf. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G.W.H. Lampe, Oxford University Press, London 1961, 1234.

51 *Stromata* 1.1.15.1–2.1: ἔστι δὲ ἅ καὶ αἰνίξεταί μοι γραφή, καὶ τοῖς μὲν παραστήσεται, τὰ δὲ μόνον ἔρεῖ, πειράσεται δὲ καὶ λανθάνουσα εἰπεῖν καὶ ἐπικρυπτομένη ἐκφήνη καὶ δεῖξαι σιωπῶσα.

52 See H.G. Marsh, *The use ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ of in the writings of Clement of Alexandria with special reference to his sacramental doctrine*, *Journal of Theological Studies* 37(1936), 64–80.

53 See also R.P. Casey, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Platonism*, *The Harvard Theological Review* 18(1925), 75 sq.

the need to *hide*. So that the intention to demonstrate through silence assumes this bipolar aspect. However, in this case, the silence under discussion is the one of the initiated and it is more a form of discretion than an inevitable response to God's transcendence.⁵⁴

In another passage, Clement mentions the silence vote imposed by Pythagoras to his disciples to achieve contemplation: "This is, then, the import of the silence (σιωπή) of five years prescribed by Pythagoras, which he enjoined on his disciples; that, abstracting themselves from the objects of sense, they might with the mind alone contemplate (ἐποπτεύειν) the Deity."⁵⁵

Despite the use of the term borrowed from the vocabulary of mysteries, it is obvious that the σιωπή at stake is not simply the discretion of the initiate. Abstaining from speech requires refraining from the activity of the senses to gain the state of "contemplation with pure mind" (ψιλῶ τῷ νῶ). In this way, we are back to *via negativa*: the word is associated with the sensory activity, while silence – in its highest sense – reveals the functioning of the mind itself: "Silence is the symbol of a higher form of knowledge."⁵⁶

Clement's perspective on prayer seems to confirm the impression expressed above: "Prayer is, then, to speak more boldly, converse with God. Though whispering, consequently, and not opening the lips, we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly. For God hears continually all the inward converse. So also we raise the head and lift the hands to heaven, and set the feet in motion at the closing utterance of the prayer, following the eagerness of the spirit directed towards the intellectual essence; and endeavouring to abstract the body from the earth, along with the discourse, raising the soul aloft, winged with

54 Cf. R. Mortley, *The theme of Silence in Clement of Alexandria*, op. cit., 201.

55 *Stromata* 5.11.67.3.1–3: τοῦτο ἄρα βούλεται καὶ τῷ Πυθαγόρῃ ἡ τῆς πενταετίας σιωπῆ, ἣν τοῖς γνωρίμοις παρεγγυᾷ, ὡς δὴ ἀποστραφέντες τῶν αἰσθητῶν ψιλῶ τῷ νῶ τὸ θεῖον ἐποπτεύειν.

56 R. Mortley, *The theme of Silence in Clement of Alexandria*, op. cit., 201.

longing for better things, we compel it to advance to *the region of holiness*, magnanimously despising the chain of the flesh.”⁵⁷

Prayer cannot be expressed through a simple model of verbal contact because it can only be fulfilled in *silence*.⁵⁸ True knowledge cannot be communicated through words, as the mind does not need the support provided by the sensible world in order to mark its *ascension*.⁵⁹ As most ingeniously expressed by Mortley, “Silence is the symbol of God: the silence of man is a sign that his νοῦς, rather than his senses, is functioning.”⁶⁰

Negative theology imprints the effect of an elimination of predicates and – when the supreme level of silence has been reached – only then the mind rise to its full heights. “Knowledge becomes a problem not of *saying*, but of *being*.”⁶¹

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE MATHEMATICAL MODEL OF VIA NEGATIVA

The Clementine Christian version of the negative method integrates perfectly into the regime of what A.H. Armstrong⁶² named through the collocations: the Mathematical Negative Theology or the Negative Theology of Tradition.

57 *Stromata* 7.7.40.1.3–6: ...ἐπακολουθοῦντες τῇ προθυμίᾳ τοῦ πνεύματος εἰς τὴν νοητὴν οὐσίαν, καί, συναφιστάνειν τῷ λόγῳ τὸ σῶμα τῆς γῆς πειρώμενοι, μετάρσιον ποιησάμενοι τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπτερωμένην τῷ πόθῳ τῶν κρείττωνων (trans. W. Wilson, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, op. cit., 534).

58 See H. Chadwick, *The Silence of Bishops in Ignatius*, *The Harvard Theological Review* 43(1950), 169–172.

59 Cf. R. Mortley, *The theme of Silence in Clement of Alexandria*, op. cit., 202.

60 *Ibidem*, 201, n. 6.

61 *Ibidem*, 202. Cf. W. Völker, *Der wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus*, Akademie-Verlag/ Hinrichs, Berlin/ Leipzig 1952, 414.

62 A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*, Cambridge University Press, London 1940, 29.

The origin of this mathematical illustration of the negation way is placed by E.R. Dodds⁶³ in a Pythagorean context.⁶⁴ H.A. Wolfson pointed to a similarity between the mathematical version of Albinus⁶⁵ and the following passage from a lost review to Euclid's⁶⁶ *Elements* – preserved in the Arabic review of al-Nairizi to *Elements*: “Euclid thus defined a point negatively because it was arrived at by the abstraction of surface from body, and by the abstraction of line from surface, and by the abstraction of point from line. Since then body has three dimensions it follows that a point [arrived at after successively eliminating all three dimensions] has none of the dimensions, and has no part.”⁶⁷

In connection to this text, Wolfson⁶⁸ ascertains that “the description of the successive abstractions of surface, line and point in Simplicius (sixth cent. A.D.) is exactly the same as the that used in the passage we have quoted from Albinus (second cent. A.D.),” and proclaims that “we have reason to believe that the statement of

63 See E.R. Dodds, *The Unknown God in Neoplatonism*, in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1963, 312.

64 See L. Rizzerio, *L'accès à la transcendance divine selon Clément d'Alexandrie*, op. cit., 167–170.

65 Cf. Albinus, *Didaskalikos* 10.5.1–4 (165.16–19 Whittaker/Louis): “The first way of conceiving God is by abstraction of these attributes, just as we form the conception of a point by abstraction from sensible phenomena, conceiving first a surface, then a line, and finally a point” (trans. J. Dillon, in: Alcinoüs, *The Handbook of Platonism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2002, 18).

66 Euclid, *Elementa* 1.1.1: “A point is that which has no part” (Σημείον ἔστιν, οὐ μέρος οὐθέν).

67 Cf. *Anaritii in decem libros priores Elementorum Euclidis commentarii ex interpretatione Gherardi Cremonensis* II. 19–23 (*The Latin Translation of Anaritiu's Commentary on Euclid's Elements of Geometry, Books I–IV*, ed. P.M.J.E. Tummers, Ingenium, Nijmegen 1994, 2): “Punctum ideo negando Euclides diffinivit, diminutione superficiei a corpore, et diminutione lineae a superficiei, et diminutione puncti a linea. Cum ergo corpus sit tres habens dimensiones, punctus necessario nullam earum habet, nec habet partem.” (Quoted in T.L. Heath, *The Thirteen Books of Euclid's elements*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1908, 157). Cf. H.A. Wolfson, *Albinus and Plotinus on Divine Attributes*, *The Harvard Theological Review* 45(1952), 118–119.

68 See H.A. Wolfson, *Albinus and Plotinus on divine attributes*, op. cit., 119.

Albinus here is only a fragment of a comment on Euclid's definition of a point which, like the passage of Simplicius, tried to explain Euclid's negative definition of a point." This hypothesis⁶⁹ did not attract researchers' consensus,⁷⁰ as the idea of "textual borrowing" of Albinus from an already existing review to Euclid's *Elements* is being disapproved.⁷¹

The movement from the point to the solid figure (*i.e.* the reverse of the illustration of Albinus) was already constitutive to Pythagoreanism⁷² and it is encountered in many authors:⁷³ *e.g.*, in Philon of Alexandria⁷⁴, Plutarch⁷⁵, Sextus Empiricus⁷⁶, Nicomachus of Gerasa⁷⁷, in the description of Alexander Polyhistor – reproduced by Diogenes

69 Cf. also A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, IV, op. cit., 314–315.

70 J. Whittaker explains that Wolfson's assumption, "even if correct, would not necessarily affect the validity of Dodds' suggestion, since any commentary on Euclid that was available to Albinus is likely to have been Neopythagorean in tone and theologically orientated." See J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, *Symbolae Osloenses* 44(1969), 110.

71 *Ibidem*, 110: "No doubt Simplicius was heavily indebted to previous commentators, but it is rash to suppose that Albinus could not have taken his illustration from any other source than a Euclidean commentary."

72 See G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971, 253–256.

73 See J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, op. cit., 110–112.

74 *De opificio mundi* 49.2–8 (*Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*, vol. 1, ed. L. Cohn, De Gruyter, Berlin 1962).

75 *Platonicae quaestiones* 1001E–1002A (*Plutarchi moralia*, vol. 6.1, ed. C. Hubert, Teubner, Leipzig 1959).

76 *Adversus mathematicos* 10.281 (*Sexti Empirici opera*, vol. 3, Teubner, Leipzig 1961).

77 *Introductio arithmetica* 2.6.4 (*Nicomachi Geraseni Pythagorei introductionis arithmeticae*, libri II, ed. R. Hoche, Teubner, Leipzig 1866).

Laertius⁷⁸; as well as in Hippolytus of Rome⁷⁹, Theon of Smyrna⁸⁰, Iamblichus⁸¹ and the Pythagorean Anonymus Photii⁸².

The fact that the method of Albinus could be related to the Pythagorean scheme stems also from the fact that Plutarch⁸³, Sextus Empiricus⁸⁴, and Nicomachus⁸⁵ expose not just the movement *from the point to the solid figure*, but also the one *from the solid figure to the point*. The two movements are found – in a combined formula – in Aristotle⁸⁶, and it seems that they were ordinary procedures in the

78 *Vitae philosophorum* 8.25 (*Diogenis Laertii vitae philosophorum*, vol. 2, ed. H.S. Long, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1966): ἀρχὴν μὲν τῶν ἀπάντων μονάδα· ἐκ δὲ τῆς μονάδος ἀόριστον δυάδα ὡς ἂν ὕλην τῇ μονάδι αἰτίῳ ὄντι ὑποστήναι· ἐκ δὲ τῆς μονάδος καὶ τῆς ἀόριστου δυάδος τοὺς ἀριθμούς· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἀριθμῶν τὰ σημεῖα· ἐκ δὲ τούτων τὰς γραμμὰς, ἐξ ὧν τὰ ἐπί πεδα σχήματα· ἐκ δὲ τῶν ἐπιπέδων τὰ στερεὰ σχήματα· ἐκ δὲ τούτων τὰ αἰσθητὰ σώματα, ὧν καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα εἶναι τέτταρα, πῦρ, ὕδωρ, γῆν, ἀέρα· μεταβάλλειν δὲ καὶ τρέπεσθαι δι' ὄλων, καὶ γίνεσθαι ἐξ αὐτῶν κόσμον ἔμψυχον ("The principle of all things is the monad or unit; arising from this monad the undefined dyad or two serves as material substratum to the monad, which is cause; from the monad and the undefined dyad spring numbers; from numbers, points; from points, lines; from lines, plane figures; from plane figures, solid figures, from solid figures, sensible bodies, the elements of which are four, fire, water, earth and air; these elements interchange and turn into one another completely, and combine to produce a universe animate.") (trans. R.D. Hicks, in: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, vol. II, William Heinemann/ G.P. Putnam's Sons, London/ New York 1925, 341, 343).

79 Cf. *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (ed. M. Marcovich, De Gruyter, Berlin/ New York 1986), IV.51 (137–138) and VI.23 (230–231).

80 *Theonis Smyrnaei philosophi Platonici expositio rerum mathematicarum ad legendum Platonem utilium*, ed. E. Hiller, Teubner, Leipzig 1878, 97.

81 [*Iamblichus*] *theologoumena arithmeticae*, ed. V. de Falco, Teubner, Leipzig 1922, 84.

82 Photius, *Bibliotheca* 249.439a.3–8 (*Bibliothèque*, 8 vol., ed. R. Henry, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1959–1977).

83 *Platonicae quaestiones* 1001e8–1002a8.

84 *Adversus mathematicos* 10.259.1–261.3.

85 *Introductio arithmetica* 2.6.71–8.

86 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1016b24–31: τὸ μὲν οὖν κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν ἀδιαίρετον, τὸ μὲν πάντη καὶ ἄθετον λέγεται μονάς, τὸ δὲ πάντη καὶ θέσιν ἔχον στιγμή, τὸ δὲ μοναχῆ γραμμῆ, τὸ δὲ διχῆ ἐπίπεδον, τὸ δὲ πάντη καὶ τριχῆ διαίρετον κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν σώμα· καὶ ἀντιστρέψαντι δὴ τὸ μὲν διχῆ διαίρετον ἐπίπεδον, τὸ δὲ μοναχῆ γραμμῆ, τὸ δὲ μηδαμῆ διαίρετον κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν στιγμή καὶ μονάς, ἢ μὲν ἄθετος μονάς ἢ δὲ θετὸς στιγμή ("That

Old Academy.⁸⁷ We may thus conclude, as does Whittaker, that there is no need to suppose that Albinus' source could only have been a commentary on Euclid. R. Mortley reinforces this verdict, stating that it is not prudent to amplify excessively the mathematical background of the Middle Platonic wording regarding *via negativa*: "The geometrical methods had long since been absorbed by philosophy, so that Albinus was probably scarcely interested in their origin."⁸⁸

However, the statement that the mathematical model of *via negativa* is a legacy of the Old Academy *exclusively* appears exaggerated, as it could be, using the phrase of Whittaker, "rather a Middle Platonic adaptation of Neopythagorean material which itself in turn built upon Early Pythagorean and Old Academic conceptions."⁸⁹

Mortley also expresses certain caution here: "It is not enough simply to suppose Neopythagorean influence,"⁹⁰ considering that many problems had already been shared by a variety of schools, and "the mere mention of removing geometrical attributes should not by itself be taken to be evidence of Neopythagorean influence. The use of this image to illustrate the principles of negative theology had long been absorbed by the other branches of philosophy, and its presence in Albinus has only the status of an illustration."⁹¹ The confirmation

which is indivisible in quantity and qua quantity is called a unit if it is not divisible in any dimension and is without position, a point if it is not divisible in any dimension and has position, a line if it is divisible in one dimension, a plane if in two, a body if divisible in quantity in all – i.e. in three – dimensions. And, reversing the order, that which is divisible in two dimensions is a plane, that which is divisible in one a line, that which is in no way divisible in quantity is a point or a unit, – that which has not position a unit, that which has position a point.") (trans. W.D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, 67).

87 See H.J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, op. cit., 105 sq.

88 Cf. R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 21.

89 Cf. J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, op. cit., 112.

90 R. Mortley, *The way of negation*, op. cit., 22.

91 *Ibidem*, 23–24. The correlation between Celsus, Albinus and Clement of Alexandria is supported by H. Chadwick (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 429–430, n. 4). Cf. R. Mortley, *Negative theology and Abstraction in Plotinus*, op. cit., 374, n. 18: Celsus uses the word

of such exegesis could come from a Clementine text,⁹² which refers to the mathematical version of *via negativa*.

Wolfson⁹³ was the one who characterized Clement's undertaking as a "paraphrase of Plotinus," through which the Alexandrian author tried "to show how, by a process of abstraction like that by which we arrive at the conceptions of surface and line and point we may also arrive at some conception of God, namely 'knowing *not* what He is, but what He is *not*.'"⁹⁴ Whittaker⁹⁵ insists on two arguments that should make us reluctant to the Wolfsonian supposition and make us consider the Clement's account independent of that of Albinus: 1. Clement's version introduces the term ἀνάλυσις in place of Albinus' ἀφαίρεσις⁹⁶ and the fact that ἀνάλυσις occurs in Celsus too in the same connection shows that it was a current Middle Platonic term for the procedure in question;⁹⁷ 2. Clement added a final stage⁹⁸ in the negative regression which has no counterpart in Albinus. In this case, the probability is rather that both were relating a "familiar doctrine," that Albinus presents this doctrine in *abbreviated* form, whereas Clement puts forward a more *elaborate* version.⁹⁹

Even so, one of the major differences between the two approaches is the very ingenious combination that Clement employs between

ἀνάλυσις, but means what Sextus means by στέρησις and Albinus by ἀφαίρεσις. See also A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. IV, op. cit., 119–123.

92 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.2–3.

93 H.A. Wolfson, *Negative Attributes in the Church Fathers and the Gnostic Basilides*, *The Harvard Theological Review* 50(1957), 147.

94 Cf. Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.3.

95 See J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, op. cit., 113–114.

96 H.J. Krämer (*Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, op. cit., 105, n. 279): ἀνάλυσις ~ ἀφαίρεσις. Cf. D. Burns (*Apophatic Strategies in Allogenes [NHC XI]*, *Harvard Theological Review* 103(2010), 168, n. 36), "ἀνάλυσις and ἀφαίρεσις mean the same thing in Middle Platonic sources."

97 Cf. also H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, op. cit., 223.

98 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.2.6–3.1.

99 J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, op. cit., 114.

abstraction (or analysis) and confession (ὁμολογία): “We shall understand the mode of purification by confession (ὁμολογία), and that of contemplation by analysis (ἀναλύσει), advancing by analysis to the first notion (τὴν πρώτην νόησιν).”¹⁰⁰ The path taking to the contemplation of God in Clement’s vision also entails a spiritual and ethical struggling, whereas in Albinus’ version the spiritual dimension is much less developed than the mental one.¹⁰¹

The ultimate disjunction consists in the fact that the Alexandrian does not stop with the final stage, μονάς,¹⁰² as Albinus does, but goes further and describes an *action* which in reality is a *new* one: “If, then, abstracting all that belongs to bodies and things called incorporeal, we cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ (τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ), and thence advance into immensity by holiness, we may reach somehow to the conception of the Almighty.”¹⁰³

Clement gets himself ahead in this regard of the approaches and practices inspired by philosophy of *via negativa* not only by the formula “casting himself into the greatness of Christ”— ἐπιρρίψαμεν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, but also by cultivating again the spiritual/ ethical dimension of the entire process: “advance into immensity by holiness” – κάκειθεν εἰς τὸ ἀχανές ἀγιότητι προϊόμε. ¹⁰⁴

“Casting ourselves into the greatness of Christ” occurs after the entire abstraction process has been exhausted and constitutes *another*

100 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.2.1–3: λάβοιμεν δ’ ἂν τὸν μὲν καθαρτικὸν τρόπον ὁμολογία, τὸν δὲ ἐποπτικὸν ἀναλύσει ἐπὶ τὴν πρώτην νόησιν προχωροῦντες (trans. W. Wilson, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, op. cit., 975).

101 Cf. H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, op. cit., 224.

102 See J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, op. cit., 114 sq.

103 Clement, *Stromata* 5.11.71.3 (trans. W. Wilson, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, op. cit., 461).

104 H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, op. cit., 225.

step – an *extra-rational*¹⁰⁵ one. Here there is an attempt to lead the abstraction beyond its scope, beyond its range of application and this is the separation that is worth noting between the traditional abstraction of the Academy and the one of Clement.¹⁰⁶

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Clement's formulations reflect the first clear statement of the negative method in the Christian tradition, and, ironically, the method he supports is actually not a form of negation at all, but a form of abstraction. This will make room – in the Christian and Neoplatonic tradition – to genuine negation, but, in the early stages, negative theology is nothing more than a technique of conceptual removal. “Being precipitated into the greatness of Christ” means being thrown into a realm which is situated *beyond* language and *beyond* existence: it is a transcendental experience.¹⁰⁷

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