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Chapter II. The First Christian negative theology: Justin and Clement

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Justin Martyr is the first Christian thinker to argue in any depth that God can be characterized in negative terms only. His view is very familiar in the context of Hellenistic Judaism: Philo has already established for Judaism the ideas brought forward by Justin. The latter thinker is nevertheless not greatly concerned with systematic negative thinking, in that he does not advocate an overall pattern of deconstructionist thinking. Language fails in the effort to describe God the Father, but we do not find in Justin the systematic use of this failure that we find in later Platonism, or the step by step method which we shall see in Clement, and which is already familiar in Middle Platonism.

A significant article by D. W. Palmer (Atheism, Apologetic...) has done much to establish a context for Justin, in the matter of negative theology. Palmer shows clearly that Justin was not an isolated case, but that the use of negative definitions of God was widespread in the second century, particularly with the apologists. He has also illuminated the period in which Christian negative theology was at its embryonic stage, and outlined a kind of Christian equivalent for the Middle Platonists. The \textit{via negativa} of these pre-Neoplatonists has been well studied by Festugière, Whittaker and others, but that of the pre-Patristic writers has not been delineated until now.

It may be objected that Palmer identifies anti-anthropomorphism with negative theology. There is clearly a negative aspect to statements which refuse anthropomorphic images for God, in that elements of familiar, human models are being negated. Yet it is equally clear that the \textit{via negativa} evolves into something more than this simple anti-anthropomorphism, and thus in chapter one it was argued that genuine negative theology is more radical than this. Anti-anthropomorphism is a common feature of many religions, but the \textit{via negativa} is a specific and somewhat more unusual development: it is firstly a way, or a system for deconstructing positive concepts, and it constitutes a more thoroughgoing refusal of linguistic categories. The example of Proclus will show to what extent the science of the negative could develop into something more than disquiet over anthropomorphic comparisons. It may further be observed that Palmer is able to find a larger amount for material precisely because he does identify anti-anthropomorphism with negative theology.

This somewhat minor criticism having been offered, it should also be said that much of what he has brought forward does shed light on the developing \textit{via negativa}. In particular it is shown that negative descriptions of God are brought forward as part of a response to the charge of atheism. This curious fact is demonstrated with regard to Athenagoras (p.244) and Justin (242), for
whom the charge of Christian atheism affords the opportunity to attack Greek anthropomorphism. This attack on the humanised deities of the Greeks is contrasted with Christian piety, based on monotheism and the comparative unrecognizability of the deity. In this way negative language has an apologetic function. But further, authors who are not under the charge of atheism speak of God in this way: Tatian (243), Theophilus (246) and Aris- tides (240) all use negative epithets, although very often in an apologetic context. The question which arises from Palmer’s article is this: to what extent does Christian negative theology owe its origins to apologetic concerns?

We return now to Justin, who is the most important figure in this group, and who establishes the remoteness of God in various ways. Justin raises (Dialogue 49) the common-place problems of the burning bush, in which God was supposed to have placed himself in order to converse with Moses. The problem was that this Exodus (3.4) story seems to localise and circumscribe God, the maker and father of all things. As did others before him and after, Justin avoided this view, and the discussion with Trypho turns on the issue of whether it was a god or an angel who spoke from the burning bush. The dialogue clearly reveals that the matter was an established subject for discussion. Justin displays a complicated argument about how to interpret the passage, but the crucial point to be drawn from it is this: a hierarchy of beings was envisaged, and God the Father was placed at its summit. The traditional discussion of the burning bush was intended to rank the beings as they were thought to have appeared, but of course its urgency arises from the necessity of preserving the transcendence of God the Father. Remoteness had become the key to the deity, and for this reason the interpretation of the burning bush episode also became crucial. The new sense of transcendence demanded a new view of it.

To this God “there is no name given” (Apology II.6). Names derive from a superior principle, and the ultimate cannot therefore be named. Words such as “creator” and “lord” cannot really be described as names, says Justin: they are clearly words, or “locutions”, but they mean to refer to acts carried out by the Father. The word Christ refers to a specific act and function in the same way, but Justin also notes that this name “contains an unknown significance”.

The word “God” is not really a name either, and shares this impenetrability: it arises from some impression in the minds of men, but does not cast light on the reality it designates. The word “Jesus” is another matter: it has significance (II.6.4). Jesus was made man “having been conceived according to the will of the Father”, for the sake of believers and for the destruction of demons.

These views of Justin’s are typical of the period. God is unbegotten (agennetos) and therefore unnameable: this principle can be found equally easily in any of the Middle Platonists discussed in chapter I. Similarly, the
Justin on names and beings

view that available names actually refer to deeds, functions or powers, rather than to God himself, is a commonplace in the Platonist writings. We have seen already in Philo that “God’s words are his deeds”, and the ingenious variation on this theme in the Gospel of Truth, where it is claimed that the name of the Father is the Son. Here the son is seen as a sort of name-act, a deed of the Father which functions as a semantic indicator of his being. It is within this context that Justin carries out his reflection, and like Philo he makes naming the capacity of an older, superior power. This is no doubt based on the human experience of giving birth and name-granting, with the assumption that naming is consequent on the act of creation, and carried out by those already in existence, and who are verbally competent to do so. The unborn character of God means that he has never received a name: indeed there is no prior power to award one.

Justin therefore sees “Jesus” as a name in the ordinary sense, since it follows procreation, and it is given by a prior being. The mention of demons is interesting: the magical documents of the period remind us of the importance of names for the exercise of spiritual power, and it is this need which God fulfils by providing the name “Jesus”. The giving of a name saves man from the demons, and this name is a name in the ordinary sense, since it designates something begotten. It therefore has a certain power in the world of the begotten. The names “God” and “Christ”, however, both have that impregnable mystery about them, in that they do not work as names should, and they do not elucidate beings in the world of things. These words are in fact masks for the true nature of God. They have not been endowed by a prior in the generation process, but have been given by man: since man comes subsequently, he cannot name that which is parent to him, at least in any efficacious way. For Justin, it is quite literally true that the word “Jesus” has meaning, whereas the word “God” does not.

The document once attributed to Justin (Exhortation to the Greeks) is much more Hellenistic in outlook, by virtue of both its philosophy and its historiography. It is far more literate in Greek philosophy than is Justin, and is distinctly Alexandrian in style. It makes an interesting comparison, since it also deals with naming and ineffability. This document also claims (21) that God cannot be known by any name, and there are two grounds for this. Firstly, the one familiar from Justin: no being existed before God, who could give him a name. But a second point is added, that names are intended to distinguish between things in their multiplicity. (This is not unlike an observation of Basilides, who sees names as responding to the multiplicity of things.) But it should further be observed that it is a standard theme of Platonism. Pseudo-Justin sees language as a fundamentally divisive art, which contributes a multiplicity of labels to the multiple entities in existence. Its job is to single them out and list them.

This is a clearly Greek view of the role of logos, and it extends back to
Plato and the Presocratics. The notion is that nouns constitute the major element in the linguistic drive to separate entities, and consequently to destroy their underlying unity. For this reason God could have no name, no appropriate noun (onoma), and to this argument Pseudo-Justin adds the view familiar from Justin himself, that no prior being existed, who could endow God with a name. Priority, on this view, gives the power to name.

Pseudo-Justin brings us much closer to Clement of Alexandria, who is also in touch with this analysis of language, and with the general ontology of the Greek tradition. Clement’s reflection on language is profound, and full of implications for all meta-disciplines such as philosophy and theology. He expects to find language full of enigmas, and treats theology as a generalised parable. Rational discourse is regarded as a kind of continuous symbol, an aigma, or puzzle to be considered by the intellect. Rational discourse does not demonstrate reality, as Aristotle would have it, but rather it symbolises transcendent truth. Thus language itself calls for a hermeneutic.

Clement regards concepts (noemata) as identical in the minds of all subjects, since they are the likenesses of things which exist. This makes thought the same from culture to culture. Language is in turn a set of symbols (symbola) for these concepts, but these vary from culture to culture (Strom. VIII.23.1). This view clearly puts language in a specially ambiguous position: thought processes have the advantage of some proximity to the objects of thought, since they resemble them. (The legacy of Stoic/Epicurean views of perception is evident here.) Language, on the other hand, is merely "symbolic" and that word has a rich significance in Clement’s vocabulary. The difference between the languages shows the tenuousness of the link between the name and the conception, and ultimately, the object. Language is therefore a matter for study, and the various modes of linguistic expression have to be identified and understood. It is this analysis of language which forms the substance of the subsequent passage in the eighth book of Clement’s Stromateis: language is dissected and analysed, and assigned into numerous categories. Such analyses were plentiful in the rhetorical writers of the time, and the fussy distinctions of a rhetor like Theon show how advanced had become the classification of language and its tropes. For Clement, no such laborious analysis need be applied to the concept itself, which has the advantage of being in the likeness of the object. Its linguistic expression, however, has no such immediate link with reality, and is therefore a matter for interpretation.

Clement is an author who stresses silence as having great value in the knowing process. God is to be worshipped in wonder and silence (Strom. VII.1.23). Clement advocates a sort of speechless mental contemplation, and the use of language is seen as a commitment to the senses. The “mind pure” functions without such props, and therefore without being diverted to the sensible world (Strom. V.11.67.3), and it is probable that here too Clement is treating the mind as bearing an immediate link with reality, of a kind that
language lacks. Accordingly prayer, as a form of communion with the highest reality, must take place in silence: "we speak in silence" (Strom. VII.7.40.1 ff.).

The contradiction at the heart of this Christian Platonism is the incarnation itself. By this act God appeared to endorse not only time and history, but also the senses, and indeed, language. Jesus gave the words of a prayer to be used, thereby endorsing a verbal understanding of prayer. Clement himself recognizes that the incarnation constitutes a breaking of the longstanding silence through his interpretation of the dumbness of Zacharias. Treating it as an ainigma, or symbol, Clement considers it an example of pre-incarnational silence (Protr. 1.10.1). He takes Zacharias' "silence" as symbolising the ignorance obtaining prior to the advent of Christ, which constitutes the full revelation. Christ as Word brings an end to the symbolic silence of Zacharias, and Clement thus concedes that language comes to its full flowering with the advent of the Son. How can he therefore place so much emphasis on the wordless character of the true knowledge of God?

This is a perpetual tension in the history of Christian Platonism, and is in the end irreducible. The idea of mystery and the idea of revelation will never easily coexist. Clement does, however, have something of a solution, in that he sees silence as coming into operation beyond the level of the Son. It is the Father of all things, the Middle Platonic One which lies beyond the realm of language: τὸ ἑπέκεινα αἰττον (Strom. VII.1.2.3 ff.). Language would appear to be operative up to the level of the Son, but not beyond. This is a characteristic theme of Middle Platonism, carried over into the Father/Son relationship of Christian theology. Since Jesus was part of the sensible world, language could be applied to him and used by him: this indeed was the whole point of the incarnation, to give language at least some limited field of applicability. It offered a launching pad for language and the experience of the senses. Yet beyond the Son there is silence, and this may reflect ideas about naming, as discussed in relation to Justin (see p. 34). The younger entity, the begotten entity, can receive a name from prior beings, but the primal and originating cause has no name and cannot receive one. There is no ontological prior. The Son therefore has a name, and came into being for this purpose, though the giver of the name must himself remain unnamed.

There is a further paradox to be noted, since Clement sees even speech as having a capacity for silence. About his own writing he says:

My treatise will hint at some things ..., it will try to speak imperceptibly, to make manifest in secrecy, to demonstrate in silence. (Strom. I.1.15.1)

This is part of persistent attempt by Clement to suggest that his writing is highly specific in character. He claims that its meaning lies not in the text itself, nor even in the meaning of the text. He communicates things which do
not appear to be the things communicated: there is some sleight of hand. Throughout this passage one can detect Clement's sense of obligation to conceal, the cultic duty of the initiate to the mysteries. He is using this as a metaphor, however, and it is difficult at times to tell whether a real *arcanum* doctrine is at stake, in other words, whether there is a real set of secret teachings available, or whether the talk about secrecy is just a way of alluding to the excessive mysteriousness of the truth. I have argued elsewhere (Apuleius...) that there was an *arcanum* doctrine in Middle Platonism, and Clement seems to advocate the view that secrecy over certain doctrines should be preserved. But he speaks as if concealment is a *natural* characteristic of discourse.

Clement's major interest is not to promote a secret body of esoteric teaching, but to offer a view of language which is consistent with both Christianity and Platonism. He is looking at language as if it has another face, a hidden, but extremely revealing obverse side. The usefulness of language does not lie in its face value. Clement's defensiveness about committing his ideas to writing is manifest throughout the whole of the first chapter of the *Stromateis*: in a reminiscence of Plato's Phaedrus, he claims that his writing is to be a remedy (*pharmakon*, see I, 94) against forgetfulness. Its inferiority is, however, clear:

"[My writing is] truly an image and shadow-painting of those clear and animated discourses which I was privileged to hear, of blessed and genuinely remarkable men. (Strom. I.1.11.1)"

The spoken word is to be preferred, and such a view has strong reinforcement. The two distinct traditions which intersect in Clement emphasise the force of the spoken word, each in its own way. On the one hand, the view of Plato was that spoken interaction was far more flexible, probing and efficacious than the written: on the other, the specific conditions of Christianity in the early period meant that great stress was placed on the value of the oral tradition. The transmission of information about the life and works of Jesus depended on this oral tradition, since the canon of documents had not yet been established. These ideas coalesce in Clement's expression of unease over his own decision to commit the *Stromateis* to paper. A distinctly Platonic note is heard in the following passage:

[Books] are continually turned over, using always the one written voice only; they answer nothing to him who asks questions which go beyond the text. (Strom. I.1.14.4)

This kind of statement about the limitations of writing is completely in the spirit of Plato's misgivings about the written word. But the same passage evokes the Christian fear of losing facts, in particular those facts which are
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the details of the first century Christological events. Clement's preference is for these things to be passed on orally, "for in speaking one is often a hearer along with the audience" (Strom. I.1.12.3).

Clement's reluctance to write is thus considerable. His concern is that writing will deaden the life-giving facts and ideas of his teaching. Yet he fears the loss of vital links in the message which he wishes to be transmitted: he moves then to a conscious recording of his teaching. (This recording is not of course solely concerned with facts, but with the whole ensemble of incidents and interpretations). Clement therefore represents a crucial stage in Alexandrian Christianity, since the knowledge that information is being lost impels him to record it. His initiative marks the beginning of the Christian commitment to documentary history.

For these reasons Clement adopts his own approach to writing. His work will "speak imperceptibly", "demonstrate in silence". This secretive writing is intended to stimulate the faculties of the seeker after truth. In the opinion of the present writer, there is no reference here to a hidden doctrine. The hidden ideas are not of this concrete theological type, but they are rather experiences of the mind, new types of spiritual/intellectual experience. He fully expects that there will be different types of reading of his text, depending on the mental and spiritual state of the reader (Strom. I.1.17.1), and it is clear that in his view language is a veil drawn over essential intellectual truths. It is the kind of veil which is useful and necessary; it is not mischievously placed there, or misleadingly cast in the way of the seeker, but simply there because it has to be.

For the word conceals much. (Strom. VI.15.132.1)

Clement's deconstructionist analysis applies to the whole of language, and not merely the various types of metaphor, parable, or allegory. These last tropes do of course conceal, or secrete, but for Clement it is writing in general which has this characteristic. The spoken word is less enigmatic, since it is more versatile, and more responsive. But in the end, the deconstructionist approach will be applied by Clement to all forms of discourse. Though in the fifth book of the Stromateis he deals with the various forms of enigmatic writing, such as the metaphor, the parable or the allegory, he does not limit his idea of the hiddenness of meaning to these figures of speech. He regards it as a characteristic of human discourse that essential truths are veiled in "enigmas, symbols, allegories, metaphors, and similar figures of speech" (Strom. V.4.21.4): all nations show the same tendency. Thus Clement gives us one of his principles of comparative religion: "both barbarians and Greeks have veiled the first principles of things" (loc. cit.). He takes as his example the sacred writing of the Egyptian priests to provide the basis of his analysis of the symbol, and this passage has been well treated by Jean Pépin (Mythe et
Allégorie 269 ff.). Throughout this passage Clement endeavours to give an analysis of symbolic forms of language, which he regards as necessary and appropriate to the expression of the loftiest truths.

Yet what must be recognized is this. Clement does not separate language into two categories, the clear and the mysterious. He tends to see all language as requiring interpretation, as being in need of a hermeneutic. (This theme was developed in my Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d’Alexandrie 193 ff., but here other passages can be adduced.) The true Gnostic is he who is able to read language: through the Scriptures he will know both the past and the future, and will grasp the true meaning of words and the solutions to enigmas (Strom. VI.11.92.3).

Clement chooses to give as his ideal a description of the “true Gnostic”. This figure is characterized by the present tense, and never the future: it is never said that he will obtain knowledge, peace, righteousness or heavenly rewards; he has them now. Thus he has knowledge now, and is an astute reader of language and the signs of the cosmos. His belief is based on the words spoken by the Lord, but somehow their meaning is concealed from other people (Strom. VI.9.78.6): to him they are clear. For the true Gnostic the world of discourse is the outer shell, and his insight takes him behind it. He will know that the number ten has a sacred significance, wherever it crops up. He finds it in the scriptures, and throughout the cosmos. The ten commandments themselves bear the mark of this mystical number (Strom. IV.16. ff.).

It is not merely the world of discourse which yields up secret meanings to the limpid gaze of the true Gnostic. The world of events and the world of things are both open to such interpretation: the construction of the ark will yield much of significance. Its narrowing peak recalls the pyramid, symbol of fire, and thus signifies those who are purified and tested by fire (Strom. VI.11.86.3). Contemplation of other aspects of its shape will yield other insights. Man himself yields mystical significance: he contains the number ten in that he has five senses, together with five other faculties, such as the power of speech and the power of reproduction (Strom. VI.16.134.1–2). Both human artefacts and things in nature have the capacity to yield meaning, and the universe is seen as encoded. Meaning is not manifest, but is present in code form: he who has eyes to see, will see. Is the concealment of meaning the result of authorial construction? Clement certainly seems to be saying that there is much more meaning in things than may have been intended by their authors: authorial intention is not the key to understanding, but a true reading by the Gnostic. This may be to ask a very contemporary question of an ancient writer, but it is prompted by the Alexandrian author’s sense of the meaning which lies hidden around us, in words and things. It is not clear whether this concealment is the result of authorial artifice, since the ultimate author could be God, but it is clear at least that we are offered an alternative
way of reading the cosmos. We are not to be limited by the literal face of things, but our minds are to flow to the truths suggested by what we see and hear.

Clement at times writes as if we should read for insights quite independent of those intended by the author of a given text. In this he is part of the already long tradition of allegorical interpretation, established by the Stoics and Philo as the pursuit of hidden meanings in mythical texts. But he does also emphasise that concealment is part of his own authorial technique: at the end of book seven of the Stromateis, he claims to have written with deliberate obscurity, so as to put off the uninformed. The germs of true knowledge are said to have been scattered throughout the writing, in order to render the discovery of the sacred traditions more difficult. His writing, he says, “aims to escape notice” (Strom. VII.18.111.2). In this case then, it is Clement the author who has endowed his writings with their secrecy.

Thus, he notes, the Greeks venerate Hermes as the god of speech. For interpretation (hermeneia) is essential, since “speech conceals much” (Strom. VI.15.132.1). The play on words makes Hermes the God of Hermeneutics, and the point seems to be that speech does require a hermeneutic, concealment being an essential part of it. A careless reading of this passage might cause us to think that Hermes is venerated by votive offerings of the fruit of the corn-poppy because he is the god of speech: but it is not speech that provides the elucidation; it requires it. Thus Hermes is associated with hermeneutics, or interpretation, which is needed because “speech conceals much”. Appropriately then, offerings are made to Hermes by the Greeks, because he, as God of artifice and cunning, will know how to unravel the mysteries contained in human discourse. The god of invention will know to break the code which constitutes the texture of human logos.

All this provides the context for Clement’s use of the via negativa. If language is a veil, obscuring essential truths, then it will be necessary to dismantle it in order to penetrate the mystery. Indeed, this pessimism about the efficacy of language always accompanies an interest in negative theology: where language is thought to fall short of having an apodeictic ability, then there arises a concern with interpreting it. In the present case, the mode of interpretation offered is that of negative deconstruction. Other hermeneutics are of course available: Hermes can deploy a variety of artful designs as he grapples with the muteness of speech. The discussion of analogy is one such example, since in this case the view is taken that language contains some relationship to essential reality, and that a kind of parallelism allows the interpreter to get some glimpse of the transcendent silence. Clement does not neglect this approach to language.

Yet here we are concerned with his interest in the negative type of therapy for this failure of language to communicate. Clement of course attacks standard anthropomorphism, which he finds in the Stoics (Strom. VII.7.37.1; see
my Connaissance... 88). God has no senses: he hears, but not in the manner of man's hearing. This is a common-or-garden statement of transcendence, and in the first chapter it was argued that such objections to anthropomorphism have very little to do with negative theology proper. Yet they approach it:

It is not possible to share in the gnostic contemplation unless we have emptied ourselves of our preconceptions. (Strom. VI.17.150.4)

We should seek to investigate the truth itself, "not seeking to learn names" (150.7). In a deliberate paradox Clement follows this up by claiming that what we are investigating when we investigate God "is not one thing, but ten thousand". Yet behind the ten thousand (epithets?) lies a single, unitary figure, and there is said to be a difference in declaring him, and declaring things about him: Clement here turns to the Aristotelian distinction between accidents and essence. But the classic statement of how to find this essence is given in Strom. V.11.71.2 ff. Beginning with some introductory comments about the Greek mysteries, Clement associates the negative method with the ritual purifications common to the religious practice of both Greeks and barbarians.

We may understand the purificatory rite by comparison with confession, and that of the initiated visionary by analysis, 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 all corporeal things, as well as the so-called incorporeal things, we may cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ, 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.

Despite the presence of the word analysis rather than aphairesis it has long been recognized that this is the negative way as defined in the textbooks of Middle Platonism. E. F. Osborn was one of the first to develop this in English, and to point out the relationship of the passage to the late interpretations of Plato's Parmenides. It is not clear, in my view, which of the hypotheses of the Parmenides is at work in this statement of Clement's negative theology. The abstraction process removes all three dimensional characteristics from observed reality, resulting in the conception of unity itself. Is this the unparticipated unity of the first hypothesis (Parm. 137 C ff.), or could it be an extraterrestrial unity which nevertheless derives its wholeness from the completeness of its parts? Plotinus certainly imagines a one which is complete in its multiplicity over and above the material world (Enn. V.8[13].9, 1 ff.). Is
Clement's unity within existence, or beyond it: this is the question raised by the second hypothesis of the Parmenides (142 B ff.). There are no answers to these questions, but what can be said is that Clement envisages a further stage: there is an "immensity of holiness" beyond the unity which has been arrived at through the abstraction process. We might speculate that this last stage is that 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 we would have the result that the Father is unity pure, and the Son the unity which is a completeness of parts.

A passage of the Protrepticus (IX.88.2; see my Connaissance religieuse... 92) refers to the Christian flock being brought together by "the unitary being". This writing is a sermon, but it proceeds to develop a philosophical concept as follows:

Let us, being made good, 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". (Protrepticus IX.88.2-3)

The metaphysical structure in this passage is the same as that of the Stromateis, quoted above. It reveals a little more, however, about Clement's interpretation of the Parmenidean alternatives. In the present passage, it is clear that Christ is the unity of many parts, and the giver of unity to inharmonious elements. But beyond the unity thus achieved, there lies the further realm of pure unity, recognized in the call to the beyond, "Abba, Father". The Protrepticus passage casts light on that of the Stromateis, and we must assume 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.

So much for the levels of unity. On the method of abstraction itself, Clement will elsewhere reiterate his interest in it. In Strom. VI.11.90.4 he commends the study of astronomy, because it trains the mind in various skills, including that of the method of deconstructionist thinking which we have designated the via negativa. Astronomy enables us "to conceive length without breadth, surface without depth, and a point without parts" (Strom. VI.11.90.4). The value of astronomy is coupled with that of music, and of philosophy, and each annotated: that of astronomy in particular is that it takes the soul up to the study of celestial objects. The study of the heavens brings us nearer to creative powers, and this takes us much closer to the source and essence of things. Astronomy draws us away from matter, and terrestrial preoccupations in general. It therefore predisposes us towards the method of abstraction.
Clement is thus a Christian representative of the method of abstraction which we have seen developed in contemporary Greek Middle Platonism. His interest in it is traditionally expressed, combining a definition of abstract thinking with an interpretation of the various unities of Plato’s Parmenides. He is, it should be stressed, the first Christian to advocate a method of negative thinking, a mode of thought calculated to take the mind to the transcendent wholeness. The background had been provided in Philo, Justin and Pseudo-Justin, in that doubts had been raised over the value of noun/names. These were perceived as being appropriate to the world of generated things, and being given to the world of objects by their intellectual priors. When, however, man endeavours to name that which is above him, and prior to him, he produces words which are little more than sounds, or marks on a piece of paper. Thus the word “God”, which for the Christian writer Justin, has no meaning.

Given this climate of scepticism about the power of language, it is natural for Clement to develop his views, which are firstly that language is the science of concealment, and secondly that by abstraction one will break through its capacity to provide disinformation.