

as a descending sequence of affirmations, to be followed by an ascending series of terse negations in this approach to the ineffable God beyond affirmation and negation. Chapter 4 then negates every category of sense perception, while Chapter 5 goes 'higher' to negate every type of concept regarding God, even the very titles of *The Divine Names*. Finally, no affirmations or assertions suffice, and the Godhead even transcends all denials.

Last in the corpus are ten *Letters*, ostensibly to apostolic figures and arranged in a specific pattern. The fourth letter, on Christ, has been carefully examined from the beginning for clues to the author's CHRISTOLOGY: is it orthodox (i.e., Neo-Chalcedonian), or does it tend towards a Miaphysite emphasis on the divine nature (see MIAPHYSITISM, NEO-CHALCEDONIANISM)? Translated into Latin by J. Scotus Eriugena (ca 800–875) in the ninth century, Dionysius profoundly influenced medieval theology and spirituality. After Hugh of St Victor's (1096–1141) appropriation in the twelfth century came the Scholastic interest by Albert the Great (ca. 1200–80) and especially T. AQUINAS, as well as spiritual interpretations by Richard of St Victor (d. 1173), T. Gallus (ca 1200–46), Bonaventure (1221–74), the author of the late fourteenth-century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and many others. Further, the Dionysian corpus provided the medievals with some angelology, liturgical allegory, key terms such as 'hierarchy', 'supernatural', and 'anagogy', and perhaps an influence on 'Gothic' architecture. Current interest in negative theology frequently invokes the Dionysian legacy, albeit loosely.

See also APOPHATIC THEOLOGY; PLATONISM.

A. Louth, *Dens the Areopagite* (Continuum, 2002).

P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

PAUL ROREM

DISABILITY THEOLOGY Disability theology is the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability. This theological movement emerges from the orotical roots within the sociological critique of cultural perceptions of disability provided by disability studies.

Disability studies highlight the implicit and explicit social oppression of people with disabilities and the underlying cadences of 'ableism' (an equivalent to racism, sexism, etc.) that are prevalent within culture. Disability studies in the UK have focused on the 'social model of disability', which assumes (in contrast to medical models) that it is the ways in which society

is structured (including the values and assumptions that underpin this structure) rather than particular impairments or pathologies that cause disablement. For example, a person in a wheelchair is not disabled if they have adequate access to buildings, transport, etc.; likewise, a person with an intellectual disability is disabled by the fact that western culture prioritizes reason and intelligence over friendship and dependence. In the USA the social model has been developed in line with the civil rights movement, such that people with disabilities are considered to be an oppressed minority group pushing towards civil rights and liberties.

Disability theology picks up on and develops theoretical perspectives such as these and presents a constructive critique of Christian theology and the practices that emerge from it in relation to the experiences of people with disabilities in Church and world. Disability theology recognizes that the meaning of the term 'disability' is diverse and complex, constructed and reconstructed according to particular times, cultures, contexts, and intentions. As a socially constructed way of naming difference, the term 'disability' can serve to advantage some people and disadvantage others. Disability theologians have recognized that theology has mostly been constructed without consideration of the experience of people with disabilities. Consequently, the ways in which particular theological understandings and Christian practices have been developed have disadvantaged and at times served to exclude and oppress people with disabilities through, e.g., the equation of disability with sin or the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities from the sacraments based on sacramental theologies that emphasize intellect and knowledge. Even when it has not so explicitly disadvantaged or excluded people with disabilities, Christian theology and practice have often ignored their perspectives in a way that leads to tacit exclusion.

Disability theology is *informative* in so far as it seeks to raise people's consciousness to the experience of disability and its significance for the development and practice of Church, theology, politics, and culture. It is also *transformative* in so far as, in seeking to challenge the primacy of disabling theological and cultural interpretations, attitudes, assumptions, and values, and in presenting creative theological alternatives to the status quo, it offers a different basis on which to understand God and value human beings.

Recent analyses have begun to question the all-encompassing explanatory power claimed by social models of disability. Appeal to civil rights presupposes autonomy and self-representation, something that is unavailable for people with (for example) profound intellectual disabilities or dementia. This line of critique suggests a need for new models of disability theology that embrace more effectively the broad range

commented upon by John, bishop of Scythopolis in Palestine, around 540.

Despite some initial questions over its authenticity, the Dionysian corpus was for many centuries considered apostolic and thus highly authoritative. Only in 1895 was there proof that these writings used works by the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (410–85) and therefore date from the late fifth or early sixth century. Perhaps nothing more about the author's identity can ever be proven. In any event, he knew late Athenian Neoplatonism (not only Proclus but also Damascius (ca 460–ca 540)), and used earlier patristic literature, especially the CAPPAOCIAN FATHERS. Thus, a corpus that was once noted for its original features ironically now seems increasingly dependent on prior works.

The first treatise in most early manuscripts is the Dionysian presentation of the angelic ranks, *The Celestial Hierarchy*. It begins with the general method for interpreting symbols, whether biblical or liturgical. Chapters 4–10 present the ANGELS in three triads, a distinctively Dionysian pattern: seraphim, cherubim, and thrones; dominions, powers, and authorities; principalities, archangels, and angels. Chapter 15, in conclusion, interprets many details of the biblical descriptions, such as the angels' physical features and equipment.

The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy presents the rituals and orders of a Christian community in seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the vocabulary and general idea of a hierarchy and a hierarchy. The next three chapters present and interpret the three sacraments: BAPTISM (called illumination), the EUCHARIST (or synaxis), and the consecration of the myron ointment that is used in other rites. Chapters 5–6 present the clergy and LAITY, including monks (see MONASTICISM). Chapter 7 concludes the work by describing and interpreting the funeral rite. The longest work in the Dionysian corpus is *The Divine Names*. Chapter 1 presents the basic point that SCAPTURE can praise God by many names, some more appropriate than others, and yet also by a 'wise silence' confess that God is actually beyond every name and thus unknowable. With Chapter 4, *The Divine Names* exegesis its first specific name for God, namely, the 'good', as well as 'light', 'love', and 'beauty'. Chapter 13 culminates the work with the names 'perfect' and 'one', leading to the subject of union with God.

Only a few pages long, but dense and difficult, *The Mystical Theology* begins with a prayer and advice to 'Timothy' that he should ascend above sense perception and conceptual achievement towards union with the One who is beyond perception and conception. The programmatic use of affirmation and negation is illustrated by Moses entering into the cloud or the 'darkness of unknowing' on Mt Sinai. Chapter 3 characterizes three previous Dionysian treatises (the lost or fictitious *Theological Representations*, *The Divine Names*, and the lost or fictitious *Symbolical Theology*)

of the human experience described as 'disability'. This may be the next phase of development within this field. N. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1985).

H. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2008).

JOHN SWINTON

DISPENSATIONALISM Dispensationalism is a term given to a reading of the Bible based on a particular and distinctive hermeneutic, namely, the principle that biblical history is made up of a series of 'dispensations', or specific temporal periods within the divine ECONOMY. The idea of separate dispensations is arguably implicit in classical Christian distinctions between the periods of LAW, of GRACE, and of eschatological GLORY, as well as in the idea of distinct COVENANTS characteristic of seventeenth-century FEDERAL THEOLOGY. But the majority of those who describe themselves as dispensationalists follow the list of seven dispensations given in the *Scotfield Reference Bible*. These comprise the dispensations of innocence, prior to Adam's fall (Gen. 1:1–3:7); of conscience, from Adam to Noah (Gen. 3:8–8:22); of government, from Noah to Abraham (Gen. 9:1–11:32); of patriarchal rule, from Abraham to Moses (Gen. 12:1–Exod. 19:25); of the Mosaic LAW, from Moses to Christ (Exod. 20:1–Acts 2:4); of grace, from Pentecost to the rapture (Acts 2:4–Rev. 20:3); and of an earthly, millennial kingdom yet to come (Rev. 20:4–6). This schema is modified by those who identify themselves as progressive dispensationalists.

The distinction between the various dispensations is not simply temporal. Each dispensation represents a different way in which God relates to human beings over the course of earthly history. Individual dispensations are defined by the transmission of a divine revelation to a particular group of people (e.g., all humanity in the case of the dispensation of conscience, Israel only in the case of the dispensation of the law). Each revelation discloses an aspect of God's will for human beings that demands the obedience of those to whom it is revealed. In every period the ground of salvation remains Christ's ATONEMENT on the cross, so that under all the dispensations one is saved by FAITH rather than works; but only under the dispensation of grace is Christ the explicit object of that faith. Prior to that time, the object of saving faith for an individual is the revelation corresponding to the dispensation then in force.

Modern dispensationalism emerged only in the nineteenth century, largely due to the influence of British evangelical preacher J. Darby (1800–82). Darby, who was to become the founder of the Plymouth Brethren denomination, developed a doctrine of the PAROUSIA according to which Christ would return twice: first in secret to RAPTURE the Church out of the world