# Body, Self and Cosmic Transformation

## An Anthropological Insight into the Corpus Areopagiticum

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# Short Abstract

This thesis explores bodily and psychic *metamorphosis* in the anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite, author of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (*CA*), and aims to provide a fresh analysis and development of the scholarly discussion around his concept of θέωσις, or deification. Its distinctive approach lies in its treatment of the notion of deification in Dionysius through an anthropological lens, which brings into focus the prominent role the bodily and psychic transformation of human beings holds in his thought. The thesis considers how this anthropology is underpinned by an eschatology that, though not often explicitly stated, is ever-present in his writings. Research on Dionysius in the course of the last century has predominantly focused on Neo-Platonic sources on the one hand and orthodox Christian sources on the other, reflecting the debate over whether Dionysius was primarily a Platonist or primarily a Christian, a dispute predicated upon the problematic assumption that the two might be incompatible. I argue that Dionysius successfully transformed and incorporated Neoplatonic concepts in his own Christian view of deification. Recognizing the formative influence of the later Neoplatonists involves seeing Dionysius as one who shares their ideas of communal worship practices as the means of deification, in contrast to those who believe unilaterally in either pagan philosophy or Christian mysticism as means to union with the divine. A common tendency has been to read Dionysius as a mystic mostly concerned with religious experiences of intense interiority, with few references to his theurgical context. As a correction to this approach, this thesis argues that Dionysius' theology offers a communal and relational model of theological anthropology in which human subjectivity is formed and deified through communal theurgical worship. Furthermore, I suggest that rather than preaching a world-denying mysticism as the way to salvation, Dionysius offers a remarkably world-affirming approach which is based upon a Christian Incarnational affirmation of embodiment.

# Long Abstract

Chapter 1, 'The human being and the cosmos,' explores the theological development of the term "hierarchy" by Dionysius the Areopagite. This term, invented by Dionysius himself, proposes a hierarchy of angels and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, which for him reflected the order, understanding, and activity of all reality. As this chapter argues, the hierarchy is not limited to external or clerical administrative structures; the predominantly function of the hierarchy is as a theological signifier for the communication of divinity in creation. The hierarchy represents the theophany of God and potentiality as it enables creation to participate in divinity. The human subject is called to respond to God's theophany and be transformed by it, and deified. It is the *mediation* between God and man, that is the aspiration of the hierarchy, and deification of man is its goal. The chapter further observes how Dionysius takes over certain cosmological structures from Neoplatonism and applies them to his vision of the hierarchies, both in terms of the division into three triads and in its mutual causality of relationality. Clearly, Dionysius was intimately familiar with Neoplatonic notions of unity and multiplicity, and very successfully he managed to incorporate these notions within his own Christian vision of the hierarchy. An important claim this chapter will make, however, is that where the Neoplatonists promote an ontological hierarchy of divine beings conveying being to each other, and where these beings are seen as autonomous gods, the function of the angels in Dionysius' hierarchy is "limited" to conveying illumination. For Dionysius it is Jesus Christ who is the creator and keeper of the whole hierarchical structure, making it surpass and supersede the pagan Neoplatonic view of hierarchy.

Chapter 2, "The Incarnation as condition for conversion," has its focus on the Incarnation as condition for man's transformation and deification. In particular, it is concerned with the central meaning of the person of Jesus Christ and his works to the Areopagite; that is to say how central Jesus' *theandric*

activity is to the process of deification. Dionysius has been accused of not taking into full account the Incarnation and its implications for man's salvation and relation to God. I argue this is a wrong assumption, so in this chapter seek to refute all accusations against Dionysius of an insufficient treatment of Christ in his work. Indeed, I argue that the vital element in Dionysius' soteriology is the Incarnation of Christ. The chapter further surveys how Dionysius' Christology, apart from its sacramental significance, receives predominantly moral and gnoseological application. The chapter suggests that it is unfair to speak of only a "thin Christian veneer" in Dionysius' worldview and proposes that the central elements of Christology are all present in the corpus. For the Areopagite, the Incarnation of Christ comes about because of God's love for a fallen humanity. Christ has, through his divine goodness, generosity and philanthropy, given humanity "access" to God; the power to become like God, that is the possibility of assimilation to, and participation in the divine reality. Participation in the life and activity of God lies in participation in the divine energies, or *theandric activity* of Jesus Christ, who has provided the example of a human life conforming perfectly to God.

Chapter 3, "Dionysius' account of the human body and soul", explores Dionysius' perception of the body-soul union, a relation that is also a central problem in the Greek Platonic tradition. Whereas the cosmology, ecclesiology and angelology of the Areopagitica have been extensively examined, very little ink has been spilt on Dionysius' psychology and body-soul relation. The chapter thus endeavours to explore this topic, starting by looking at Dionysius' accounts of the anatomy of the soul and the accounts of the body, and then moving on to the metaphysical significance of soul and body being made in the image and likeness of God, and how these accounts inform Dionysius' prescriptions for purification and deification. The aim is furthermore to show within this context both striking similarities and significant differences between Dionysius and Neoplatonism. We find numerous parallels in the Dionysian and Greek Platonic psychology. Like the Neoplatonists, Dionysius is concerned with the purification and ascent of the soul. This is a process which for both traditions culminate in union with the transcendent deity; a union that is both beyond all knowledge and that also transcends the bodily realm. However, as this chapter argues, whereas in Neoplatonism the emphasis lies with the soteriology of the human soul, deification for Dionysius applies to the whole human being. According to Dionysius, the human person is embodied and physical. This view implies salvation also for the body. This chapter sets out Dionysius' relation to and departure from Platonic philosophical anthropology. Plato's dialogues had established a kind of semi-dogma about the soul as the true self, and the body and its passions as the main obstacle to the soul's ascent and deification. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus had a more positive view of the body as a potential tool for the ascent of the soul. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how Dionysius develops, transforms, and applies these ideas in a comprehensively different context - the Christian ecclesiastical one. In line with Christian tradition, the body is given an inevitable significance as the soul's companion, both in this life and in the hereafter. For Dionysius, the body is not only a companion but is indispensable to the deification of the soul. Dionysius esteems the body and assures that, with proper purification, the body too will enjoy an immortal, divine life. As we are a union of body and soul, our perfection lies not in the isolation of the soul from the body, says Dionysius, but in our emulation of the true union of the divine and human exemplified in Christ, the Godman. The very idea that the body should also experience a resurrection must have seemed absurd to the ancient pagan philosophers who often understood the body as the major obstacle for the soul's ascent and sometimes even as an evil. For Dionysius everything that exists participates in the Good, albeit to a greater or lesser degree, so evil must therefore be understood as non-existent, or as a "defect" or absence of the good. Evil is seen as a category that has no ontological existence, i.e., no substance in itself. If this is the case, then neither matter nor the body can be evil. The fact that the body exists means that it participates in the good and the beautiful.

Chapter 4, "The Corpus Areopagiticum on the church and the symbolic representations," surveys certain ecclesiological aspects of *theosis* (θέωσις) by focusing on the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the sacramental implications of deification. For Dionysius the sacraments are the sacred working (ἱερουργία) of God and modus operandi of the process of deification of the human being. The chapter observes how Dionysius develops central concepts from the Neoplatonic tradition like the term theurgy (θεουργία) and how he in strikingly innovative ways gives it a distinctively Christian meaning and context. It will be argued that Dionysius adopts the term theourgia to express the full spectrum of the

Godhead's providential activity in the created world. However, it will be argued that Dionysius' premises are radically divergent from Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the metaphysical metaphysical framework in which he thinks. Whereas the Neoplatonic theurgic rites derive from the gods as transmissions of the One's theurgy for souls, the Christian sacraments derive from the incarnate Christ as gifts of the Godhead's theurgy for creatures. The main intention with the chapter is to point to Dionysius' view of the validity and efficacy of the materiality of the ecclesiastical (scriptural, liturgical, sacramental) symbols, and how the Incarnation both exemplifies and validates the possibility of matter to convey the divine in the sensible world. The second half of the chapter therefore explores how Dionysius develops his symbolic theology, via what he understands as natural manifestations of God in the sensible and intelligible nature and in the rites and the sacraments of the church. Within this context, important distinguishing points between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists will be pointed out. Whereas the symbols employed in the theurgical rituals of the Neoplatonists derive from the natural world–involving elements such as: animation of statues, magical use of names, states of trance, revelations of various gods in the form of fire and light–nothing of this is to be found in Dionysius' Christian liturgy. It is the scriptural and theurgical/liturgical symbols used in the church that is Dionysius' context. It is argued that what is most central to Dionysius' soteriology is the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus Christ, and his saving historical "theurgies" and their symbolic representation in the Christian liturgy. For Dionysius, it is Jesus Christ who is the centre of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and thus of the salvation of rational beings. Because God had become man, then humanity could again be created in God's image, and be healed and redeemed from the passions. The Church's role was to continue to mediate this redemptive power of the Incarnation to humanity.

Chapter 5, "Eschatology," examines eschatological perspectives on deification, i.e., Dionysius' view of the future condition of the human being in the eschaton. Key aspects that will be addressed include resurrection, judgement and the eschatological state of the human nature in the afterlife. This will be considered in relation to the eschatological views of other early Church fathers and Greek Platonic authors where appropriate. The chapter uncovers that Dionysius – unlike the Greek Platonists – pursues a holistic anthropology, asserting that the state of the human nature in the eschaton is not purely intellectual, but also materially embodied; there is no dissolution or evaporation of the body in the eschaton, man will be transformed as a whole. This is in sharp contrast to the pagan (Neo)-platonic authors who would consider the possibility of bodily resurrection something beyond the capacity of human nature. In Platonism, death is perceived as the termination of human life, and thus as the total separation of body and soul. Resurrection can relate only to the human soul, who is the 'real person', in the sense of transmigration of souls. Moreover, the chapter will thematize how Dionysius sees the transformation or metamorphosis of human beings as a constant process during one's life that leads to greater earthly levels of realization. This means a form of "realized eschatology", which refers to the achievement of deification in the here and now, pointing to those who are eschatologically realized in their earthly life. It is already now because the historical incarnation of Christ has laid the foundation for the conversion. Through the spiritual life, the Christian is already brought into contact with the power of transformation which leads to deification. The ultimate goal and true unification are forthcoming: it is the eschatological hope of the restoration of all things in Christ.

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# INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores bodily and psychic *metamorphosis* in the anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite, henceforth the *Corpus Areopagiticum (CA),* and aims to provide a fresh analysis and development of the scholarly discussion around his concept of θέωσις, or deification. Its distinctive approach lies in its treatment of the notion of deification in Dionysius through an anthropological lens, which brings into focus the prominent role the bodily and psychic transformation of human beings holds in his theological thought. The thesis considers how this anthropology is underpinned by an eschatology that, though not often explicitly stated, is ever-present in his writings. A work of this scope requires multiple forms of analysis and a broadly interdisciplinary approach. As such, my methodology will consist of a close reading and contextualisation of the relevant primary texts, along with the frequent employment of philological and comparative tools, to bring to light topics that remain as yet unexplored in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. Since these topics have not been fully explored in existing literature, the bulk of this thesis will consist of the systematic analysis of the *CA*, along with relevant passages from antique and late antique Christian and philosophical writers. Working on Dionysius necessitates detailed and nuanced analysis of his textual and cultural background, particularly within the Platonic tradition to which he owed a great deal, and the first part of this introduction will set out the known and suspected contexts in which Dionysius wrote, with a particular focus on Platonic influences. The second part sets out the argument in detail.

**The author and his context**

The collection of writings known as the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (*CA*) is in many ways enigmatic. Finding an answer to the most basic questions, such as its author, place of origin and date of composition, have so far escaped all attempts by modern scholars. What seems to be commonly agreed upon, however, is that these writings, that have exercised such a profound

influence on Christian theology and philosophy up to this very day, were composed some time at the beginning of the sixth century. What remains a mystery is the identity of the author behind the writings, his intentions in drafting these works, and the circumstances around their composition.

A *terminus post quem* for the corpus seems on the one hand to be after the 440s, when Proclus (412-485) had published the works influencing the *CA*, and on the other hand after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, seemingly influential for some aspects of the texts. References in the corpus to the *Trisagion* sung in the liturgy contribute to the dating, as this was only introduced in 476 into the Syrian liturgy by Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch (475–477 AD). The attempt by the emperor Zeno at a conciliation between conflicting theological opinion on the nature of Christ with the *Henotikon* in 482 have also been seen as influential. A *terminus ante quem* is the conference in Constantinople in 532, where Chalcedonian and Monophysite Christians were struggling to find common ground in their diverging views on the relationship between humanity and divinity in the Incarnate Logos. It is in this context that the corpus is first time mentioned. Severus of Antioch appealed to "Dionysius of Athens" as an authority together with other patristic authorities who assert that there is one nature of God the Logos after the union. We are therefore dealing with the period between 440 and 532 when trying to place the corpus in time.

The *Corpus Areopagiticum* to which the Monophysites referred does not discuss the issues that occupied the theologians of the day. Instead, it embraces the doctrine of the Incarnation in a much broader cosmic context. The corpus describes a world infused with beauty where everything is interconnected and where everything created is yearning for the God who created them. The yearning that permeates Dionysius's world is expressed in all of its fragments and in all levels of creation, including the Christian community and its practice of worship. Dionysius's vision for the Christian life, as it is lived out in the Christian

community, consists of beauty and love, and for Dionysius beauty means order, and love means desire for the beautiful, the true and the good. Dionysius' God is the God who not only created everything but for whom nature and the entirety of the surroundings are yearning. Modern Christians may disregard such ideas as pagan or new age, but in a similar fashion as the Psalmists speak of the wisdom of the birds, and the way that the stones and the waves consciously praise God and all the elements of nature live and breathe,[1] so does Dionysius envision the created order as an interconnected whole, where every facet of reality proceeds out from the reciprocal yearning of God and creation. To participate in the created order means to yearn for God. This yearning that infuses all of creation is what keeps the cosmos together and binds the created order to God.

When the *CA* was first made known, it was understood that its author was that Dionysius mentioned in Acts 17 who converted to the Christian faith after having listened to the apostle Paul's speech about the unknown God on the Areopagos hill in Athens. The author calls himself by the name of Dionysius and claims that he and Apollophanes had been in Heliopolis during a solar eclipse "when the Saviour was put to the cross".[2] Acceptance of the apostolic authenticity of the text assured that the relatively small corpus composed of four short theological treatises and ten letters, would exert a vast influence on developing Christian theology and ecclesiology in both the East and the West. When Koch and Stiglmayr demonstrated (independently from each other) at the end of the last century that the latter part of *DN* IV in the corpus was taken, frequently with almost no alteration, from Proclus, Dionysius became Pseudo-Dionysius.[3] No longer taken for the Dionysius mentioned in Acts 17, he is now instead regarded as a pseudepigraphic author whose true identity still eludes us.

[1] Cf. Psalm 96:10-13.
[2] *Ep*. VII, 3; *Ep*. VII, 2.
[3] Koch 1895: 353-421; Stiglmayr 1895: 253-73.

The historical identity and mission of the author is still clouded in mystery. The historical circumstances under which the texts seem to have begun to exert public influence, c. 530 AD, lead only to a preliminary assessment of the theological and philosophical context of the corpus. Although there is no general agreement about Dionysius' personal identity, there are a few points upon which most scholars agree. The first is that Dionysius was probably writing in the late fifth or early sixth century. The second is that he was most likely of Syrian descent, given the similarity between his descriptions of certain rites and those known to have been practiced in Syria at that time.[4] Thirdly, that he was connected with and possibly trained in the Athenian School.[5]

Even so, the question surrounding the author's identity remains unanswered. In the search for the person hiding behind the pseudonym we are actually brought to Dionysius' own method, the apophatic one, where we can only say who he may not have been: he was not Paul's student at the Areopagus, nor was he the French patron saint St. Denis, nor was he Plotinus' and Origen's teacher, Ammonius Saccas, and so on.[6] Already since the mid sixth and early seventh century the preserved corpus started to live a life of its own, generating an abundance of myths and traditions about the alleged author, Dionysius the Areopagite. Up to this very day countless theories about the identity have been brought forth, explanations that may be considered as more or less "Obscurum per Obscurius". As Edith Stein pointed out, all of these speculations have certain similarities to the speculations around Shakespeare and can be described as different attempts to build a house of cards.[7] In this thesis, there is no purpose

[4] Key arguments include that the liturgical rites which Dionysius describes in *The Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH*) XV, 16 and in *EH* II, 7, 72, 14F come from a Syrian tradition, and that *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*EH*) III C 7, 87, 24–26 refers to the Nicene creed that only in 476 was introduced into the Syrian liturgy by Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch (475–477 AD). See Louth 1989: 9, 14, 60; Rorem 1993: 102. For the Syrian connection, see also Frotingham 1886; Stiglmayr 1928; Hausherr 1935; Arthur 2008; Golitzin 1994; Perczel 2008 and Fiori 2010.

[5] Saffrey 1982: 64–74.

[6] Ammonius Saccas is of course a matter of severe contention. It has been discussed whether the Origen mentioned in the *Vita Plotini* is the same as the adamantine exegete.

[7] Stein 2003: 23f.

to supply this extensive *Quellenforschung* with yet another attempt to "solve" the riddle. We may, however, assume that the author's choice of pseudonym can tell us something, and *EH* III, 2, where Dionysius tells us that he saw St. Paul as his first and principal teacher, might be a way of indicating that he saw himself as standing in both the Greek and Christian intellectual traditions.[8]

The fact that Dionysius does not himself provide any information about his roots, and that he keeps his identity hidden, makes this an open question still today. Although efforts to identify the author behind the corpus has been largely unsuccessful, they have generated certain results such as placing Dionysius in late antiquity and identifying his Syrian and Platonic contexts. Something that we now know, for example, and which will be pointed out in this thesis, is that Dionysius drew on the work of the theurgical Platonists who claimed that human salvation can only be achieved through certain ritual worship practices, or theurgy.

**Syriac background**

*De ecclesiastica hierarchia* is the text in the corpus most likely to provide some indications about the context in which *CA* might have been produced, as it is the only text referring to more tangible and practical matters. Dionysius does make a reference here to a liturgical innovation introduced in the mid-fifth century by the Syrian Monophysite Peter the Fuller. It has been sufficiently well-established that this liturgical reference places Dionysius in the late fifth or early sixth century, located within a Syrian liturgical context.[9] It is commonly accepted by

[8] Pauline literature does seem to be his major scriptural port of call. Of course, this is nothing unique to Dionyius, but nonetheless worthy of note here.

[9] Key arguments include that the liturgical rites which Dionysius describes in *The Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH*) XV, 16 and in *EH* II, 7, 72, 14F come from a Syrian tradition, and that *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*EH*) III C 7, 87, 24-26 refers to the Nicene creed that only in 476 was introduced into the Syrian liturgy by Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch (475-477 AD). See Louth 1989: 9, 14; Rorem 1993: 102.

scholars that Dionysius' knowledge of the Syrian church's sacraments and rituals suggest that he himself was a cleric. Many scholars see him as associated with a Syriac milieu.[10] Alexander Golitzin is one of the scholars who emphasizes the liturgical argument and who claims that the Syriac context, in particular Syrian Christian asceticism, "is virtually the royal key to unlocking the mystery which the *CA* has posed for its modern interpreters".[11] Accusations that Dionysius is some kind of Monophysite are heard as early as 533, at the conference between the Severians and the orthodox. Hypatius, bishop of Ephesus, accused Dionysius of being a fraudulent partisan of the condemned views of Apollinaris, who claimed that Jesus as man possessed no human soul, and later that he possessed only an "irrational" one, the rational part being replaced by the Logos–Christ. "Apollinaris" at that time had a genuine historical reference but was also a "code word" for anti-Chalcedonian, or Monophysite. The suspicions of Hypatius on this issue, though in a less extreme form, have been echoed by many modern scholars who have repeatedly attempted to identify Dionysius as one or another of the "monophysite" leaders of the period.[12]

The early readers of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* seem to belong to a network of Syrian Monophysites affiliated to the circles around Severus of Antioch. It is among these individuals that the corpus first emerges into (known) history. Thus it is no wonder that many of the suggestions put forward by scholars point to these circles when trying to identify the author behind the corpus.[13] Since we do not have access to the original texts, but only the two earliest receptions – the Syrian and the Greek – the Syrian translation would serve as a credible witness

[10] Golitzin 1994: 270-83, 340-48; Other scholars that have argued for Dionysius' association with a Syrian tradition are Frotingham 1886; Stiglmayr 1928; Hausherr 1935; Louth 1989; Arthur 2008; Golitzin 1994; Perczel 2008 and Fiori 2010.

[11] Golitzin 2002: 141 and Strothmann 1978; Louth 1989: 63-4, 69-70, and 78-98; Golitzin 1984: 354-92.

[12] According to Stiglmayr he is Severus of Antioch, others have identified him with Peter the Iberian.

[13] Frotingham 1886; Stiglmayr 1928; Hausherr 1935; Louth 1989; Arthur 2008; Golitzin 1994; Perczel 2008 and Fiori 2010.

as well, albeit indirectly, to the original text and context.[14] Thanks to Sergius of Resh'ayna's very first translation of the corpus into Syriac, and his lengthy introduction to that translation, a substratum emerges from the Semitic language which was not evident in the Greek, and allows us to fruitfully compare the Syriac version of the corpus to other relevant *testimonia* stemming from what would very likely have been the Areopagite's milieu.[15] Sergius' Syriac introduction and translation of *CA* has been the subject of review in recent research. István Perczel has drawn some tentative lines between Sergius and Dionysius; he suggests it is reasonable to assume that the rich Origenistic content in Sergius' translation and introduction is not just his own, but that the author himself (Dionysius) might have belonged to a similar environment, and that his could also explain why *CA* was received with such enthusiasm among Syrian speaking Origenists in the sixth century.[16] The claim that Dionysius himself was some sort of Origenist is debatable, but that the first (Syriac) reception of Dionysius may tell us something about the milieu he was a part of, or knew of, is not unlikely. Two other key texts that mark the earliest reception are *The Book of the Holy Hierotheus* from the middle of the 6th century, attributed by a long tradition to a monk from Edessa named Stephen Bar Sudhaili (born about 480AD); and a letter by the contemporary Monophysite bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) addressed to two Edessenian priests, warnings against Stephen's teaching. I shall start by taking a brief look at *The Book of the Holy Hierotheus.*

**The Book of the Holy Hierotheos**

Although no writings have survived under the name of Stephen Bar Sudhaili, he has been associated with the author of the treatise which survives in a single Syriac manuscript, *The*

[14] Perczel 2008: 557-571.

[15] Sergius' translation – not of the complete corpus though as the beginning and end of manuscript are missing – exists in a single manuscript, *Sinai Syriacus* 52, in Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai.

[16] Perczel 2009: 565. Perczel asserts it is conceivable that the Greek manuscripts, as they have been left after John Scythopolis' treatment, have been subject to an orthodox interpretation, while possible heterodox content may have been reduced.

*Book of the Holy Hierotheos*.[17] *The Book*, which is most likely posterior to the *Areopagitica*, contains many Dionysian traits such as a doctrine on the ascent of the mind, and a hierarchy of angels which is quite similar to that of Dionysius. It has been suggested that the claim that this was written by Hierotheos, the teacher of Dionysius,[18] was an attempt to give authenticity to a work that is otherwise uncompromisingly Evagrian and radically Origenistic in its origin.[19]

On a theological level, however, *The Book* seems much naiver and more unsystematic than the Dionysian text.[20] After briefly describing the origin of the world by emanation from the Supreme Good, *The Book* (which in fact consists of five books) is mainly occupied with the description of the stages by which the mind returns to union with God, who finally becomes all in all. The angelic hierarchy presented in *The Book* bears many similarities to Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*.[21] As in Dionysius the purpose of the hierarchy is to purify, sanctify and unite rational minds with each other and with God.[22] It consists of nine ranks that are subdivided into three, giving 27 ranks. These 27 ranks are subdivided into nine, giving totally 243 orders of angels.[23] Even if these are many more ranks of angels than in the Dionysian hierarchy, the divisions of nine and three are the same. Interestingly enough, Dionysius ascribes his hierarchy's division of three to his teacher Hierotheos.[24] In many places he refers to his

[17] Marsh (ed.), 1927. The work claims to have been composed in the 1 st century AD, by a certain Hierotheus who was the diciple of Saint Paul and the teacher of Dionysius the Areopagite. But, like the work which pass under the name of Dionysius, it is undoubtedly pseudonymous, and most Syriac writers who mention it attribute it to Stephen. The thirteenth-century West Syriac scholar and mystic, Gregory Bar Hebraeus presumed that Bar Sudhaili was the author of *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*.
[18] Cfr. *DN* III, 2-3; *DN* II, 9-10; *DN* IV, 15-17.
[19] Louth 1989: 113.
[20] As far as I am aware, no detailed critical study of Bar Sudhaili's thought in relation to that of Dionysius has yet been carrried out. An interesting discussion and summary of the book has been given by A.L. Frothingham though (Frothingham 1886), and Rosemary Arthur has made some suggestive ideas on this relation in her study on Dionysius' sources (Arthur 2008).
[21] *HH* I, 10; *HH* I, 12. The names of the angelic realms are with few exceptions the same as in Dionysius: Angels, Archangels, Powers, Authorities, Thrones, Lordships and Essences – without names. Besides we find Cherubim and Seraphim, though not in the same order as in Dionysius. Seraphs are not at the top, but above the Archangels and below the Thrones.
[22] *HH* II, 18; *EH*V, 3 504B-C.
[23] *HH* I, 12.
[24] *CH* VI 2, 200D-201A. This has led many scholars suggest Hierotheos must be a pseudonym Dionysius gives Proclus since triads are so important in Proclus' system (See Sheldon-Williams 1966: 108-17; Müller 1926: 37-

teacher Hierotheos as a divine and inspired mystic and mentions his scriptures as the second Bible, *deutera logia*.[25] According to Frothingham, the portrait Dionysius gives of Hierothos "tallies completely with what we know of Bar Sudhaili: the mysticism, the celestial visions, the obtrusive and condensed thought, the study of Scripture."[26] However, Frothingham holds the two minds for being of entirely different calibres: whereas Hierotheos is a simple monk, whose thought is entirely distinct from any philosophical system, presenting a 'sentimental, symbolical and analogical way of thinking', Dionysius presents intellectual and logical forms to the same ideas, something that might show the natural development of the Syrian schools, and give priority to Hierotheos.[27] Whether the Hierotheos that Dionysius is referring to is the same as the author of *The Book of the holy Hierotheos* is still an open question. By introducing this individual as his spiritual teacher and initiator, Dionysius certainly reveals that he finds himself in a milieu where relationships between spiritual teachers and their pupils are being cultivated. From the *CA* it appears that his network consists of initiated monks, priests and hierarchs, and that he himself has a certain authority since he keeps sending guidance and instructions via his letters. In this position, as a Christian of rank who is publishing, Dionysius might have felt that as much as he admired this spiritually gifted Hierotheos, he could not be mentioned by his real name, because of certain controversial ideas that Dionysius himself did not support. A contemporary Origenist such as Stephen Bar Sudhaili would in this case not be an unlikely candidate for the holy Hierotheos.

The many speculations and attempts that have been made to identify Hierotheos have, however, not reached any conclusion. Nevertheless, what can be proposed with more

8; Vanneste 1959: 14, 41-2). Triads were however central also to Porphyrius, Iamblichus and Damascius (Lewy 1978: 13f.; Taylor 1994: 25). I find the Proclus theory rather unlikely as Hierotheos is presented as a Christian of high ecclesiastical rank in *DN* III, 2.

[25] *DN* III, 2. Scriptures Dionysius ascribes Hierotheos are *erotikosi hymnoi* and *Theologikai Stoicheioseis*.

[26] Frothingham 1886: 74.

[27] Frothingham 1886: 82.

confidence is that Dionysius and Stephen Bar Sudhaili frequented the same circles, and that there is some interaction between the texts. This makes *The Book* an important source for us when trying to contextualize Dionysius. We know that it flourished between about 510 and 520,[28] while the likely dates for the composition of the Dionysian corpus would have been during the 520s.[29] Sergius' Syriac version of the *CA*, that Bar Sudhaili might have known, was slightly anterior the *collatio cum severianis* in Constantinople, 532, when the *CA* first appeared to the public. István Perczel suggests that the author of *The Book* was among the first to have read Sergius' translation of the Dionysian corpus and to use it in his own speculations.[30] He also holds the opportunity open that both works emerge from one and the same milieu, perhaps a school of Syriac-speaking Origenists, that the authors knew each other's work, and even might have known each other personally.[31] Imagining a real meeting of Dionysius, who is a text without an author, and Stephen, who is an author without a sure text, is very difficult from a historical point of view. That both works emerge from the same milieu does, however, seem likely. In the introduction of Sergius' Syriac translation of *CA*, Sergius refers to a "brother Mar Stephen" who had generously helped him with the translation. Whether this Mar Stephen happens to be Stephen Bar Sudhaili, and whether Bar Sudhaili helped with the translation because he already felt familiar with the content of *CA* after himself having written his own work on angels is a speculation, but interesting enough.

The little that is known about Stephen Bar Sudhaili (born about 480AD) seems to be derived solely from his opponents' letters. Philoxenus of Mabbug, one of Dionysius' contemporaries, gives a picture of Stephen's teaching in a letter to two priests of Edessa, warning them against the heterodox ideas that he is propagating. Philoxenus describes him as

[28] Hausherr 1933:196-197.
[29] Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 10-15.
[30] Perczel 2008: 33.
[31] Perczel 2008: 33.

a person with a "high self-esteem that has rejected all authority and all traditional teaching and made himself his own master."[32] He is known as a monk who moved from Edessa to Jerusalem and was there involved in the outbreak of Origenism in the monasteries of Saint Babas. He then returned to Edessa and died there sometime after 543. Inspired by both Evagrius and Origen, cabbalistic and gnostic system of thoughts and early Chaldeic cosmogoni, he developed a pantheistic doctrine that he summarised as: "Everything is of the same nature as God."[33] It was exactly this pantheistic eschatology that Philoxenus warned about, and also his radical mystical theology. Hierotheos teaches that the Mind passes beyond the need of material sacraments.[34] Likewise it passes beyond Christ (after first becoming Christ), for Christ is only a mansion near the Father; and they who are going to the Father must pass beyond the Mansion,[35] beyond God, and become commingled in that which has no distinction, no description and no name. This is a radical Origenist teaching that goes further than Evagrius. Whereas Evagrius' mindset has been described as "a narrowing and a clarification of Origen's […] that leads him to a further radicalization of the earlier thinker,"[36] one could say *Hierotheos* is an example of radicalization of Evagrius. It has been suggested that *The Book* helped fuel the fire to which Evagrianism was consigned in 553 by the council of Constantinople.[37] A hypothesis could be that Dionysius is refuting Bar Sudhailis teachings to counteract what he saw as a dangerous heresy.[38] It may as well be the other way around, as Andrew Louth suggests: in other words, the noticeable Dionysian traits in Hierotheos were adopted to give this work its authority.[39] We do not for sure who wrote first, but these two authors certainly seem to be connected. The statement from Dionysius' defender John of Scythopolis that "some dare to

[32] Frothingham 1886: 83.
[33] Frothingham 1886: 42f.
[34] *Book of the Holy Hierotheos* III, 7: 80.
[35] *Book of the Holy Hierotheos* I, 3: 8.
[36] Golitzin 1994: 322f.
[37] Colles 2008: 80.
[38] Cf. Arthur 2001: 373
[39] Louth 1989: 113. See also Pelikan 1987: 15.

abuse the divine Dionysius with charges of heresy,"[40] could be referring to *The Book*, at least it indicates that the reception of Dionysius was very complex. It seems important for John to demonstrate that Dionysius himself is untainted by heresy and "the bastard teachings".[41] This does not exclude that Dionysius may have found inspiration for his spiritual life in a diverse environment with various philosophical and spiritual approaches to Christianity.

**Origenist connection**

Origenism as a movement had its resurgence in sixth-century Syria.[42] The movement built upon Origen's (185–254 a.d.) doctrine and Evagrius' further radicalization of his ideas,[43] but it was also a generic term applied to a variety of positions within Eastern Christian theology inspired by Origen and Evagrius. What was commonly held, nonetheless, was "a high recognition of the intellect, and a flexible approach and willingness to speculate".[44] Our perspective on the Origenists from sixth-century Syria has been shaped largely by sources such as Cyril of Scythopolis.[45] The Origenists are usually described as being a homogenous group of heretics, guilty of radicalising Evagrius' "systematisation" of Origen's speculations under the influence of Stephen Bar Sudhaili's extreme pantheism.[46] In Cyril's catalogue of heretics, Origenists tend to be grouped with Arians and Nestorians, with pagans and Jews, and with Theodore of Mopsuestia.[47] Cyril describes them as "full of pride of their own intellectual accomplishments" and "more interested in dangerous speculations than in the traditional monastic virtues";[48]

[40] Rorem and Lamoreaux (eds)1998: 146
[41] Ibid.
[42] See Golitzin 1994: 270-83, 340-48; 340ff.
[43] Golitzin 1994: 322f.
[44] Daley 1995: 627-638.
[45] Hombergen 2001.
[46] Ibid: 369.
[47] Daley 2001: 632.
[48] *Vita Cyriaci* 13-14 (Schwatz 230, 17-32).

moreover, he pictures them as "revolutionaries capable of violent aggression against their peace-loving orthodox brethren."[49] Daniel Hombergen notes that "some features of the complicated conflict in which they were involved have emerged. But the results need to be further developed; they touch the wider area of late antiquity, including not only the history of theology and dogma but also, and in particular, the development of monastic spirituality".[50]

Hombergen has in his own right made a good attempt to do so, in particular by providing us with an important critical study of Cyril of Scythopolis. He gives an elaborate analysis of the complex tangle of personal and political relationships involved in the sixth-century struggle Cyril was involved with. The analysis is comparable to what Elizabeth Clark had previously provided regarding a similar late fourth-century conflict.[51] Both show how complex these struggles were. B. Daley, in his illuminating article "What did 'Origenism' mean in the sixth century?",[52] also provides us with core insights concerning the sixth-century conflict. He says the "Origenism" of the sixth century signified more a style of religious thinking, and a possible set of priorities in living the monastic life, rather than strict adherence to a body of doctrine which could find its inspiration in the works of Origen. In the sixth-century controversies, Origen himself was more a symbolic name, while the real source of controversial doctrine was Evagrius Ponticus.[53] As Antoine Guillamont demonstrated already in the early 1960s, it was especially Evagrius as associated with the highly speculative Kephalaia Gnostica, from which most of the "Origenist" theses condemned by Justinian in 543 and by the Fathers of the Second Council of Constantinople ten years later were taken.[54]

[49] *Vita Sabae* 85 (Schwartz 191, 32); *Vita Sabae* 84 (Schwartz 190, 10-28).
[50] Ibid: 369f.
[51] Clark 1992.
[52] Daley 1995: 627–38.
[53] Ibid. 628.
[54] Guillaumont 1962; more recent monographs and articles on Evagrius are for instance: Stewart 2011; Corrigan 2009; Konstantinovsky 2009; Dysinger 2005.

Although the Dionysian corpus contains no trace of any of the specific doctrines that were subject to the anathemas of 553AD,[55] we cannot completely exclude the possibility that Dionysius could somehow be connected to Christian groups that by the end of the sixth century came to be seen as heterodox or heretical. Already Stiglmayr made this connection in the nineteenth century.[56] Modern scholars such as Alexander Golitzin, Istvan Perzel, Emilliano Fiori and Rosemary Arthur have followed.[57] Certainly one is too readily accustomed to regarding Greek and Latin as the two great languages and overlapping cultures of the patristic tradition. Syriac, the third classical patristic language, has in general received less attention. Syriac-speaking Christianity, which shared a great deal intellectually and culturally with its Greek and Latin counterparts, also had an expressiveness, character, and spirituality of its own. According to Roberta Bondi, Syriac spirituality has three main characteristics: *individualism*, *asceticism*, and *symbolism* as a mode of theological reflection.[58] Symbolism is also essential for the Areopagite, who developed his own *Symbolic Theology*, which is the title of one of his "lost works". The leading authority of Syriac studies, Sebastian Brock, has pointed to similarities between St. Ephrem the Syrian and the Areopagite in their symbolic language.[59] Both posit an inherent link between the material and spiritual worlds in their writings. Both use types and symbols to express connections or relationships that "reveal" something that is otherwise "hidden", particularly meanings between this world and the heavenly, between the New Testament and the sacraments, and between the sacraments and the eschaton. St Ephrem's theology is thus "not tied to a particular cultural or philosophical background but operates by means of imagery and symbolism basic to all human experience".[60] So there is the possibility

[55] Arthur 2008: 176.
[56] Stiglmayr 1895: 253–273, 721–748.
[57] Golitzin 1994; Perczel 2008; Fiori 2010; Arthur 2008.
[58] Bondi 1978: 153ff.
[59] See Brock 1997.
[60] Ibid.

that Dionysius may have found inspiration for his language, which is characterized by hymns, from other Syriac authors whose theological visions were often expressed in beautiful hymns.

Both the Monophysite and Nestorian communities in Syria, as well as the Origenist movement(s), had experienced a resurgence in this area at the beginning of the sixth century, exercising a widespread influence. The many translations available of writings from leading personalities demonstrate this well.[61] The cultural heritage nested in Origen and Evagrius was widely shared among the Syrian monks of the sixth century, who must have found in it answers to various spiritual needs.[62] However, as noted, Origenism in this time is to be described as more a style of religious thinking, and a possible set of priorities in living the monastic life, than an adherence to doctrines.

Dionysius may also have found directions in this religious thinking for how to practice the spiritual life. There are many types of monastic milieus and brotherhoods in the fifth century from where the *Corpus Areopagiticum* might originally have evolved. When considering Dionysius and his writings, knowledge of the original circumstances is evasive, so even good theories have to be based on much speculations. The fact, however, that five of the ten letters preserved in the corpus are directed to monks may certainly indicate some form of monastic connection; the first four to a monk named Gaius, and *Ep*. 8 is to one called Demophilus. The letter to Demophilus, which is the longest of the letters, is largely about hierarchical organisation and discipline, and provides us with many details concerning the practical functioning of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the authority and respect that the respective ranks should command. In this letter Dionysius criticizes the monk Demophilus who wants to discard an ordained cleric and who takes charge of the Eucharist vessels. As we saw above when referring to Cyril of Scythopolis' catalogue of heretics, there were many rebellious monks

[61] Daley 1995: 627–38
[62] Bondi 1978: 153ff.

in the fifth and sixth centuries who themselves took liberties towards the church. The letter could just be about a dispute in a religious community, but Dionysius certainly disapproves of Demophilus' revolt, and extols the virtue of meekness, kindness and tolerance.

If Dionysius allowed himself to be inspired by some of the spirituality of the Origenists, we should keep in mind that the content of his texts and doctrines did not seem to frighten the Orthodox Fathers. Maximus Confessor embraced his writings, as did his predecessor John of Scytholpolis. Sheldon-Williams comments on this point:

> No sooner had the Corpus Dionysianum been made public than commentators leapt to the task of defending not only its genuineness but also its orthodoxy. In the first half of the sixth century commentaries were written by John and George Scythopolis, by St. Maximus in the seventh, by Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople in the eighth, and by others anonymous commentators who belong to these three centuries.[63]

As far as the social context of the corpus is concerned, it seems likely that it may be some kind of monastic/ascetic community since several of the letters are addressed to monks and give a relatively strict picture of the ideal Christian community. Although Dionysius writes about the church in general, he certainly describes a tradition of teachers discussing theological matters. For the transmission of the Christian tradition, theology and knowledge there existed many types of theological schools, ascetic and celibate Christian communities besides the ordinary church in the fifth century.[64] The monastic movement had by now developed for some hundred years and showed a large diversity. The communities were organized in different ways, from ascetic, sometimes also layman, Christian brotherhoods to ordinary monasteries, which also

[63] Sheldon-Williams 1970: 473f.
[64] In Syria some seemed to consider only those who had denounced the world and embraced the ascetic life as pure Christians. See Brock 1973: 8.

had many fractions and allowed various degrees of ascetism.[65] Transmission of tradition and knowledge conveyed through a teacher-pupil relationship seem to have been a common feature.

**Neoplatonist background**

The second "charge" against Dionysius is that he is a Platonist or, in modern terms, a Neoplatonist follower of Proclus. The accusation, in its modern formulations, springs in the first instance from Luther, who claims that Dionysius "is downright dangerous, for he is more of a Platonist than a Christian",[66] and reappears in Anders Nygren among others.[67] Since the end of the nineteenth century, few scholars have denied that Dionysius is partially dependent on Proclus (and other Neoplatonists as well, such as Iamblichus and Damascius), but Luther had in mind something much more serious than dependence. The essence of his remark about Dionysius is that Dionysius' Platonism distorts his Christianity and that Dionysius therefore is really a pagan Platonist, and only nominally a Christian. Such beliefs were later developed by a number of scholars, especially Vanneste, who thinks of Dionysius' mystical writings as unrelated to any genuine Christian "experience", being an echo of Neoplatonic mystical techniques with a rather thin Christian veneer.[68] Even for scholars who would argue for a somewhat thicker "Christian veneer", Dionysius would still be seen as "the Christian Proclus".[69] When Koch and Stiglmayr demonstrated that the latter part of *DN* IV depended on Proclus this was merely the beginning of the evidence to show that Dionysius was a

[65] Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore these environments in more detail. But this is for sure an interesting field within Dionysius scholarship. For example, I would like to mention communities such as the *Philoponoi* in Alexandria and the *Akoimetoi* in Constaninople.
[66] *Plus platonizans quam christianizans*: from *The Babylonian Captivity* (1520), Weimar: Krit. Ausg 6, 562.
[67] Nygren 1953: 576–593.
[68] See Vanneste 1959*;* See also Brons 1976. For the relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity in Dionysius, see also the discussion between Alexander Golitzin and Kenneth Paul Wesche in "St. Vladimir's theological quarterly", volume 33 and 34, 1989.
[69] Sheldon-Williams comments on the *CA*: "Together they compose the most systematic exposition of fifth-century Neoplatonism that we posess; and the exposition is a Christian one. Dionysius is the Christian Proclus…" Sheldon-Williams 1964: 293-302.

Neoplatonist, deeply influenced by Proclean philosophy.[70] Within the last one hundred years researchers have had a particular focus on these so called "objective links."[71]

A question that should be posed is where Dionysius had learned his Proclus. Several answers might legitimately arise.[72] Given his claim to Athenian provenance, the possibility that he studied under Proclus himself in the school at Athens should be considered. This school, which would attract students of philosophy from all over the Orient, remained relatively pagan, though only in comparison to the school in Alexandria which was more Christian in nature. Someone as educated and learned in both Christian theology and Neo-Platonic philosophy as Dionysius may just as well have studied in Alexandria, which was one of the most important centers for philosophy and education in the fifth and sixth century. Hierocles was a well-known lecturer of Plato there, and Proclus studied there before moving to Athens. Some of his students in the Academy in Athens later became teachers of philosophy in Alexandria. One of them was Ammonius (born around AD 440) who became a professor of philosophy there around AD 470.[73] Ammonius describes himself as a close follower of Proclus,[74] and he seems to draw on his teacher in his own work.[75] It is quite possible that his fascination for Proclus would also rub off on his students in Alexandria, and that Proclus' texts would circle among them. Ammonius certainly taught Plato and Aristotle to his pagan students Damascius and Simplicius, who later made their career in Athens. He also lectured to Olympiodorus and John Philoponus who later functioned as Christian philosophers and teachers in Alexandria.[76] In 529 A.D., the same year as Justinian was closing down the School of Athens, John Philoponus in

[70] The surviving Greek portions of De Malorum were clearly redacted by someone who had noted this, since at the beginning Proclus is made to say that he is expounding Dionysius. The redactor seems to have modified any locution which suggests polytheism and avoided all allusions of transmigration.
[71] Cf. Saffrey`s"Un lien objectif…" from 1966 and "New Objective Links…" from 1982.
[72] For discussions, see A. M. Ritter, Pseudo-Dionysius, *Uber die mystische Theologie und Briefe,* Stuttgart: Hierseemann 1994.
[73] Griffin 2016: 400.
[74] Ammonius, On Aristotle's On Interpretation 1.3–11.
[75] Griffin 2016: 404.
[76] Böhm 1967: 24-26; Sorabji 1987: 1-3.

Alexandria set out to criticize Proclus in his treatise *Against Proclus On the Eternity of the World.*[77] There are also references to the Dionysian writings in one of his texts.[78] Another important school for Christian philosophy in the fifth and sixth century was Gaza, where both pagan and Christian philosophers studied, and from where Christian theological writings stem.[79] This shows that there was a large variety of teachers and students, both Christian and pagan, who were taught by each other, and a continuous flow of ideas between the schools in Alexandria, Athens and Gaza.

Dionysius may very well have studied at one or even more of these schools. By training himself in pagan philosophy and by using its own rhetoric, argumentation techniques and terminology, he made himself capable of arguing for his own Christian position against the pagan philosophy. In *Ep*. VII he defends himself against the accusation of 'making unholy use of things Greek to attack the Greeks.' Yet, even if his texts are not intended as polemics as he seems to suggest, it is not improbable that they reached out to and inspired also pagan philosophers of the time, something which might as well have been his intention. With the rhetoric and knowledge that he had picked up from the pagans he could easily, like a Trojan horse, slip into their territory, yet with the meekness and respect of St Paul on the Areopagos hill, he would preach to them about the resurrected God at the same time as he would acknowledge the devotion that he saw that they had for their own pagan gods. This is very much in line with how many of the Church Fathers would be in dialogue with the pagans and were in some way or the other influenced by or at least knew something of Platonism: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, or Gregory of Nyssa are just some examples. [80] It is quite

[77] Philoponus argues for the Christian view that matter can be created by God out of nothing. It needs no prior matter for its creation.
[78] Böhm 1967: 462.
[79] The philosopher and rhetorician Aeneas of Gaza , the theologian Procopius of Gaza and the grammarian John of Gaza were connected to this school. See Downey 1963: 108-116; Wilson 1983: 30.
[80] For a treatment of Origen and Platonism, see Edwards 2002. Edwards argues against the traditional view that Origen is a "Christian Platonist." He places Origen in the religious and philosophical community in Alexandria and concludes, that neither is his doctrine of God or the soul Platonic, nor is his interpretation of the scriptures

possible (as we have seen) that Dionysius drew on Origen, and also possible that he knew something of Gregory, and they might well have provided a ready framework for him to work within the legacy of the Neoplatonic writers.[81]

**Intention**

When exploring the influence the Platonists had on Dionysius, this involves more than just identifying key passages in the corpus where Dionysius borrows their language and concepts. This thesis examines similarities in certain vocabulary and concepts in order to evaluate the extent of Dionysius' familiarity with pagan theurgy as expounded by Iamblichus and Proclus, and, in light of this familiarity, it reevaluates the difference accentuated between Dionysian sacramentalism and pagan theurgy. I argue that Dionysius was intimately familiar with certain Neoplatonic notions such as eros, the soul and theurgy, and that he successfully incorporated these notions and various psychological elements in his own Christian view of deification. Recognizing the formative role that Iamblichus and Proclus had on Dionysius also involves seeing Dionysius as one who shares their ideas of communal worship practices as the means of deification, in contrast to those who believe unilaterally in either pagan philosophy or Christian mysticism as means to union with the divine. In this thesis I argue that for both the Neoplatonic theurgists and for Dionysius it is through the ritual performances that the human is being shaped and moved towards the divine. Both see the plurality of the sensible world that we encounter through our senses as deriving from a single divine source, something which

characterized by an allegorical methodological reading. According to Edwards, Origen is critical of pagan philosophy, in casu platonism. In the conclusion he sums up what he considers Platonic in the thinking of Origen's time, and then opposes each point with what he expects would be Origen's Christian response.

[81] The doctrines of Origen and Dionysius are sometimes comparable; both tend to speak of God's love as *eros* rather than *agape*, for instance, though Dionysius might be more extreme on this point. This may be because he is imitating Origen or expanding an Origenist idea.

means that the plurality is linked together in a larger whole. The divine work (*theourgia*) of the single transcendent God infuses the whole created world in religious rites and symbols, and in the work of the human souls, i.e., in their performance of the rites. For both the Neoplatonic theurgists and for Dionysius it is this sanctifying power of the divine oneness that keeps the created order together. The difference lies in that whereas the pagan theurgy derives from the gods as transmissions of the One's theurgy for souls, Dionysius' Christian sacraments derive from the Incarnate Christ, who is the source and being of all theurgy. However, for both Dionysius and the theurgists the way to the intelligible goes through the perceptible. Contrary to those who would believe in a world-denying mysticism as a way to salvation, Dionysius offers a remarkably world-affirming approach which is based upon a Christian Incarnational affirmation of embodiment. This is something that seems to have been neglected in modern scholarship on Dionysius. A common tendency has been to read him as a mystic mostly concerned with religious experiences of intense interiority, with few or no references to his theurgical context. As a correction to this approach, I shall in this thesis argue that Dionyisus' theology offers a communal and relational model of theological anthropology in which the human subjectivity is formed and deified through communal theurgical worship.

Extensive research on Dionysius in the course of the last century has predominantly focused on Neo-Platonic sources on the one hand and orthodox Christian sources on the other, reflecting the debate over whether Dionysius was primarily a Platonist or primarily a Christian, a dispute predicated upon the problematic assumption that the two might somehow be incompatible.[82] Both sides seem to have been characterized by overtly strong agendas: on one

[82] See for example, Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 109). Alexander Golitzin, "'On the Other Hand' (A Response to Fr Paul Wesche's Recent Article on Dionysius)," St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 34, no. 4 (1990): 316; Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church. (London,: J. Clarke, 1957), 32, 38; Andrew Louth, "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite," The Journal of Theological Studies 37, no. 2 (1986): 434; Anders Nygren, Agape and Eros (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1982), 576–7; Jan Vanneste, "Is the Mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius Genuine?," International Philosophical Quarterly 3, no. 2 (1963): 296; Kenneth Paul Wesche, "Christological Doctrine and Liturgical Interpretation in Pseudo-

hand a somewhat simplistic view of Neoplatonism, on the other hand a somewhat narrow conception of what counts as authentic Christianity. Dionysius however appears to have been more interested in seeking the truth than in placing himself in one tradition or another. In the seventh letter he writes:

> As far as I am concerned, I have never spoken out against the Greeks or any others. In my view, good men are satisfied to know and to proclaim as well as they can the truth itself as it really is (Ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ οἶδα πρὸς Ἕλληνας ἢ πρὸς ἑτέρους εἰπών, ἀρκεῖν οἰόμενος ἀγαθοῖς ἀνδράσιν, εἰ τὸ ἀληθὲς αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ δυνήσοιντο καὶ γνῶναι καὶ εἰπεῖν, ᾗ ὄντως ἔχει)."[83]

Consequently, a more open approach is likely to be fruitful for the research being done on Dionysius. The following study will, in contrast to past and present scholarship which sees Dionysius as either Christian or Platonist, not argue for one tradition exclusively. The corpus itself offers such a rich tapestry of both philosophical, theological, scriptural and liturgical references that it is obvious that Dionysius is thoroughly familiar with both Greek Platonic thought and the Greek and Syriac Christian tradition. On one hand, the influence of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the Cappadocians and Evagrius Ponticus, as well as Syrian fathers pervades the corpus. On the other hand, no less significant is Dionysius' indebtedness to Greek Neo-Platonism. The author of the corpus demonstrates a breadth and depth of reading and a sensitivity to contemporary debates. He stands at the confluence of Greek Philosophy and Christian tradition, from which he appropriated much, and, from which he confidently and

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Dionysius," St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 33, no. 1 (1989): 316; Filip Ivanovic, "The Ecclesiology of Dionysius the Areopagite," International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church 11, no. 1 (February 2011): 28; John Rist ("A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius," Vigiliae Christianae 20, no. 4 [1966]: 235–243); Gregory Shaw ("Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite," Journal of Early Christian Studies 7, no. 4 [Winter 1999]: 573–99); and Vladimir Kharlamov (The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008]); Sarah Klitenic Wear and John M Dillon, Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

[83] *Ep.*VII, 1, 1077C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 165). The translations in this thesis are my own. I have used the following critical editions of the Corpus Areopagiticum: G. Heil and A.M. Ritter, Corpus Dionysiacum ii: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De coelesti hierarchia, de ecclesiastica hierarchia, de mystica theologia, epistulae [Patristische Texte und Studien 36. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991]: 7-59; B.R. Suchla, Corpus Dionysiacum i: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De divinis nominibus [Patristische Texte und Studien 33. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990]: 107-23.

adeptly produced his own genuine Christian vision of deification, i.e., the human being's transformation into likeness and union with God.

**Human transformation**

The concept of human transformation and deification permeates the thought of Dionysius. The soul's union with God is the ultimate goal to which the human being can be inclined, whether the defying process happens through symbolism, apophatic theology, or the use of the ecclesiastical and celestial hierarchy. Dionysius borrows the term θέωσις (a noun coined by Gregory of Nazianzus) to explicate this teaching. He also explicitly declares that human beings are *θεοί* on several occasions and does so by reference to the scriptural term "God of gods" (Deut. 10: 17).[84] In his own definition of deification he proclaims:

> The most supreme Deity - which transcends everything and which is both one and three – and whose will - inscrutable to us, but known to itself – has resolved to ensure the salvation of rational beings, both those among us and above us. But this could not take place if not those who are being saved are being deified. And deification is to be assimilated and in union with God as much as possible.[85]

Dionysius' understanding of *theosis* as "the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as possible" corresponds with the definition that is given for the goal of the hierarchy (*CH* III, 2, 165A).[86] In doing so, more than anyone prior to him, Dionysius lays a systematic foundation for *theosis* to become a topic of theological discussion in its own right. He approaches *theosis* with a theologically systematic perspective, by using explicit ontological, metaphysical, epistemological, liturgical–sacramental, and anthropological dimensions. The present thesis considers all these perspectives but focuses on the last-mentioned dimension of

[84] Russell 2004: 249. For the use of *theoi* see: *CH* XII, 3, 293B; *DN* I, 6, 596B; *DN* II, 8, 645C; *DN* II, 11, 649C; *DN* 649D; *DN*, XII, 1, 969B; *DN* XII, 4, 972B.
[85] *EH* I, 3, 373D-376A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 66): Ταύτη δὲ τῇ πάντων ἐπέκεινα θεαρχικωτάτῃ μακαριότητι τῇ τρισσῇ τῇ μονάδι τῇ ὄντως οὔσῃ κατὰ τὸ ἡμῖν μὲν ἀνέφικτον αὐτῇ δὲ ἐπιστητὸν θέλημα μέν ἐστιν ἡ λογικὴ σωτηρία τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς τε καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς οὐσιῶν· ἡ δὲ οὐχ ἑτέρως γενέσθαι δύναται μὴ θεουμένων τῶν σωζομένων· ἡ δὲ θέωσίς ἐστιν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις.
[86] This qualification comes from *Theaetetus* 176a.

the deification theme by assessing the divine–human relationship, showing how Dionysius develops a theological anthropology in harmony with his cosmology.

In an examination of the anthropological aspects of the deification theme in Dionysius, the human body must play a key part. However, more to the point, Dionysius in fact emphasizes the body as a part of God's creation, just as much as the soul. This is something that unfortunately to a large extent has been neglected among Dionysius scholars, who seem to have had a more one-sided focus on the soul and its ascent as described in *The Mystical Theology*. This thesis stresses that the body is seen as an essential and enduring element of the human being. Together with the soul, the body is to be transformed, and will take part in the resurrection on the last day. As Dionysius puts it, life "has promised us that it will transform our whole being— I mean our souls and the bodies linked to them - and will bring us to perfect life and immortality" (ὅτι καὶ ὅλους ἡμᾶς, ψυχάς φημι καὶ τὰ συζυγῆ σώματα, πρὸς παντελῆ ζωὴν καὶ ἀθανασίαν ἐπήγγελται μεταθήσειν)."[87] Consequently, emphasis must be placed not only on the value of the soul, but also on the body: for Dionysius, the eschatological transformation of the human being was total, as much somatic as it is psychic.

Dionysius is such a towering figure over later Patristic literature that no one thesis will adequately explore every dimension of his thought. As such, the scope of this thesis is limited to one very specific discussion, though questions remain in the scholarship concerning Dionysius' Christological allegiances, especially whether he can be accurately described as in either miaphysite or monophysite camps, and debate is ongoing over whether Dionysius' work contains overt Neoplatonisms. This thesis is not intended to answer these questions, and thus will neither set out to rationalise Dionysius within the Christological contexts of the 6th century, nor to provide a new survey of Dionysius' Christian orthodoxy in light of his

[87] *DN* VI, 2, 856D (ed. Suchla 1990: 192).

philosophical sympathies. Though Dionysius' thought necessitates engagement with Neoplatonic literature, and the relevant parallels will be drawn through this thesis, I will avoid a more systematic, comparative study of the sources. These topics, though rightly at the forefront of Dionysian scholarship, would distract from the one at hand: his wider theological and anthropological vision.

It is also beyond the scope of this thesis to enter into the wider scholarly discourse on theosis and attempt to give an account of its various implications: other works paint a far better picture than this one could.[88] Rather, as suggested by the title, the intention is here to read theosis in Dionysius as primarily addressing transformation (*metamorphosis*), and specifically as a transformation of man which includes both body and soul.[89] I will argue that by this Dionysius theologically innovates with a holistic and transformative view of the divinized human being. Theosis and metamorphosis can of course be seen as two sides of the same coin, but metamorphosis is here understood as the principal perceptible change that occurs during theosis, enabling the individual to—through their transformation into restored human beings, co-participate in the image of the transfigured Christ—and become united with God.[90] It is this radical transformation of the human, which includes the body as well, that is fundamental for Dionysius. Indeed, it already spoke to the ancient mind and seems to have had a very strong connotation of radical transformation in Late Antiquity. Tales about transformation, *Metamorphoses*, formed a well-known genre in the time including narratives of humans and deities who changed forms, emerged as differently-looking entities of some kind.[91] Whether the more general notions of metamorphosis in antiquity contributed to the development of

[88] Cf. Gross 1938; Russell 2006; Lossky 1989; Finlan and Kharlamov (eds.) 2006.
[89] Cf. *DN* 1, 4.
[90] According to Liddell-Scott, metamorphosis is a regular way of saying "transformation." Porphyry's *De Abstinentia* 1.6 talks about the transformation of the soul. it mentions theosis, but only cites Damascius. As for Lampe (p. 854), Methodius of Olympus likes the term metamorphosis, esp. to indicate the transformation of saints into Christ's likeness and the transfiguation. It's this latter meaning that is most common elsewhere e.g. in Chrysostom.
[91] Cf. Apuleius' famous *Metamorphoses*, often referred to today as the *Golden Ass* (*asinus aureus*).

human transformation as central focus in Christian thought is an interesting question.[92] Certainly the attention given to the resurrection provided a similar opportunity to reflect on the metamorphosis of the body and what was retained in the process of human death and resurrection.[93] Christians tended to employ *metamorphosis* when discussing or alluding to the transfiguration of Christ, or of the saints in likeness to him.[94] Christianity, which claimed the resurrection of Christ, also stirred the hope that those who belonged to him would resurrect. Questions revolving around what resurrection implied—about the change and transformation of human souls and bodies would undoubtedly have been of significance. Certainly, identification with Christ, whereby Christians strive to imitate his virtuous life, was crucial to the early Christians, reaching a climax in martyrdom and the theology of Ignatius. The very name for Christian, *Christianos*, is one who follows Christ. To be saved is to be like Christ, as much as possible. This is affirmed by the often semi-divine descriptions of the martyrs in early hagiographical literature and in Ignatius' famous quote in *Romans* 6: "allow me to be an imitator of the suffering of my God". This thus links to a full soteriology for the early Christians, who saw salvation as meant to "be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3: 18). This would involve disciplinary and ethical dimensions, and also eschatological expectations. So, we can assume that the path to transformation and theosis by the time of Dionysius was the path of mimesis, which would most often be related to ascetical practice.[95]

[92] Cf. Seim and Økland (eds.) 2013: 4.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Lampe, p. 854.
[95] Cf. Reitzenstein's theory that asceticism filled the hole martyrdom left. See Reitzenstein 1916: 79-81.

**Survey of the word theosis**

The term θέωσις was first coined by the fourth century theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus,[96] and is usually in English rendered either as *deification* or *divinization*.[97] In its Christian theological context it is typically understood as the transformation of man into the likeness of God. This has been related to other modes of expression: transformation of the mind, the metamorphosis of character, a redefinition of selfhood, and an imitation of God.[98] Further, for theologians, the word theosis has been used in a variety of ways, but it generally denotes taking on God's character or being "divinized", that is being made divine or "deified". Certain writers distinguish between divinization and deification, where others use the terms equally. Indeed Patristic writers had a broad selection of terms in Greek that they used for achieving likeness with God, but there is a marked preference for the verbs θεοποιέω and θεόω and the nouns θεοποίησις and θέωσις, both nouns being late coinages found almost exclusively in Christian writers.[99] The second-century Apologists use θεοποιέω with some frequency, but only with reference to pagan deification.[100] Clement is the earliest writer to apply θεοποιέω to Christian deification, along with θεόω and several other terms which he uses in a manner indistinguishable from that of his pagan contemporaries[101]. The word θεοποιέω, with the element ποιέω in it, "to make", suggests the agency of another, which works to fashion the subject into something more divine. It has been translated to "making of gods".[102] The word was taken up by Athanasius, who derives the noun θεοποίησις from it, and by Gregory of

[96] It first appears in the Fourth Oration, the First Invective against Julian, which was composed shortly after Julian's death in July 363. *Or*. 7. 71.
[97] For a survey on the Greek vocabulary on theosis, see Russel 2006: Appendix. This section of the thesis is largely based on Russel's Appendix.
[98] Russel 2006: Appendix II; Finlan and Kharlamov (eds.) 2006: 1
[99] Ibid. θέωποίησις, while remaining uncommon among pagan writers, became the preferred verb among Christians to denote both pagan and Christian deification.
[100] Russel 2006: Appendix II.
[101] *Prot.* 9. 87. 1; 11. 114. 4; *Strom*. 6. 125. 4.
[102] Russel 2006: Appendix II.

Nazianzus, who derives the noun, θέωσις of it. Cyril of Alexandria follows Athanasius' terminology, while Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor follow Gregory's.[103]

Although various expressions were employed by the earlier Fathers, θέωσις became the standard term for deification in Byzantine theology. The idea of deification was vital in the early church and has kept continuity in the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has retained this concept for theological reflection. In *CA* theosis and other forms of the noun occur 20 times, primarily in the hierarchic books. It is verbally absent from the *MT*, but "theoric" type language occurs 89 times.

**Presentation of literature**

**1. The Corpus Areopagiticum**

The main source for this thesis is obviously the *CA* itself. Despite the many theories about Dionysius' identity, outlined above, there is general agreement that there must be one and the same author behind the *CA*.[104] The four main works as well as ten letters that make up the *CA* have such characteristic features and uniform style that there does not seem to be a reason to doubt this.[105] The texts are written in an archaic language employing unusual and innovative

[103] Ibid.

[104] The collected works are 1) *The celestial hierarchy* (*De coelesti hierarchia),* 2) *The ecclesiastical hierarchy* (*De ecclesiastica hierarchia*), 3) *The Divine Names* (*De divinis nominibus*) and 4) *The mystical theology* (*De mystica theologia*). Although the original editions of these manuscripts were written in Greek, it is common to refer to patristic texts with Latin titles, preferably with a technical abbreviation after the Latin title. The different parts of the *CA* are abbreviated with the following designations: *CH, EH, DN* and *MT*. In addition, there are ten letters (*Epistule*) that have the technical abbreviation *Ep.*, and these are considered one book. This makes a total of five books. The manuscripts that have been preserved are documented in the introduction to Beate Regine Suchla's Greek text edition (volume 1). She distinguishes between 4 types of manuscripts: 1) Manuscripts with the whole Corpus (Corpus-Handschriften), 2) Partially destroyed manuscripts (Mutitierte Corpus-Handschriften), 3) Lost Manuscripts (Verlorene Corpus-Handscriften) and 4) Manuscripts consisting of single works (Handschriften mit einzelnen Werken). The first group of Corpus manuscripts consists of 120 different manuscripts (Suchla 1990: 1-120, 14-30). The second group of 17 manuscripts (Suchla 1990: 30-32). The third group of 4 manuscripts (Suchla 1990: 32-33). The fourth group of 16 manuscripts (Suchla 1990: 33-35). The same place Suchla gives a survey of the history of the manuscripts (Suchla 1990: 36ff.).

[105] *CH* describes nine orders of angels arranged in a hierarchical, triadic system between God and human. At the top come seraphim and cherubim, at the bottom and closest to man are archangels and angels. 2) *EH* describes how the hierarchy continues in the earthly with three priestly orders: bishop, priest and deacon, and on the transmission of God's work. 3) *DN* describes God as the first principle which cannot be experienced directly, but which is transcendent and relates to man via various levels. 4) *MT* describes the ascension and union of the

terminology for various offices and functions. This makes both interpretation and translation challenging as the intention is not always conclusive and clear. The collected works are 1) *The celestial hierarchy* (*De coelesti hierarchia),* 2) *The ecclesiastical hierarchy* (*De ecclesiastica hierarchia*), 3) *The Divine Names* (*De divinis nominibus*) and 4) *The mystical theology* (*De mystica theologia*). Although the original editions of these manuscripts were written in Greek, it is common to refer to patristic texts with Latin titles, preferably with a technical abbreviation after the Latin title. The different parts of the *CA* are abbreviated with the following designations: *CH, EH, DN* and *MT*. In addition, there are ten letters (*Epistule*) that have the technical abbreviation *Ep.*, and these are considered one book. This makes a total of five books.

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soul with the deity. 5) *Ep*. continues some themes from the rest of the work. Dionysius also refers to seven other works that have been lost. Among these are the *Symbolic Theology* and *Theological Outlines*, two works, of which content and meaning he refers to several places in the corpus, partly as to already written and partly as something to be written. In addition, he refers to *Sacred Hymns* that do not exist either. Within Dionysius scholarship there are differing views on whether these seven works have ever existed. Due to the fact that there are neither references nor quotes from any other authors than Dionysius himself to these works, and since it is hard to imagine that such a large part of the Areopagitica have disappeared so quickly from history, a number of scholars assume that it is fictional writings (Ritter 1994: 87). Hans Urs von Balthasar, on the other hand, believes that it is "in accordance with the spirit of the author and his writings that these works have existed" (Balthasar 1962: 159). Endre von Ivánka, together with some other scholars, keeps the question open: "ob er [Dionysios] sie nun verfasst hat oder ob die Hinweise nur literarische Fiktion sind, die letzern zeugen jedenfalls von einem Willen zur Abrundung einer enzyklopädischen Theologie, einer Gesamtwissenschaft der christlichen Offenbarung, die bei einer Beurteilung dauernd im Blick bleiben muss." (See Ivánka 1964: 16 and also Rorem 1993: 196; Ruh 1990: 40; McGinn 1994: 236).

[106] Cf. Brons 1975: 119-140. Brons sees the sixth until the tenth letter as not original.

Dionysius also refers to seven other works that are either fictional or have been lost: *The Symbolic Theology, The Theological Representations, Divine Hymns, Concerning Justice and the Judgement of God, The Soul* and *The Conceptual and the Perceptual*. Within Dionysius scholarship there are differing views on whether these seven works have ever existed. Due to the fact that there are neither references nor quotes from any other authors than Dionysius himself to these works, and since it is hard to imagine that such a large part of the Areopagitica have disappeared so quickly from history, a number of scholars assume that they do not exist.[107]

The manuscripts that have been preserved are documented in the introduction to Beate Regine Suchla's Greek text edition (volume 1).[108] No original manuscripts of the *CA* survive. The earliest known manuscript is a translation into Syriac by Sergius of Reshaina from late 6th century, which is today kept at St. Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai. There are several distinct manuscript traditions in Greek, Syriac and Arabic. Scholars are working to clarify the relationship between these manuscript traditions and to establish a reliable history of the translations.[109]

A question that arises is whether Dionysius intended the corpus to be read as a whole or as individual documents. If he had already written books on earthly and heavenly hierarchies, would he assume that a reader of the *Mystical Theology* would already have knowledge of them? It is by far the shortest of the four main works we have, and it somewhat

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[109][109] Lilla, Salvatore 2001.

seems like either a prologue *or* an epilogue to the thoughts he has in his other works. It is a common understanding that the different books together create one whole and should be read in conjunction with each other.[110] Scholars have different opinions on the order in which to read the works. I find Rorem's suggestion quite convincing. He argues that the two books on hierarchies are thematically linked together in the order *CH–EH* and that the other two books have the order *DN–MT*. Rorem finds that *MT* can only be understood after having read the other three. Moreover, he finds that the letters give a good introduction to the rest of the work since they anticipate the upcoming topics. The order as Rorem proposes are thus: *Ep.–CH–EH–DN–MT*.[111]

It makes sense to read the corpus together since it is indeed part of a coherent whole that can be classified into three theologies which mutually complement each other: the cataphatic, symbolic, and apophatic. In cataphatic theology, certain qualities are ascribed to God, apophatic theology denies certain things about God. These approaches represent a movement that, on one side, confirms God's revelation of himself and, on the other side, seeks to reach back to God by negating and to transcend what he has revealed of himself. The cataphatic or affirmative theology, which is especially expressed in *DN*, seeks to find appropriate names to praise God the Creator. Since God cannot be summed up in one concept, it proves necessary to name Him in a number of ways. *DN* II lists no fewer than 40 names for God. As Dionysius himself explains, *DN* revolves around "how to name the good, and how it is, and how life, wisdom and power is, and what other comprehensible names belong to the divine" (πῶς ἀγαθὸς ὀνομάζεται, πῶς ὤν, πῶς ζωὴ καὶ σοφία καὶ δύναμις καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τῆς

[110] The different books together create one whole and should be read together. The order varies on how scholars prefer to read them. Andrew Louth and Rorem discuss this issue and point to two well-known thematically sequences: *CH, EH, DN, MT, Ep*. (Louths and Rorem's commentaries) and *DN, MT, CH, EH, Ep*. (Luibheids and Rorem's translation). Rorem 1989: 23.
[111] Rorem 1989: 23.

νοητῆς ἐστι θεωνυμίας).[112] These names are all intelligible, not sensible, that is, they do not denote anything with physical substance. This "via positiva" method is cataphatic, because it affirms what something is (κατάφημι), as does the positive theology. Dionysius often makes affirmative statements about God, then "negates" them in the same sentence, since he believes it is not possible to say anything real about God, so therefore it is necessary to transcend all names of God.[113] This "via negativa" method is apophatic because it denies what something is (ἀπόφημι), as does the negative theology.[114] The negative theology describes the inability of language and intellect to speak of God, who is *hyperousios*, that is, "beyond being" or "beyond existence", which means he transcends all being.[115] Dionysius holds the apophatic theology, which is especially expressed in *MT*, as more adequate than the cataphatic; it is better to say what God is not, than to say what he is. The goal is man's union, *henosis*, with God, which is the ultimate stage in Dionysius' mystical theology. Finally we have the symbolic theology, expressed and explained in *CH*, which according to Dionysius is an exegetical method where various sensible metaphors are applied to God.[116] The advantage of applying sensible symbols to the divine is, says Dionysius, that we are not misled to believe that we have a complete account of the transcendent God.[117] Instead, we have to transcend all metaphors and symbols, and in this way to be able to reach the intelligible. The symbolic theology can thus be understood as an exegetical method, whose goal is the ascent from the sensible to the

[112] *MT* III, 1033A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 146).
[113] Apophatic or negative language is not at all original to Dionysius. The Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), who may very well have been sources of inspiration for Dionysius, often mention God in negations.
[114] According to John Meyendorff, the Cappadocians developed the negative theology as an alternative to Eunomius and extreme Arians who claimed that man can acquire knowledge of God. See Meyendorff 1997: 93; Henny Fiskå Hägg claims that the apophatic theology dates back even further, to Clemens of Alexandria. See Hägg 2006. Andrew Louth, however, points out that an apophatic language was already used by Plato and his successors and that the Platonist Philo of Alexandria is the father of "negative theology". See Louth 1983: 19; Chapters 1 and 3.
[115] *DN* 4, 3 697A. See also Derrida, *How to avoid speaking: Denials* in tr. Kamuf and Rottenberg (eds.), *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol 2, (Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 73.
[116] *MT* III, 1033B; *CH* XV; *DN* IV, 5, 700C; *Ep*. IX, 2,110B.
[117] *CH* II, 3 140C-141C.

intelligible, or as Sheldon-Williams puts it, "the science of discarding the materiality and evoking the significance".[118]

## 2. Existing scholarship

Christian theosis has been seen as one of the crucial concepts that influenced the Hellenisation of early Christianity.[119] A comprehensive overview of the Greek Fathers on the question of salvation as deification is found in *The Divinisation of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers,* published in French in 1938 by Julian Gross and translated into English in 2003.[120] The book contains a compilation and translation of numerous texts on deification, which inform the author's analysis of the doctrine's development from the apostolic Fathers to John of Damascus. In the second half of the twentieth century, ecumenical dialogue and the work of John Meyendorff stimulated new attention to deification.[121] In addition, there is a long list of modern Eastern Orthodox theologians who treat the concept of deification and soteriology as expressed by Patristic authors.[122] Much of this happened in mid-twentieth-century France. The *nouvelle théologie* and Russian Orthodox exile in Ile-de-France do seem to have been key points of focus in the renewed ecclesiastical interest in deification. Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, based on his 1988 Oxford doctoral thesis is a work of special importance as it gives an extensive study of the theme of deification in patristic thought prior to Dionysius.[123] Aside from Greek patristic sources, Russell also gives a smaller overview of the Syriac (and Latin) sources and suggests new possibilities for further research in an appendix, "Deification in the Syriac and Latin Traditions". Further historical interest was continued by the work of Vladimir Kharlamov in his thorough study of *theosis* in

[118] Sheldon-Williams 1991: 463.
[119] See e.g., Adolf Harnack, History of Dogma (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 1:45.
[120] Gross 2003.
[121] Meyendorff 1989: 470–76. See also Dragas 1998: 377–99; Wesche 1999: 29–43;
[122] See Lossky 1974, 1976, 1983; Mantzarides 1984; Nellas 1987; Stavropoulos 1976; Staniloae 2003: esp. 303–74.
[123] Russell 2004.

Dionysius and an overview of the main aspects of the deification theme in patristic thought: *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole: The Concept of Theosis in the Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite* (2008). In 2012 he followed up this theme in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Volume 2).

Key advances made in understanding the *Corpus Areopagiticum* can be traced through the twentieth century, beginning with the classical work of Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr.[124] Their independently reached conclusions provided definitive evidence that Dionysius depended on Proclean Platonism both linguistically and conceptually. Stiglmayr also worked to uncover the Syrian sources for Dionysius' Christology, even suggesting that he may have been Severus of Antioch himself.[125] Other researchers have emphasized the importance of the Alexandrian exegetical school.[126] Bernhard Brons examines the relationship between Neoplatonic metaphysics and Christian tradition in *Dionysius in Gott und die Seienden* (1976) and concludes that CA is primarily Neoplatonic. He claims that the foundation for Dionysius is Christian modified Neoplatonic outline [...] into which he has fitted certain Christian elements.[127]

The theological approach in Dionysius scholarship sees Dionysius under the guise in which he originally appeared, as a contributor to dogmatic controversy. A significant contribution to the effort to locate Dionysius theologically is found in René Roque's *L' univers dionysien* from 1954. This work provides a systematic presentation of Dionysius' celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, both regarding the tradition from the Church Fathers and to various Platonists, as well as references to the hermetic literature and theurgy. Roques identifies three

[124] Koch 1900; Stiglmayr 1895: 253–273, 721–748; *DN* IV, for example, and Proclus's *De Malorum Subsistentia* display remarkable similarities of structure and diction; Roques 1954: xi.
[125] Stiglmayr 1895: 253–273, 721–748; see Rist-1992: 136, fn. 5.
[126] John Meyendorff places Dionysius in the context of the Cappadocians. Jaroslav Pelikan, however, puts special emphasis on the legacy of Origen.
[127] Brons 1976: 325.

principles that explains what Dionysius meant by hierarchy: simultaneously order, understanding, and activity. Roques also noted of Dionysius' Christology, that it was ambiguous—neither clearly Chalcedonian nor Monophysite—something which most likely had precedent in the Henoticon, which enjoyed great popularity in fifth-century Syria.[128] Roques, who has been referred to as a nestor in Dionysius scholarship, has, according to Bernhard Brons, laid the foundation for all further work with the Areopagitica.[129]

Four years after Roque's publication, Walter Völker's *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita* appeared (1958). This work has been seen as a challenge to Roques and an attempt to correct the one-sided focus on *CA*'s noetic side.[130] Völker places Dionysius in a theological tradition that goes from the Alexandrians, via the Cappadocians to the mystics of the Middle Ages. The structure of Völker's analysis is based on Ethos, Contemplation and Ecstasy. He emphasizes the mystical and ascetical character of the ascent, and refers mainly to the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa in particular, with special emphasis on *The Life of Moses.* Völker's effort to highlight Dionysius' reliance on Christian sources are lodged in a desire to defend him against the charge of paganism. For example, he attempts to demonstrate that Dionysius' doctrine of creation was not shaped by Neoplatonist philosophy and its emanation theory. One commentator, however, has noted that while Völker correctly highlights the dependence on Christian sources, "the cogency of his arguments is not enhanced by an apparently polemical tendency to minimize the influence of pagan Neoplatonism of the Iamblicho-Procline variety.[131]

Endre v. Ivanka stands largely in the same tradition as Völker. In his thematically extensive work *Plato Christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die*

[128] Roques 1954: xix. "Introduction".
[129] See Paul Rorem's comment in the introduction to Luibheid 1987; Brons 1976: 15.
[130] Ritter 1994: 25.
[131] Gersh 1978: 4.

*Väter* (1964) Ivanka attempts to demonstrate what he sees as fundamental differences between Dionysius and Neoplatonsim. One of his main points is that the Dionysian model of creation allows him to not commit to the pantheistic implications that affirming "emanation of being" does, but that it teaches a Christian creation doctrine, where the hierarchical cosmos is thought to be created directly by God.[132] In his article "Teilhaben, Hervorgang und Hierarchie bei Ps.-D. und bei Proklos. Inwiefern ist Ps.-D. Ar. Neuplatoniker?" (1964), Ivanka sets out a number of criteria for what is Christian doctrine and what is Neoplatonism in Dionysius' work. With Völker's and Ivanka's contributions, the interpretation and contextualization of the *CA* turned in a new direction that has been characterized as a "Christianization" of the Dionysius scholarship.[133] Vladimir Lossky is another scholar who locates Dionysius theologically. In his *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1976) and *The Vision of God* (1983) he exposes Dionysius as "a Christian thinker disguised as a Neo-Platonist, a theologian very much aware of his task, which was to conquer the ground held by Neo-Platonism by becoming a master of its philosophical method".[134]

Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin (now Archbishop in OCA) describes his main work *Et introito Ad Altare Dei. The mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita with special Reference to his Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Traditions* (1994) as a "Christianizing and personal approach."[135] He makes it clear that his point of departure is "Dionysius as inheriting and contributing to the Eastern Christian tradition."[136] His focus is on both the Alexandrian and Cappadocian tradition, as well as the Egyptian and Syrian monastic traditions. Golitzin can be

[132] Ivánka 1964: 285.
[133] Goltz 1974: 15.
[134] Lossky 1983: 122.
[135] Golitzin 1994: 21.
[136] Ibid.

seen as a successor of Lossky, and his contribution has helped to make a distinction between an Eastern and Western ecclesiastical interpretation of Dionysius.

Werner Beierwaltes represents an intermediate position between Brons and Golitzin in his philosophical study *Platonismus im Christentum* (1998) and he modifies Marsilio Ficino's characterization of Dionysius as "Platonicus primo ac de inde Christianus" when characterizing Dionysius as "Christianus simulque vere Platonicus."[137] Ysabel de Andia is very much in line with Golitzin in her five hundred pages extensive work *Henosis* (1996). Andrew Louth's *Denys the Areopagite* (1989) gives a very synthetic and concise introduction to Dionysius. Louth places Dionysius in a context of various Late Antiquity topics and considers Dionysius as belonging to the East-Byzantine mystical tradition.[138] While Louth's reading of *CA* is first and foremost liturgical, he does not exclude the philosophical significance: "It may be that the real core of what Dionysius is trying to say is philosophical, but that is not how he presents his writings. They are intended to serve the needs of a Christian community."[139]

Eric Perl's *Theophany. The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysisius the Areopagite* (2007) is a comprehensive analysis of various Dionysian themes from a philosophical point of view. It is first and foremost Neoplatonism that Perl wants to shed light on, as "this book is an exposition not only of Dionysius himself but also of central aspects of Neoplatonic thought in terms of their philosophical foundations."[140] At the same time he does not depreciate the Christianity in Dionysius' work. He praises Alexander Golitzin for his thorough and important contribution to the study of Dionysius' Christian background and adds: "I see no fundamental opposition between Neoplatonism and Christianity, and hence no need to decide on which side

[137] Beierwaltes 1998: 84.
[138] Louth 1989: 29
[139] Ibid. 18.
[140] Perl 2007: 2.

of this supposed disjunction Dionysius belongs."[141] Further, he criticizes previous Dionysius scholarship as having, both from a philosophical and theological point of view, been characterized by overtly strong agendas: "Both sides tend to share a somewhat simplistic and philosophically unsophisticated conception of Neoplatonism, and, indeed, a somewhat narrow and monolithic view of what counts as authentic Christianity. Such approaches preclude a genuinely philosophical understanding of both non-Christian Neoplatonism and Dionysius."[142] One of the main points that Perl makes is that Neoplatonic emanation doctrine does not necessarily contradict Christian creation doctrine in Dionysius, as the cosmic diversity is all part of God's "theophanies," everything that has existence is, therefore, a differentiated presence of God.[143]

Recent scholarship generally seems to lean towards a middle position. Christian Schäfer's *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction to the Structure and the Content of the Treatise on the Divine Names* (2006) is an analysis of *DN*. Schäfer begins by examining various interpretations of the structure of *DN* (especially by Endre von Ivanka, H. von Balthasar and Thomas Aquinas) before proposing his own "ontological exegesis of the theological Names because it unveils the treatise's inner structure."[144] He gives a careful examination of the structure of what he refers to as an "associative combining of themes that to some degree emulates the letters of St. Paul, and which seeks 'an esodic understanding of the world through and in God' by application of Platonic methods."[145]

Schäfer reads *CA* as "a philosophical system discovering the truth of Christian doctrine, developing from the revealed Biblical Names of God an explanation of the world that is

[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid. 31, 48, 51.
[144] Schäfer 2006: 4.
[145] Ibid.: 51, 128.

consistent with the 'better parts' of Hellenic philosophy."[146] He often turns to Perl to support his own conclusions. Like Perl, he argues that the Neoplatonism in *CA* goes beyond what is linguistic, without putting Dionysius' genuine Christian foundation in doubt.

John Dillon's and Sarah Klitenic Wear's *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition* (2007) includes nine chapters that addresses various topics relevant to Neoplatonism in Dionysius, including: God as monad and triad in *DN*; hierarchy; the problem of evil; Dionysius' understanding of theurgy; unity and return to God (a comparison between *MT* and the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*). Their approach is, as they emphasize, first and foremost "from a predominantly Neoplatonic, rather than a Patristic perspective, and will thus tend to view patterns of influence somewhat differently from someone with the latter background."[147]

Paul Rorem balances the Christian and Platonist traditions in Dionysius' work. In his doctoral thesis *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (1984) Rorem presents the anagogic interpretation of biblical and liturgical symbols in *CA* without excluding the philosophical implications. He explains that his own project is to demonstrate that the corpus is unified not only by the concern for the liturgy, but also through biblical interpretation. He argues that the anagogical goal could be achieved through proper biblical and liturgical interpretation. In his commentary on the *CA* he points to this unity by analyzing the order in which the texts are thought to have been originally produced, following Dionysius' own hints on the matter. He discovers a movement of procession and return that hinges on the *MT*.[148] Rorem argues that for Dionysius, unity of the corpus lies primarily in his "pervasive concern for the symbols of the liturgy…and especially of the Bible."[149] For Rorem, it is the understanding of the sacred symbols which raises us to contemplation. He argues that the

[146] Ibid. 128.
[147] Dillon and Wear 2007: "Acknowledgements".
[148] Rorem 1993.
[149] Ibid.

human anagogy in Dionysius consists in a "thoroughly interpretive nature […], namely that the uplifting does not occur by virtues of rites or symbols by themselves but rather by their interpretation, in the upward movement through the perceptible to the intelligible".[150] By interpretation and negation of the divine symbols, humanity might be lifted up towards unity with the divine. I find Rorem's analysis convincing, and I partly make use of it for my own interpretation of Dionysius' liturgical theology. Rorem helpfully foregrounds the unity of the corpus, his treatment of anagogy rightly points to the close link in Dionysius between Scripture and liturgy, and he affirms that anagogy is affected through knowledge and understanding. There is a problem, however: Rorem fails to explore how and why the interpretation and negation of liturgical and biblical symbols have the anagogical effect on humanity that Dionysius says they have. Rorem claims that anagogy is purely cognitive and leads solely to a "special knowledge or spiritual comprehension".[151] Similarly, the efficacy of the Christian sacraments lies not in being performed, but in their being contemplated and understood.[152] I find this assessment problematic. It does not seem likely that Dionysius sees deification and sacramental efficacy solely as a matter of intelligibility. I will argue that for Dionysius; the sacraments are both operating on the soul spiritually through knowledge and on the body physically. Knowledge and understanding are undoubtedly paramount for the soul's anagogy, but that is only one side of the coin; there is also a place for genuine sacramental efficacy in Dionysian sacramental theology. In this thesis I will therefore argue that Dionysius accentuated the sacramental life of the church to help humanity to be transformed and divinized. Further, that he translated or baptized an Iamblichean approach to theurgy into a Christian Incarnational theology. As with Iamblichus (and other Platonists of the later Platonic Academy), so also does Dionysius see anagogy happening through rituals that are affected by virtue of the presence

[150] Rorem 1984: 116.
[151] Ibid. 99–116.
[152] Rorem 1984: 99–116; Louth 1986: 435–436.

and activity of the divine. But where Rorem claims that anagogy in Dionysius happens solely through the understanding of the sacred symbols, I will argue that the return to unity happens through experience and must be approached in theurgic and liturgical practice. However, I will emphasize that, although the religious practice and the experimental knowledge that it bestows are regarded as the superior path to deification of man for both Dionysius and Iamblichus, "theurgic knowledge" and *theoria* are still a necessary preliminary for approaching and attaining union with the divine. Yet, the ultimate goal on the path to the soul's union with the divine is for Dionysius "unknowing" and "unseeing".[153] For Dionysius the sacraments are the modus operandi in the process of deification of the human subject. This makes my argument a supplement or even corrective to Rorem's analysis, highlighting that the efficacy given to contemplation and to the materiality of sacramental and scriptural symbols reveals a bodily appreciation that is crucial for a follower of Christ like Dionysius, and which would be underlined by the central event on which his Christian faith is founded: the Incarnation, the Word that became flesh.

**The structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1, 'The human being and the cosmos,' explores the theological development of the term "hierarchy" by Dionysius the Areopagite. This term, invented by Dionysius himself, proposes a hierarchy of angels and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, which for him reflected the order, understanding, and activity of all reality. As this chapter argues, the hierarchy is not limited to external or clerical administrative structures; the predominantly function of the hierarchy is as a theological signifier for the communication of divinity in creation. The hierarchy represents the theophany of God and potentiality as it enables creation to participate

[153] *DN* 592D.

in divinity. The human subject is called to respond to God's theophany and be transformed by it, and deified. It is the *mediation* between God and man, that is the aspiration of the hierarchy, and deification of man is its goal. The chapter further observes how Dionysius takes over certain cosmological structures from Neoplatonism and applies them to his vision of the hierarchies, both in terms of the division into three triads and in its mutual causality of relationality. Clearly, Dionysius was intimately familiar with Neoplatonic notions of unity and multiplicity, and very successfully he managed to incorporate these notions within his own Christian vision of the hierarchy. An important claim this chapter will make, however, is that where the Neoplatonists promote an ontological hierarchy of divine beings conveying being to each other, and where these beings are seen as autonomous gods, the function of the angels in Dionysius' hierarchy is "limited" to conveying illumination. For Dionysius it is Jesus Christ who is the creator and keeper of the whole hierarchical structure, making it surpass and supersede the pagan Neoplatonic view of hierarchy.

Chapter 2, "The Incarnation as condition for conversion," has its focus on the Incarnation as condition for man's transformation and deification. In particular, it is concerned with the central meaning of the person of Jesus Christ and his works to the Areopagite; that is to say how central Jesus' *theandric* activity is to the process of deification. Dionysius has been accused of not taking into full account the Incarnation and its implications for man's salvation and relation to God. I argue this is a wrong assumption, so in this chapter seek to refute all accusations against Dionysius of an insufficient treatment of Christ in his work. Indeed, I argue that the vital element in Dionysius' soteriology is the Incarnation of Christ. The chapter further surveys how Dionysius' Christology, apart from its sacramental significance, receives predominantly moral and gnoseological application. The chapter suggests that it is unfair to speak of only a "thin Christian veneer" in Dionysius' worldview and proposes that the central elements of Christology are all present in the corpus. For the Areopagite, the Incarnation of

Christ comes about because of God's love for a fallen humanity. Christ has, through his divine goodness, generosity and philanthropy, given humanity "access" to God; the power to become like God, that is the possibility of assimilation to, and participation in the divine reality. Participation in the life and activity of God lies in participation in the divine energies, or *theandric activity* of Jesus Christ, who has provided the example of a human life conforming perfectly to God.

Chapter 3, "Dionysius' account of the human body and soul", explores Dionysius' perception of the body-soul union, a relation that is also a central problem in the Greek Platonic tradition. Whereas the cosmology, ecclesiology and angelology of the Areopagitica have been extensively examined, very little ink has been spilt on Dionysius' psychology and body-soul relation. The chapter thus endeavours to explore this topic, starting by looking at Dionysius' accounts of the anatomy of the soul and the accounts of the body, and then moving on to the metaphysical significance of soul and body being made in the image and likeness of God, and how these accounts inform Dionysius' prescriptions for purification and deification. The aim is furthermore to show within this context both striking similarities and significant differences between Dionysius and Neoplatonism. We find numerous parallels in the Dionysian and Greek Platonic psychology. Like the Neoplatonists, Dionysius is concerned with the purification and ascent of the soul. This is a process which for both traditions culminate in union with the transcendent deity; a union that is both beyond all knowledge and that also transcends the bodily realm. However, as this chapter argues, whereas in Neoplatonism the emphasis lies with the soteriology of the human soul, deification for Dionysius applies to the whole human being. According to Dionysius, the human person is embodied and physical. This view implies salvation also for the body. This chapter sets out Dionysius' relation to and departure from Platonic philosophical anthropology. Plato's dialogues had established a kind of semi-dogma about the soul as the true self, and the body and its passions as the main obstacle to the soul's

ascent and deification. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus had a more positive view of the body as a potential tool for the ascent of the soul. The chapter seeks to demonstrate how Dionysius develops, transforms, and applies these ideas in a comprehensively different context - the Christian ecclesiastical one. In line with Christian tradition, the body is given an inevitable significance as the soul's companion, both in this life and in the hereafter. For Dionysius, the body is not only a companion but is indispensable to the deification of the soul. Dionysius esteems the body and assures that, with proper purification, the body too will enjoy an immortal, divine life. As we are a union of body and soul, our perfection lies not in the isolation of the soul from the body, says Dionysius, but in our emulation of the true union of the divine and human exemplified in Christ, the Godman. The very idea that the body should also experience a resurrection must have seemed absurd to the ancient pagan philosophers who often understood the body as the major obstacle for the soul's ascent and sometimes even as an evil. For Dionysius everything that exists participates in the Good, albeit to a greater or lesser degree, so evil must therefore be understood as non-existent, or as a "defect" or absence of the good. Evil is seen as a category that has no ontological existence, i.e., no substance in itself. If this is the case, then neither matter nor the body can be evil. The fact that the body exists means that it participates in the good and the beautiful.

Chapter 4, "The Corpus Areopagiticum on the church and the symbolic representations," surveys certain ecclesiological aspects of *theosis* (θέωσις) by focusing on the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the sacramental implications of deification. For Dionysius the sacraments are the sacred working (ἱερουργία) of God and modus operandi of the process of deification of the human being. The chapter observes how Dionysius develops central concepts from the Neoplatonic tradition like the term theurgy (θεουργία) and how he in strikingly innovative ways gives it a distinctively Christian meaning and context. It will be argued that Dionysius adopts the term theourgia to express the full spectrum of the Godhead's providential activity

in the created world. However, it will be argued that Dionysius' premises are radically divergent from Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the metaphysical metaphysical framework in which he thinks. Whereas the Neoplatonic theurgic rites derive from the gods as transmissions of the One's theurgy for souls, the Christian sacraments derive from the incarnate Christ as gifts of the Godhead's theurgy for creatures. The main intention with the chapter is to point to Dionysius' view of the validity and efficacy of the materiality of the ecclesiastical (scriptural, liturgical, sacramental) symbols, and how the Incarnation both exemplifies and validates the possibility of matter to convey the divine in the sensible world. The second half of the chapter therefore explores how Dionysius develops his symbolic theology, via what he understands as natural manifestations of God in the sensible and intelligible nature and in the rites and the sacraments of the church. Within this context, important distinguishing points between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists will be pointed out. Whereas the symbols employed in the theurgical rituals of the Neoplatonists derive from the natural world–involving elements such as: animation of statues, magical use of names, states of trance, revelations of various gods in the form of fire and light–nothing of this is to be found in Dionysius' Christian liturgy. It is the scriptural and theurgical/liturgical symbols used in the church that is Dionysius' context. It is argued that what is most central to Dionysius' soteriology is the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus Christ, and his saving historical "theurgies" and their symbolic representation in the Christian liturgy. For Dionysius, it is Jesus Christ who is the centre of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and thus of the salvation of rational beings. Because God had become man, then humanity could again be created in God's image, and be healed and redeemed from the passions. The Church's role was to continue to mediate this redemptive power of the Incarnation to humanity.

Chapter 5, "Eschatology," examines eschatological perspectives on deification, i.e., Dionysius' view of the future condition of the human being in the eschaton. Key aspects that will be

addressed include resurrection, judgement and the eschatological state of the human nature in the afterlife. This will be considered in relation to the eschatological views of other early Church fathers and Greek Platonic authors where appropriate. The chapter uncovers that Dionysius – unlike the Greek Platonists – pursues a holistic anthropology, asserting that the state of the human nature in the eschaton is not purely intellectual, but also materially embodied; there is no dissolution or evaporation of the body in the eschaton, man will be transformed as a whole. This is in sharp contrast to the pagan (Neo)-platonic authors who would consider the possibility of bodily resurrection something beyond the capacity of human nature. In Platonism, death is perceived as the termination of human life, and thus as the total separation of body and soul. Resurrection can relate only to the human soul, who is the 'real person', in the sense of transmigration of souls. Moreover, the chapter will thematize how Dionysius sees the transformation or metamorphosis of human beings as a constant process during one's life that leads to greater earthly levels of realization. This means a form of "realized eschatology", which refers to the achievement of deification in the here and now, pointing to those who are eschatologically realized in their earthly life. It is already now because the historical incarnation of Christ has laid the foundation for the conversion. Through the spiritual life, the Christian is already brought into contact with the power of transformation which leads to deification. The ultimate goal and true unification are forthcoming: it is the eschatological hope of the restoration of all things in Christ.

# CHAPTER 1: THE HUMAN BEING AND THE COSMOS

## Introduction

### Man as situated in a hierarchical cosmos

In this chapter I shall present Dionysius' understanding of hierarchy and explore how the hierarchies mediate union with God and are the vehicle of man's deification. This theme provides a useful and illuminating lens through which to examine the relationship between Dionysian theology and the Neoplatonic concepts it drew from and transformed. The term hierarchy, ἱεραρχία, which was coined by Dionysius himself, is in chapter 3 of the *Celestial Hierarchy* defined as: "a sacred order, knowledge and activity that, as far as possible, seeks unity with God."[154] Dionysius' hierarchical cosmos consists of the ecclesiastical and celestial hierarchies. Both are arranged into triads whose action is purification, illumination, and perfection, with the goal of bringing rational beings to their proper *telos*, which is "assimilation with God and union with him, as far as possible".[155] For Dionysius the hierarchies are a *theophany* of God; they are the articulated manifestation of the divine love that constitutes all things.[156] The whole of reality is presented as a hierarchically ranked sequence, descending from the angelic, or pure intellects, to inanimate beings. Dionysius' concept of hierarchy, whether celestial or ecclesiastical, is as Eric Perl notes, "a development of his account of the divine processions, of the constitutive perfections of beings, and hence of the whole of reality, as the differentiated presence of God".[157] By responding to this theophany man is assimilated to God and deified.[158] Contrary to our modern use of the word

[154] *CH* III, 1, 164D–165A.
[155] *CH* III, 2, 165A.
[156] On hierarchy as theophany, see Perl 2007: 81.
[157] Perl 2007: 65.
[158] Louth 1989: 106.

hierarchy, it is the *activity* and the *goal* of the hierarchies that is central to Dionysius, i.e. what the orders are doing and for which purpose.

Thus, in this chapter I will challenge the view, prevalent in narratives of Dionysius' influence on the development of an ideology of ecclesiastical authority, that Dionysius' hierarchies are simply a rigid ranking of power.[159] I will argue that he is concerned just as much with what the orders enable, as it is the *mediation* between heaven and earth, between God and man, that is the aspiration of the hierarchies. The final goal is the deification of man, and this is Dionysius' overarching concern—man's union and assimilation to God, as much as is possible.[160] Consequently, the hierarchical structure of the universe plays a vital role for Dionysius as it is through the hierarchy that man ascends to God and God descends to man, but the structure itself is simply a precondition that allows the higher level to lead the lower level to God.

As a Christian author, writing about hierarchies in the last decades of the fifth century, Dionysius appears to draw on pagan Neoplatonism, at least there are evidently connection points between his Christian cosmology and the Neoplatonic one. Given that he was part of an intellectual culture which used Platonic language to describe cosmological and metaphysical phenomena, it would simply be unavoidable to make use of their terminology and concepts. Common to these Platonic accounts was their suggestion that the sensible realm resulted from a differentiation of divine unity, i.e. that being was hierarchically transmitted from the highest and simplest levels of being to the lowest and most multiple. This idea, which originated in a Platonic creation narrative, had become increasingly complex

[159] The Dionysian hierarchies have been characterised as "power sanctified", and are generally regarded as underpinning a highly authoritarian medieval ecclesiology. See, for instance, James Ginther, "Hierarchy" in *The Westminster Handbook to Medieval Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 82.
[160] *CH* III, 2. 165A.

and systematized by Dionysius' time. Clearly, Dionysius employs such notions of unity and multiplicity to articulate his own Christian ideas of the deity, the created world, and the relationship between God and the world.[161] He writes that as the deity allows all beings to partake in its own divinity, it becomes "separated from itself in an aggregate way (διάκρισις καὶ πολλαπλασιασμός),"[162] it is multiplied at the same time as it remains one. To describe this relation, Dionysius distinguishes between ἕνωσις ("unity") and διάκρισις ("distinction").[163] We can imagine a mutual movement which flows through the universe, a procession from a first point of departure and a return of all things to God.[164]

Another important concept for Dionysius' hierarchy which he adopts from Neoplatonism is the triadic scheme of causality: indwelling or rest (μόνη), procession (πρόοδος), and conversion or return (ἐπιστροφή) – a scheme that E. R. Dodds has described as "the three moments of the Neoplatonic world-process".[165] In short, at the height of the Neoplatonic system is God, or the One, who remains in Himself (indwelling), while bringing forth an activity that bestows existence upon a plurality of entities (procession). The perfection of each entity is achieved through its assimilation with the First Principle (conversion).[166] The idea is that everything springs from the divine source and is created to participate in it; the goal is therefore return and union with God.[167] We shall see that the same kind of reasoning is expressed in several places in the Dionysian writings, for example in *DN* IV, 10: "Briefly said, all beings originate from, exist in, and return to the beautiful and the good (Καὶ ἁπλῶς πᾶν ὂν ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ἀγαθῷ ἔστι καὶ εἰς τὸ

[161] This is being thematised in all *DN* II.
[162] *DN* II, 11, 649C (ed. Suchla 1990: 136).
[163] *DN* II, 11 649B (ed. Suchla 1990: 135).
[164] Cf. *DN* IV, 14, 712C; *CH* I, 2.
[165] See Dodds 1963, propositions 25–39.
[166] Cf. Proclus *Inst. Theol.* 35.
[167] Cf. Vasilakis (2019) on the meaning of hierarchy in Dionysius in (eds.) Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019: 181.

καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐπιστρέφεται)."[168] In short, Dionysius here envisions the restoration of the cosmos to a perfect theophany, which entails the assimilation of creatures to divine perfection.

Although Dionysius takes over certain cosmological structures from Neoplatonism and applies them to his vision of the hierarchies (both in terms of the division into three triads and in its mutual causality relationship), there are also fundamental differences that I shall discuss in this chapter. Whereas the Neoplatonists propose the theory of *emanation*, where being is passed down the hierarchy, I shall argue that Dionysius teaches a corrective to this idea. A theory of emanation could surely suggest that God had not created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), that instead God's creative activity could be replaced by autonomous entities emanating being down the scale of being. Aware of the unorthodoxy of such a claim, Dionysius, carefully avoids such a model of creation. For him, all beings are created immediately by God.[169] Whilst Dionysius, it is true, never uses the term *creatio ex nihilo*, this is likely because he is more concerned with emphasizing that creation comes from God, rather than from nothing. Moreover, he wishes to emphasize God's revelation or theophany in creation, a point already made by Andrew Louth and Eric Perl.[170]

To sum up, important claims that this chapter will make are as follows: where the Neoplatonists promote an ontological hierarchy of divine beings conveying being to each other, and where these beings are seen as autonomous gods, the function of the angels in Dionysius' hierarchy is "limited" to conveying illumination. For Dionysius it is Jesus Christ who is the creator and keeper of the whole hierarchical structure.[171] This structure, which has both a heavenly and earthly dimension, consisting of the angelic beings on the one hand and

[168] *DN* IV, 10, 705D (ed. Suchla 1990: 154).
[169] *DN* II, 11, 649B-C; V, 4, 817C. Cf. Louth 1989: 85.
[170] Perl 2007: 65; Louth 1989: 39.
[171] Cf. *EH* I, 1.

clerics and other members of the church on the other, shows us that Dionysius' view is in line with the early Christian tradition, expressed for instance in the Nicene Creed, which states that God created through the Son both things invisible and visible. It is precisely at this point, as this chapter will show, that Dionysius differs mostly significantly from the Neoplatonists: the meaning and function Christ has in Dionysius' hierarchy is *the* "crucial point that both surpasses and supersedes the pagan Neoplatonic view of hierarchy".[172]

**"The Great Chain of Being" and a hierarchical order**

The idea of a "sacred" and "ordered" nature to creation is of course not unique to Dionysius. In cosmological thinking from antiquity to medieval times we find a range of hierarchical structures used to explain the world within certain structures and as deriving from a certain origin, or *arche*.[173] A key concept dominating this Western cosmology, right from antiquity to before the rise of modernity, is "the great chain of being" or the *scala naturae*, with its divine order to the universe. Arthur O. Lovejoy describes in his classic work *The Great Chain of Being* how the medieval and renaissance world inherited this cosmology and also how the hierarchical structure of it was conveyed.[174] Central is the idea that the universe consists of a myriad of arrangements of beings, ranked hierarchically from the lowest through a variety of stages up to the highest perfection, which is God or the first mover.[175] This however, is not to be understood as a ladder where one climbs from one level to a higher one, but rather as a chain of levels where the scope is perfection at the given place.

[172] Cf. Vasilakis (2019), "On the meaning of hierarchy in Dionysius" in (eds.) Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019: 183.
[173] See, for example, Proclus, *Plat. Theol*. I, 4 (20, 24); Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cant. XV* (VI 445, 10ff.). See Marenbon and Luscombe 2003: 51–72. For an overview of various cosmologies in ancient times, see: Wright 1995.
[174] Lovejoy (1960) traces the idea of "The Great Chain of Being" back to its beginning in Western culture through Plato, especially in his fifth and sixth book of *Politeia*, but also in *Timaeus*, Plato's dialogue on cosmology. Lovejoy, however, has little to say about Dionysius' concept of hierarchy.
[175] A summary of the concept of the great chain of being is also found in Tillyard 1972, and in Alexander Pope's poem *Essay on Man* from 1734.

Such a hierarchical arrangement is also characteristic of Dionysius' universe. Two of his main works have "hierarchy" as the main theme: *The Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH*) examines how the Bible's descriptions of angels can be understood and their importance for lifting man towards God. This hierarchy descends to *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*EH*), or "our hierarchy" that constitutes the church's liturgy and functions in the anagogical process. Dionysius summarizes his hierarchical cosmic structure as,

> A certain holy order, an image of the beauty of God, ministering the mysteries of its own enlightenment in hierarchical orders and insights, and assimilated as far as possible to its own origin.[176]

Such a hierarchical worldview, where the world order is seen as a perfect arrangement and divine image, appears through all aspects of Dionysius' comprehension of reality and in his terminology. *The Divine Names* also present reality as hierarchically structured and uses terms such as order, rank, higher/lower, superior/inferior.[177] Within the structure are angelic-type powers at the top and inanimate beings at the very bottom. The various "names" applied to God represent levels which stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, according to how close or distant they are from God.[178] At the uppermost lies *Good*, then *Being*, *Life* and *Wisdom* (ἀγαθός, ζωή and σοφία). These "names" or processions are the modes in which God is constitutively present in the various ranks of beings.[179] Dionysius explains,

> For the divine name of the Good reveals the whole procession of the universal Cause, extends both to the things which are, and to the things which are not, and is above what is and what is not.[180] The name of Being extends to all things that exist and is beyond them. And the name of Life extends to all

[176] *CH* III, 2, 165B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 18): Οὐκοῦν ἱεραρχίαν ὁ λέγων ἱεράν τινα καθόλου δηλοῖ διακόσμησιν, εἰκόνα τῆς θεαρχικῆς ὡραιότητος, ἐν τάξεσι καὶ ἐπιστήμαις ἱεραρχικαῖς τὰ τῆς οἰκείας ἐλλάμψεως ἱερουργοῦσαν μυστήρια καὶ πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρχὴν ὡς θεμιτὸν ἀφομοιουμένην.
[177] *DN* V, 1; *DN* IV–VII.
[178] See Schäfer 2006. This is an analysis of *DN*, where Schäfer begins by examining various interpretations of the structure of *DN*, before proposing his own ontological exegesis of the divine names and what he sees as the treatise's "inner structure". He reads the whole corpus as a philosophical system discovering the truth of Christian doctrine, focusing on the revealed Biblical Names of God which are consistent with Hellenic philosophy.
[179] Perl 2007: 65.
[180] i.e., Extends both to good things and to bad things and is beyond the opposition between good and bad.

living things and is beyond them. The name of Wisdom extends to the whole realm of intellect, reason and sense perception, and is beyond them all.[181]

The presence of God is even in "non-being", which will be covered in Chapter Four in more detail. For the moment it is worth recognizing that non-being refers to evil. In Dionysius' understanding evil is not "being" in itself, and must depend on being, and being upon God, for its existence. Thus, Dionysius provides a comprehensive cosmic structure of hierarchy, which even explains evil.

René Roques, the Nestor of Dionysian studies, provides a summary of the importance of hierarchy in Dionysius in his classic *L'Univers Dionysien, Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le pseudo-Denys* (1954). Roques emphasizes "Unité sans confusion, dans l'ordre, dans la measure et dans l'harmonie" as the characteristics of any Dionysian order:

> Bien qu'appliqués à l'univers des intelligences hiérarchiques, les notions dionysiennes d'ordre et d'harmonie retiennent les thèmes essentiels des cosmologies l'Antiquité, sans qu'il soit possible cependant d'assigner toujours une origine immédiate et précise à chacune des influences subies. Mais ces notions ne s'inscrivent pas seulement dans la tradition hellénique. Elles se rattachent aussi aux idées bibliques et chrétiennes de création, de providence et de rédemption, et elles reprennent les commentaires, habituellement platonisants, des Pères de l'Église sur les premiers chapitres de la *Genèse*.[182]

What Roques stresses here is the ontological distinction between God and man/or any other rational being in Dionysius' system. Roques is correct in this assessment, because union and assimilation to God is not to be understood as confusion of the hierarchy of being with the essence of God. This is an important issue for Dionysius as he stresses the importance of the apophatic theology throughout the whole corpus. For him it is obvious that God and man do not have the same ontological status. However, man can, and is, encouraged to know God

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[181] *DN* V, 1, 816B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 181): Καὶ γὰρ ἡ τἀγαθοῦ θεωνυμία τὰς ὅλας τοῦ πάντων αἰτίου προόδους ἐκφαίνουσα καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄντα καὶ εἰς τὰ οὐκ ὄντα ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ ὄντα καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ οὐκ ὄντα ἔστιν. Ἡ δὲ τοῦ ὄντος εἰς πάντα τὰ ὄντα ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ ὄντα ἔστιν. Ἡ δὲ τῆς ζωῆς εἰς πάντα τὰ ζῶντα ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ ζῶντα ἔστιν. Ἡ δὲ τῆς σοφίας εἰς πάντα τὰ νοερὰ καὶ λογικὰ καὶ αἰσθητικὰ ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα ταῦτα ἔστιν.
[182] Roques 1954: 67.

better and in this way become more like God. The hierarchy, being the middle part of communication between God and man, serves an indispensable function as the sacred order and as an image of the beauty of God, which then enlightens and deifies man.

**Cosmos as order and beauty**

Indeed, the concept of a divine and ordered cosmos is an important feature of all Hellenic philosophy. Order or τάξις is considered to be the very prerequisite of being, while disorder or ἀταξία results from evil. Already with Plato there is his analysis of the world of ideas as "order". In *Timaeus* he says:

> For God wanted everything to be good and as far as possible that nothing should be bad. Therefore, he took all that was visible, that was not at peace, but moved without harmony and order, and he led it from disorder to order – he made it better in every way.[183]

The Demiurge's mission, as described in *Timaeus*, is thus to transform χάος into κόσμος by bringing—as it were —precambrian matter "from disorder to order". Indeed, the *Timaeus* is often seen as Plato's outline of his cosmology, so much so that Cornford's venerable commentary is titled *Plato's Cosmology*.[184] The *Timaeus*, which would have an invaluable influence on philosophy and cosmology in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, is the work that first gives the term *cosmos* a valid and unambiguous meaning as the "world" in language history.[185] We may say it sets the concept of cosmos in motion by providing the first description of reality that forms an ordered whole that is both good and beautiful.[186] The cosmos is described by Plato as an organized whole moving according to the purpose of good and beauty, and matter is described as copies of the universal forms.[187] All in all, the *Timaeus*

[183] Plato, *Timaeus* 30a: βουληθεὶς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἀγαθὰ μὲν πάντα, φλαῦρον δὲ μηδὲν εἶναι κατὰ δύναμιν, οὕτω δὴ πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὁρατὸν παραλαβὼν οὐχ ἡσυχίαν ἄγον ἀλλὰ κινούμενον πλημμελῶς καὶ ἀτάκτως, εἰς τάξιν αὐτὸ ἤγαγεν ἐκ τῆς ἀταξίας, ἡγησάμενος ἐκεῖνο τούτου πάντως ἄμεινον.
[184] Cornford 1937.
[185] Brague 2006: 36.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Plato, *Timaeus* 30, 40-1, 41C.

has a positive view of the cosmos. For Dionysius' cosmology, such a universal way of thinking, and the idea of microcosm mirroring macrocosm, is fundamental, especially as it is expressed in his understanding of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as an earthly reflection of the celestial hierarchy.

The etymological background for the word *cosmos* is not clear, but in the *Iliad,* the word primarily implies "order" and is used in regular expressions like κατά κόσμον (in good order), but also as meaning "jewelry", understood as decoration on the horse's bridle or as Hera's necklace.[188] The term *cosmos* in this fashion denotes order and beauty, or more correctly, the beauty that comes out of order, which is the background to the modern word "cosmetics".[189] In Greek, both terms existed side by side, and gave room for many puns. A parallel is the Latin word *mundus,* from which the French word *monde* comes, and probably also *mundus*, which means "ornaments or jewelry".[190] Pliny the Elder seems to assume this when writing: "The name the Greeks used for jewelry, *cosmos,* we refer to according to its perfect and perfected beauty, as *mundus* (*a perfecta absolutaque elegantia*)."[191] Tertullian points out that the Greeks referred to a term that actually means "adornment", and in the ninth century, John Scotus Eriugena firmly stated that "the Greek cosmos is not really to be translated as world, but as adornment (*ornatus*)".[192] In modern times, Alexander von Humboldt has introduced the word *kosmos* under the name "Jewelry of the orderly".[193]

What relevance does this have to the Areopagite? My intention by presenting the broader context here is to show that an organized world that appears as good and beautiful—as is the characteristics of the Greek world—is indeed the foundation of Dionysius'

[188] *Iliad* IV, 145; XIV, 187.
[189] Brague 2006: 31.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Humbholdt 1845: 52ff.

cosmological thinking. Roques shows, for example, that the terms εὐκοσμία and εὔκοσμος occur a number of times in the *CA*.[194] For example, every order in the hierarchy is called εὔκοσμοι.[195] The prefix εὐ/*eu*- (beautiful) implies an aesthetic dimension applied to the cosmos. According to Roques, the beautiful order, "la belle ordonnance", reflects participation in God, who is the harmonious principle of all orders, εὐκόσμου ταξιαρχίας, from which all proceed.[196] The aesthetic aspect of the Dionysian cosmology has also been emphasized by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who in his *Theological Aesthetics* (1962) refers to "this whole spiritual and yet visible order [...] the cosmic beauty, in which the thearchic, surpassing beauty is manifest".[197] It follows that the beautiful order can be understood as the manifestation of God in the cosmos:

> For out of this Cause there has collectively emerged, and spread throughout the world, the unmixed perfection of utter purity. From it arose every law and arrangement of all things, which banishes all disharmony, inequality and disproportion, and rejoices over the well-ordered consistency and rightness, bringing into their proper place all things which are held worthy to participate in it.[198]

Coming out from God—which Dionysius also calls to ἕν, the One, or to καλόν, the Beautiful—everything has been put into order. The One can be explained as the center in a circle that determines the circle and its possible concentric circles. [199] One can imagine

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[194] See, for example, *CH* 240 A-B; *EH* 504A; Roques 1954: 57.
[195] See *CH* 240 A-B; *EH* 504A.
[196] Roques 1954: 57.
[197] Balthasar 1984: 202.
[198] *DN* XII, 3, 969C-972A (ed. Suchla 1990: 224-225): Καὶ γὰρ ἐξ αὐτῆς ἐν ἑνὶ καὶ ἀθρόως ἐκπέφυκε καὶ διανενέμηται πᾶσα ἀμιγὴς ἀκρίβεια πάσης εἰλικρινοῦς καθαρότητος, πᾶσα ἡ τῶν ὄντων διάταξίς τε καὶ διακόσμησις ἀναρμοστίαν καὶ ἀνισότητα καὶ ἀσυμμετρίαν ἐξορίζουσα καὶ εἰς τὴν εὔτακτον ταὐτότητα καὶ ὀρθότητα γανυμένη καὶ περιάγουσα τὰ μετέχειν αὐτῆς ἠξιωμένα.
[199] Cf. *DN* II, 5. cf. Plotinus *Enn*. 1.7.1, 5.1.11, 6.4.7, 6.8.18, 6.9.8. We find a similar Gnostic thought on this matter in Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* (Book I, Chapter 24) where Basilides seems to hold a similar cosmology of many aeons spreading out as if they were circles surrounding the next. Irenaeus writes that Basilides "gives an immense development to his doctrines. He sets forth that Nous was first born of the unborn father, that from him, again, was born Logos, from Logos Phronesis, from Phronesis Sophia and Dynamis, and from Dynamis and Sophia the powers, and principalities, and angels, whom he also calls the first; and that by them the first heaven was made. Then other powers, being formed by emanation from these, created another heaven similar to the first; and in like manner, when others, again, had been formed by emanation from them, corresponding exactly to those above them, these, too, framed another third heaven; and then from this third, in downward order, there was a fourth succession of descendants; and so on, after the same fashion, they declare that more and more principalities and angels were formed, and three hundred and sixty-five heavens. Wherefore the year contains the same number of days in conformity with the number of the heavens." Ireneaus, *Against Heresies* (Book I, Chapter 24, paragraph 3).

everything that has existence as circles that surround the center with greater or less proximity. Everything, both in the intelligible and in the sensible world, is defined by its position in relation to the One. The One is also called the source of all unity[200] and unifying force (ἑνοποιος δύναμις).[201] In other words, from the principle of the One as the center in the universe, Dionysius is able to explain and justify the entire universe as a hierarchical structure.

An ordered cosmos was esteemed by ancient philosophers as the better alternative to chaos, and we find the same sense of order and beauty permeating the whole of the Areopagitica.[202] Although influenced by the broader ancient cosmology, Dionysius also builds specific aspects of his foundation, as Roques has noted, on biblical material, including the Christian creation doctrine, and the commentary of the Church Fathers on Genesis.[203] These are questions that I will elucidate later in this chapter. For now, to sum up, we see that even if applied in his specific way to a universe of hierarchical intelligences, and although used within a Christian context, the Dionysian notions of order and of harmony do retain the essential themes of cosmology found in antiquity.

**Hierarchy and hierarch**

In this section I shall take up the notion upon which Dionysius builds his understanding of hierarchy. As we saw in the introduction of this chapter, Dionysius is veritably considered to be the one who coins the term hierarchy, ἱεραρχία, which he defines as "a sacred order, knowledge and activity that, as far as possible, seeks unity with God",[204] and which originates from from ἱερό (sacred) and ἀρχή (source, beginning, principle, cause, starting point). Joseph

[200] *DN* I, 1, 585B-588B.
[201] *DN* I, 4, 589D (ed. Suchla 1990: 112).
[202] See Hällström 2004: 34.
[203] Roques 1954: 67.
[204] *CH* III, 1, 164D–165A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 17).

Stiglmayr has shown that before Dionysius no one else had used the term *hierarchia*.[205] Roques, however, has pointed out that a good deal of Dionysius' language has its origins in the terminology of mystery cults.[206] And George Mylonas has traced earlier sources for ἱεράρχης in the Christian Fathers in their interpretation of the pagan mystery cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries.[207] The hierarch was originally the title of the officer who administers the sacred rites.[208] In connection to the mystery cult, τὰ ἱερά has been understood as "the most secret" and "most sacred", referring to the revelation which completes the initiation.[209] The term *hiera,* however, is exclusively related to the divine revelation, and is not provided by man himself, meaning it was something that was shown to the initiates and not given to them to handle.[210] The High Priest or Bishop of Eleusis was called ἱεροφάντης, because he revealed, φάίνει the sacred, ἱερά.[211] This is interesting, because Dionysius' high priest or bishop, the ἱεράρχης, does actually have some of the same function as the hierophant by being the one who administers the holy rites and who is himself initiated into them.[212] I will shortly look at the role of Dionysius' hierarch and how he can be seen as closely and inevitably connected to the hierarchy. But first I will make a small digression on some

[205] In his groundbreaking article "Ueber de Termini Hierarch und Hierarchie" Stiglmayr demonstrates that whereas he at least could not find a confirmed use of the term ἱεραρχία [*hierarchia*] anywhere before Dionysius, other terms such as πολεμαρχία, ταξιαρχία, τριηραχία [*polemarchia, taxiarchia, trierarchia*], were frequently used in the same meaning as hierarchy (Stiglmayr 1898: 18).
[206] Roques 1954: 240ff.
[207] Mylonas 1969: 287f. See the last chapter for a review of the early Christian Fathers concept and interpretation of the pagan mystery cults and their concepts, especially of the Eleusinian mysteries. Günter Heil has shown that the term *hierarches* appears at least once in Christian literature before Dionysius, in Eusebius, where it refers to the designation of the priests, as opposed to the bishop and the people. See Heil 1986: 2.
[208] See Lampe, *hierarchia*; arche IID.
[209] Mylonas 1969: 318.
[210] Ibid. 298–299.
[211] Hesychios defines the hierophant as the priest who shows or reveals the mysteries. In the Demeter hymn it is said: "Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen these mysteries" (Hymn, v. 480); Sophocles says: "Thrice happy are those mortals, who, having seen those rites, depart from Hades"; and Pindar agrees: "Happy is he who, having seen those rites goes below the hollow earth" (Sophokles, Fragm., 719; Pindar, Fragm., 102). See Mylonas 1969: 299.
[212] Liddel and Scott define *hierarches* as "leader of the holy rites", or "high priest".

parallels between Dionysius and the pagan mystery cults, not least because Dionysius chooses to use the Eleusinian term ἱεράρχης, about the bishop in the church.[213]

There seems to be a certain appeal to a "secret and mystical" tradition in Dionysius. He says, for instance, when talking about the symbolism of the liturgy, that it is necessary that the divine and hidden truths remain hidden by diversity, for not all are sacred and knowledge of the sacred is not for everyone.[214] This was not an uncommon attitude and practice among the early Christians, who would conceal their rites from outsiders as the cults did, and use cultic language to assign profound meaning to them. So a certain degree of secrecy would be a natural part of the Christian tradition that Dionysius stands in. However, Dionysius' overall attitude to *ritual* in the *EH* can at times be seen as fairly reminiscent of the pagan mysteries. Just as a participant in the Eleusinian mysteries is meant to be initiated through rites rather than through intellectual rigour, the same could in some ways be said of Christian rite for Dionysius. It is the *experience* of the mysteries that is central to him. It is through the sacraments—the performance of the religious rites—that the initiator and, and through him, the initiates may participate in the divine. For Dionysius it is important that the divine things praised through the liturgies are not merely viewed and learned (*μάθειν*), they are experienced or "suffered" (*παθεῖν*).[215] The way par excellence to initiation into the Christian life is for Dionysius baptism, or the "divine birth" as he calls it. In *EH* he describes it as a series of steps of purification which bring about union and presence of God. As with

[213] The term *hierarches* is also found in several inscriptions before Dionysius, so too the verb *hierarcheo* describing what the officer does, but there is no noun. See Lampe 1961: 669. *Hierarchia* is a one of a number of words that encompasses the suffix αρχή *arche*, a typical construction that Dionysius uses. His common name for the deity is, for example θεαρχία *therarchia*; and he frequently uses words like ἀγαθαρχία *agatharchia* (from "good" and "source") and ταξιαρχία *taxiarchia* (from "order" and "source"). See Louth 1989: 38. Stiglmayr (1898: 180–187) recounts how the terms ιεραρχία [*hierarchia*] and ιεράρχης [*hierarches*] *hierarchia* and *hierarches* soon flourished in the Greek East, after Dionysius' first use of them. Stiglmayr 1898: 180–187.
[214] *CH* II, 2, 137B-140B. This passage discusses Dionysius' complex method of interpreting religious symbols, both biblical symbols and the symbolism of the liturgy. The ambiguity of the symbols is on the one hand to reveal sacred truths to those who have insight, but on the other hand, to conceal and prevent the uninitiated from participating in secret knowledge. This is the subject of symbolism—secrecy and disclosure, depending on what the interpreter is capable of detecting.
[215] Cf. *DN* II, 9, 648B.

other Church Fathers in his time Dionysius would understand baptism as the necessary prerequisite for deification.[216] Everett Ferguson, in his book on baptism in the early church, has suggested that baptism for the early Christians is an imitation of the death and burial of Christ.[217] This is also how Dionysius himself understands this ritual. For him baptism is the very event where the initiate demonstrates through the rituals that he moves away from a sinful life to participate in the mystery of Christ's death, and through this, to be reborn in Christ.[218] This implies a substantial transformation that the initiate undergoes, where he is clothed in the flesh of the new man so to speak. The similarities to this that we can find in the pagan mystery cults are interesting. Walter Burkert has showed how initiation—step by step—into the mysteries, which also implies spiritual death and resurrection, is the central theme in the Eleusinian mysteries.[219] There is of course one major issue with substantively linking Christian ritual and the mystery-cult on the basis that their liturgies both prioritize experience over intellectual contemplation: whereas the devotee of any mystery-cult, after participating in the mystery, would assumedly leave the sanctuary and live the same life as any other members of the wider society, for the Christian this would be more than an occasional ritual—it would be his lifestyle.[220] For the Christian, the rituals would form part of a whole, where also Christian doctrine, ethics and individual contemplation play an important role.[221] I will give a more thorough discussion of Dionysius' understanding of Christian rituals and the contemplation of them in Chapter Four. Now, back to his notion of hierarch.

We should bear in mind that in the sixth century, when the *CA* was written, a "hierarch" would represent a religious leader, whose leadership must have included teaching,

[216] *CH* II, 2, 137B-140B.
[217] Ferguson 2009: 588.
[218] *EH* VI, 9, 7, 392B.
[219] Burkert 1991: 281.
[220] This has also been stressed by John Whitty in his Oxford DPhil thesis. See Whitty 2019: 146ff.
[221] Ibid.

both doctrinal and pastoral, as well as the performance of rituals with the aim of purification and illumination.[222] Accordingly, as Dimitrios A. Vasilakis has noted, Dionysius' hierarch is not only a person of high office, he also assumes the role of a father, who cares about his people. He does not resemble a tyrant or despot, but a providential and loving God. With a reference to Plato, Vasilakis notes that the hierarch is not like Thales, the philosopher in *Theaetetus*, who looks at the sky while being blind to earthly things, but rather more like the philosopher of the *Republic* who descends into the cave in order to educate his former fellow-prisoners.[223] I find this a helpful assessment, which is also confirmed by Dionysius, who says about the hierarch that "not only did he return to God, but additionally he helped the others to ascend to the true and divine principle".[224] Consequently, having been divinized, the hierarch is in position to allow the participation of the lower levels into the mysteries. I believe this is an important point that gives us a hint of the very principle of Dionysius' notion of hierarchy, namely the idea of the higher ranks helping the lower ranks to ascend to higher levels. He may have wanted to imply what he saw as the essential and vital meaning of the hierarchy, namely the original idea of the "hierarch", which would point towards a leader who is in a higher position than the others and whose role is to help them. Likewise, in both the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarches there are different mediators at the various levels that can carry out the role of hierarch in different ways.[225] Furthermore, it has been argued that Dionysius, both with his unusual term ἱεράρχης, for bishop, and the word ἱεραρχία, for hierarchy, provides a new understanding of theology and helps us see the church in a larger context.[226] This is because the principle working in the hierarchy also applies on a higher level, in the angelic region between God and humans. "Hierarchy" can thus be seen as the name for a

[222] Cf. Vasilakis (2019) on the meaning of hierarchy in Dionysius in (eds.) Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019.
[223] Ibid. 182.
[224] Ibid.
[225] This point was also made by Vasilakis in Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019: 184.
[226] Heil 1986: 3.

general principle of order, and at the same time for the general system of God's manifestation in the world.[227] This is a reasonable approach that helps us see the interconnections in Dionysius' universe and get to the core of the meaning of hierarchical orders.

Dionysius gives more definitions to *hierarchia*. In the beginning of *CH* III he defines the term as a sacred order, within which knowledge, and an activity that as far as possible is seeking unity with God, prevails.[228] "Order" is particularly intrinsic to the arrangement of the hierarchies that consist of nine levels divided into three triads. In regard to the celestial hierarchy, Dionysius refers to "Understanding" as divine knowledge being disseminated through the hierarchy, prompting each level to enlighten the level below. When considering "Activity", this should be seen as every level's descent or exit from the source, as well as ascension to unification with what is revealed. The knowledge conveyed through the hierarchy is called "light" (φῶς), the movement from God and downward is called "procession" (πρόοδος), man's successive ascension is "return" (ἐπιστροφή). From this, it appears that the hierarchy is more than just a ranking; it concerns itself just as much with what this heavenly order enables, i.e. the dissemination of knowledge and activity. The *activity* of the hierarchy is what is predominant. Just as the hierarch and those of the higher ranks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy are helping the lower ranks to ascend to higher levels, the same principle applies to the celestial hierarchy: the higher levels of intelligible beings are bringing knowledge or light down to the lower levels, with the overall σκόπος, or goal in mind: union with God as far as possible. As mentioned above, this does not mean a union, understood as a confusion with the transcendent God, but rather a reflection of God as he

[227] Die Bestimmung des Bischofs als Stifter und Gebieter über die heiligen Dinge und seines Amts als Stiftung und Verwaltung derselben ermöglicht, die Kirche in einem größeren Zusammenhang zu sehen. Den in das ihr wirkende Prinzip gilt auch auf einer höheren Ebene, in der Engelregion zwischen Gott und Menschen […] "Hierarchie" wird damit die Bezeichnung für ein allgemeines Ordnungsprinzip und gleichzeitig für das allgemeine System der Manifestation Gottes in der Welt. Heil 1986: 3.
[228] *CH* III, 1, 164D.

reveals himself in his manifestations.[229] Dionysius explains the determination of the hierarchy as such:

> The purpose of the hierarchy is thus to achieve the greatest possible assimilation and unity with God. It has him as the leader of all sacred insight and activity, and constantly looks towards God's most divine beauty and imitates this as far as possible. By perfecting its own members as divine images of God, pure and spotless mirrors, able to receive the original light that comes from God himself. They are completely filled with the radiance that is given to them, and in obedience to the Divine, they generously pass on this light to beings who are lower in the hierarchy.[230]

From this, it appears that the hierarchy largely relates to divinely laid tasks and to the hierarchical levels and their relations to each other. Here we are at the very basics of Dionysius' hierarchical theory: all levels in the hierarchy are given the opportunity to become the sacred image of God. The manifestations of God are continuously being brought from higher to lower levels in the hierarchy; they originate from the source and are led back to it. It is a world order in which all beings participate, and which together constitute a whole. In this way, the entire hierarchically organized world can be regarded as an appearance of God's activity and a manifestation of the Deity.

**Dionysius' hierarchies**

The Dionysian cosmos comprises three hierarchies: the celestial hierarchy, the ecclesiastical and the legal hierarchy.[231] The ecclesiastical hierarchy, which represents the human level, is between the celestial hierarchy and the legal hierarchy, which is the manifestation of the Law of the Old Testament. Dionysius does not give a closer explanation of the legal hierarchy, but writes that it was founded by Moses, "the first initiate and leader of all hierarchs according to

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[229] Louth 1989: 39.

[230] *CH* III, 2, 165A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 17-18): Σκοπὸς οὖν ἱεραρχίας ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις αὐτὸν ἔχουσα πάσης ἱερᾶς ἐπιστήμης τε καὶ ἐνεργείας καθηγεμόνα καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτοῦ θειοτάτην εὐπρέπειαν ἀκλινῶς μὲν ὁρῶν ὡς δυνατὸν δὲ ἀποτυπούμενος καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώτας ἀγάλματα θεῖα τελῶν ἔσοπτρα διειδέστατα καὶ ἀκηλίδωτα, δεκτικὰ τῆς ἀρχιφώτου καὶ θεαρχικῆς ἀκτῖνος καὶ τῆς μὲν ἐνδιδομένης αἴγλης ἱερῶς ἀποπληρούμενα, ταύτην δὲ αὖθις ἀφθόνως εἰς τὰ ἐξῆς ἀναλάμποντα κατὰ τοὺς θεαρχικοὺς θεσμούς.

[231] A review of the hierarchy is given in both *CH* and *EH*, and also in the ten letters. See, for example, the eighth letter to the monk Demophilos that deals with the hierarchical ranking. For a detailed study and a translation of the letters, see Hathaway 1969.

the law" (τοῦ πρώτου τῶν κατὰ νόμον ἱεραρχῶν μύστου καὶ ἡγεμόνος).[232] The legal hierarchy, however, is not to be understood as an independent hierarchy existing in itself. Sheldon-Williams explains:

> There is no hierarchy below the Ecclesiastical: for the Legal Hierarchy, that is to say the Old Testament, is not a copy of the Ecclesiastical as the Ecclesiastical is of the Celestial, but is, as it were, a first version of the Ecclesiastical which disintegrated because the light from its mysteries failed to reach the orders which were to have been initiated, so that the means of return were lost.[233]

The ecclesiastical hierarchy, that Dionysius also calls "our hierarchy", is a fulfillment of the legal hierarchy, as it was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.[234] The difference between the legal hierarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy should according to Sheldon-Williams be understood as,

> […] merely pious practices devoid of theory while the latter are practices which necessarily lead the mind on to their theory, that is to say, a consideration of the symbols which give entry into the schemes or forms of that which eludes every scheme and every form and is yet an object of contemplation, a response to the condescension of the immaterial into matter, and an ascent of the intellect which liberates it from matter and opens the way to gnosis.[235]

The ecclesiastical hierarchy has a triple structure. Interestingly, it is the sacramental order that is the closest connection between the triple structure of the celestial hierarchy and its earthly counterpart; namely baptism, communion and the anointing of the sick with the holy oil.[236] These sacraments, which constitute the first and highest triad of the ecclesiastical

[232] *EH* V, 2, 501C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 105).
[233] Sheldon-Williams 1964: 296.
[234] *EH* V, 2, 501C.
[235] Sheldon-Williams 1964: 299.
[236] Dionysius also mentions three other "mysteries" in *EH*: the ordination of priests, the monks' profession, and funeral rites. These are the activities of the orders: the hierarch ordains; the monks' profession implies the second order bringing the third order to perfection; the funeral rites concern the sacred oil that ends the temporal existence of the hierarchy. According to Sheldon-Williams, the sacrament of confession may have been part of the baptism rite since it is the catechumens who take part in this sacrament. Dionysius does not mention the sacrament of marriage. See Sheldon-Williams 1964: 297.

hierarchy,[237] will be examined more closely in Chapter Four where we scrutinize the sacraments, but also the importance of the body and material elements, for the process of conversion to holiness. Furthermore, the ecclesiastical hierarchy consists of human beings within the church or the ecclesiastically bearing office holders: the hierarch/bishops, priests, deacons, monks, laity, catechumens, penitents, and the demon-possessed are also mentioned as part of the structure or whole. The ecclesiastical hierarchy stands between the hierarchy "in nature" and the celestial hierarchy whose "being and order" is "above us,"[238] says Dionysius, and it can be seen as a manifestation of the celestial hierarchy, which is its model.[239]

The celestial hierarchy of intelligible beings comprises three times three groups of angels: the seraphim (σεραφίμ), cherubim (χερουβίμ), thrones (θρόνοι), dominions (κύριοι), powers (δύναμις), authorities (ἐξουσίαι), principalities (ἀρχαί), archangels (ἀρχάγγελοι), and angels (ἄγγελοι).[240] These hierarchies consist of a unity that shares in the participation of God at the same time as they contrast him in being created. The ontological distinction between Creator and the created does not cease to exist.

**Angels as theophany**

Whilst an array of Christian theologians have sought to explore the Word, the *logos*, as the direct mediating principle between God and man, and have interpreted God's appearances in the Old Testament as the embodied Word of God, Dionysius, like a major part of Christian theology in the fifth century, is more concerned with angels as God's theophany or

[237] Suchla understands baptism, eucharist, and holy oil as the supreme triad, see Suchla 1995: 206.
[238] *EH* I, 4, 376B.
[239] Cf. Our Father "as in heaven, so and on earth." Matthew 6, 9–13.
[240] See *CH* VII, 1 205B–IX, 2 260B for a detailed description of the intelligible hierarchy. Here Dionysius lists the hierarchical orders and their attributes.

appearance.[241] God's theophany is understood as the divine *proodos*, where God, through his love and goodness, appears in creation.[242] For Dionysius, the angels are the manifestations of the ineffable God, which proceed from the silence that surrounds God to communicate with creation.[243] Angels are pure intelligences, bodyless (ἀσώματοι) and intangible (ἄϋλοι), two adjectives that, according to Roques, seem indispensable to Dionysius when describing what is of intelligible nature.[244] When Dionysius talks about angels, he bases it on Scriptural descriptions of them, which are often images taken from the sensible world; sensible images that represent something spiritual. This does not mean, however, that these images directly mean what they represent, but rather that they represent a similarity. This principle of equality is based on an anagogical thinking, which is essential to understanding Dionysius, assuming that the sensible points out beyond itself to the intelligible realm.

In *CH* IV–V Dionysius carefully elucidates what is meant by the word angel and what characterizes the angels. He does not elaborate much on the nature of the angels, apart from saying they remain a mystery of God,[245] but he does say a lot about their function as mediators. According to *CH* IV the angels act primarily as mediators between God and creation and all human knowledge of the divine is mediated by angels. The angels are messengers between God and man (cf. Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:12), they bring messages from God to men and they bring prayers from man to God (cf. the Hebrew word *mal'ak* meaning messenger, and the Greek *angelos* meaning the same.) Divine beings as mediators are found in various traditions: In Homer, some gods and goddesses are described as

[241] Cf. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 8.2.; Louth 1989: 51, 37.
[242] Cf. Perl 2007: 514f.
[243] *DN* IV, 2.
[244] Roques 1954: 55. Origen, however, in the proem to First Principles denies that angels are truly *asomatoi*, reserving this adjective for the persons of the Trinity. On the other hand, he does seem to allow created incorporeals. Augustine may also believe that angels have bodies of some kind. So, describing angels as bodyless may be a Platonizing tendency in Dionysius.
[245] *CH* VI, 1, 200C.

"messengers" between heaven and earth or "angels", ἄγγελος.[246] The Olympic god Hermes is called ἀρχαγγελικὸς ("arch-messenger", "arch-messenger-like" or "archangelic") and ἄγγελος τοῦ Διός ("the messenger of Zeus") by Proclus.[247] No matter the tradition from the ancient Near East or the Mediterranean, there is some commonality of understanding held, particularly that the function of angelic beings is to be "messengers" due to their intermediary role between the divine and human realms.

**Purpose of the hierarchy**

Although names of angelic beings are mentioned in one or more places in the Bible,[248] they are not arranged systematically nor in any particular form of order. What then is the purpose of a structured hierarchy of angels in the Christian tradition when the Bible itself contains no direct concept for this? It can be argued that if Christ is at the right hand of the Father, then he is able to receive prayers from believers and intercede for those who believe in him (cf. Romans 8:34) and thus there would be no need for other hierarchical structures between God and man, for Christ would be the only necessary intermediary. Yet, in the Bible there are also hints of a general milieu of cosmology present in the ancient world, which implies a familiarity with hierarchy many of the scriptural authors knew of, but were not setting out to specifically explain, as it was so well known. In this sense Dionysius is neither unique nor outlandish. Structuring his cosmology, he explains that the σκοπός or goal of the hierarchy is "as far as possible to be like God and to attain unity with him [...] to make its members to the holy image of God [...] and pass on this light generously to those beneath." (ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις αὐτὸν …καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώτας ἀγάλματα θεῖα τελῶν

[246] The Odyssey V, 29.
[247] Beck 1992: 327.
[248] Ephesians 1: 21: "The Father gave Christ the seat of his right hand in heaven, high above all powers and authorities, powers, and rulers." In Colossians 1, 16, Paul mentions thrones. There are often talk of ordinary angels in the Bible. In Luke, 19 and 26 we hear about archangels. In Gen. 1 we hear about cherubs, who were given the task of God to guard the gates of Paradise. Finally, Isaiah 6, 2 and 6 tell about seraphim who stand before the throne of God. See also Psalm 80.1, Romans 8.38, and 1. Thessalonians 4.16.

ἔσοπτρα διειδέστατα … ταύτην δὲ αὖθις ἀφθόνως εἰς τὰ ἑξῆς ἀναλάμποντα).[249] For the purpose of imitating God and becoming like him, each member of the hierarchy receives purification, light, and wisdom from the level above which possesses a greater degree of this and which is assigned to pass it on to the level below.[250] This process takes place step by step; the highest level that is closest to God is first illuminated and suffused with the divine light (which is understood to incorporate within it the mediating presence of the *Logos*), and then illuminates the next level. Together, the levels constitute a stepwise order of higher, middle and lower spiritual beings who are in close co-operation with each other. In the whole structure and in between the levels there is a threefold activity consisting of rest (μόνη), procession (πρόοδος) and return (ἐπιστροφή); a three-fold process where God, who is the supreme transcendent principle, penetrates the whole creation with his divine illumination. The idea is that everything springs from the divine source and is created to participate in it; the goal is therefore return and union with God.

In *CH* VII, VIII and IX Dionysius describes how this tripartite activity reflects the three triads in the hierarchy and dynamics that flow between them. The top triad, seraphim (*σεραφίμ*), cherubim (*χερουβίμ*), thrones (*θρόνοι*), is immediately purified, enlightened and united with God[251] and transfers this to the next triad, dominions (*κύριοι*), powers (*δυνάμις*), authorities (*ἐξουσίαι*), which is being purified, illuminated, and perfected by the supreme triad. The triad in the middle does not achieve perfection to the same degree as the supreme triad, its foremost characteristic is ἔλλαμψις, illumination,[252] which it brings forth by

[249] *CH* III, 2, 165A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 17-18).
[250] *CH* VII, 3, 208A.
[251] *CH* VII.
[252] *CH* VIII.

illuminating the lowest triad, principalities (*ἀρχαί*), archangels (*ἀρχάγγελοι*) and angels (*ἄγγελοι*) which is purified and which in its turn cleanses the level below, which is man.[253]

Each of the three triads is purified, illuminated, and perfected, yet it is the supreme triad that is characterized by being perfected and perfecting, the middle by being illuminated and illuminating and the bottom by being purified and purifying.[254] While this is a principle that applies within each triad, it is primarily a question of a movement that pulsates throughout the hierarchy. It is a vertical activity between the various levels of hierarchy where ascent is the central. The upper levels possess a greater degree of perfection while having integrated the functions of the levels below. However, the deity itself always remains transcendent, that is, it also transcends any perfection. It is, in Paul Rorem's words, "beyond purification, beyond light, the very source of perfection which is more than perfect".[255] In this respect, the hierarchy is both like and unlike God; it is like God in the way that it possesses the triple activity, and unlike God in that it is to be understood as an effect which must not be confused with its cause.[256]

The mission of Dionysius' hierarchies is, as we have seen, to attain likeness and unity with God, and to pass on what one has received generously to those beneath.[257] This anagogic process is determined by three activities: 1) *purification*, 2) *illumination*, and 3) *perfection*. In *CH* III Dionysius writes that "the holy order" presupposes that some are purified (καθαίρεσθαι) and others purify (καθαίρειν), that someone is illuminated (φωτίζεσθαι) and others are illuminating (φωτίζειν), and that some are perfected (τελεσθεῖεν) and others are perfecting (τελεσιουργεῖν).[258] In this way, the cosmic order is maintained. This presupposes

[253] *CH* IX.
[254] *CH* VIII.
[255] Rorem 1993: 58.
[256] Ibid.
[257] *CH* III, 2, 165A.
[258] *CH* III, 2, 165 B–C.

that each level fulfills the vocation given, which is to realize its own potential and mission in the hierarchy, and in so doing becoming God's co-worker, θεοῦ συνεργός, just as Paul expresses it in 1 Corinthians 3, 9.

The threefold process of purification, illumination, and perfection also applies to the human realm, that is, to 'our hierarchy', or to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is divided into three times three orders.[259] The first triad is the mysteries (*τελεταί*), the other is the ones who initiate (μύσται), the third ones are being initiated (τελουμένοι).[260] Purification, illumination, and perfection within the ecclesiastical hierarchy involves participation in the rites. The holy rites can help man rise from the sensible to the intelligible, according to Dionysius, and is thus purifying, or as Sheldon-Williams puts it, "the ascent through the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is an ascent towards the Truth, that is to say, a philosophy. Philosophy begins when theory is applied to practice […]."[261] Dionysius understands the Sacrament as a unitary source of light; the clergy disseminate the light; the laity receives it and it is thereby brought back to its source.[262] In *EH* II he even says that the catechumen is rescued by the baptism from darkness of evil and ignorance, which he sees as the negation of light.[263] So the holy rites are understood both as a means of purification and illumination.[264] He explains further that the ecclesiastical ceremonies and symbols are not only an exhortation to purify, but also "an invitation to a life lived in the light which the Hierarchy bestows for the first time upon each of [the] newly baptized" (ἀλλ' ἐνθέως ἀεὶ τοῖς προσιοῦσι ταῖς αὐτοῦ φωταγωγίαις ἱεραρχικῶς ἐλλάμπων ἐν εὐκοσμίᾳ καὶ τάξει καὶ ἀναλογίᾳ τῆς ἑκάστου πρὸς τὰ ἱερὰ συμμετρίας).[265] The goal of the hierarchy is thus to lift all members of the hierarchy up

[259] *CH* III.8.1.
[260] *EH* V, I, 501A 4–6.
[261] Sheldon-Williams 1964: 298, 295.
[262] Ibid.
[263] *EH* II, 3, 4, 400C 4–5.
[264] *EH* III, I, 425A 9–B2.
[265] *EH* II, 3, 400B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 75).

to the life lived in light, and to divinization. Those who are not yet initiated need purification (1), the catechumens are illuminated (2) and the monks are perfected (3), which means, they are in a special contemplative relationship with God. The deacons take care of the uninitiated and are therefore responsible for the purification; they instruct the uninitiated in scripture and faith. The priests have particular responsibility for the catechumens and therefore also for the illumination. The bishops have particular responsibility for the monks in this threefold way, that is, for their perfection. Man's ecclesiastical hierarchy is, in short, the visible world emerging from the invisible, elaborating its purpose and achieving its final destiny.[266]

In his description of both the angelic hierarchy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Dionysius follows, as we have seen, a descending and ascending movement of mediation and perfection. Using the word "ascension" in connection with the hierarchy may be misleading though, as this does not mean rising in degrees from monk to deacon to bishop, etc. Such a voyage—which might even be thought to continue through to the angelical hierarchy, order by order, until one ended up being like God Himself—is not the theme in Dionysius' theology. Neither the heavenly nor the ecclesiastical hierarchy is to be understood as a ladder. Rather, it is about perfecting one's given place, and as Dionysius himself states, "as far as possible seeking unity with God" (ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις αὐτον).[267] When Dionysius says "as far as possible" it should be understood as realizing one's potential and transforming ones' opportunity into reality. This is in line with earlier epistemologies in Christian thought that sought to point out that human nature can never become divine nature, just that it becomes deified, e.g., qualitatively resembles God, but never itself divine *ousia*. Thus, the purpose of the hierarchy is not to climb upward, but to seek resemblance to God where one is situated. We have seen that the Dionysian hierarchy is

[266] Cf. Rutledge 1965: 3.
[267] *CH* III, 1-2, 164D–165A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 17-19).

a highly systematized structure, with each member ordered by God in creation, and whose purpose is to realize the capacity of divinization on each level.

The hierarchies can be seen as the dynamic workings of the thearchy; they have no intrinsic interest, as Dom Placid Spearrit would put it, but are worth studying only in so far as they manifest the God who is their principle.[268] Each member of the hierarchy has the advantage of being God's co-worker, belonging to an order that conveys light down to the lower orders according to the degree to which they are able to receive it. The idea of light mediated through various levels has been referred to as "the staircase principle" by Georges Florovsky,[269] who understands this as a dissemination of divine knowledge, from the upper angelic order surrounding the divine throne, through the lower angelic orders, right down to our hierarchy (that is, the ecclesiastical hierarchy with its sacraments and clergy), and finally down to the baptized lay people.[270] Thus, every hierarchy is a descent of the light and the knowledge from the higher regions to the lower. As it descends this light becomes increasingly impoverished, there is a percolation through one διακόσμησις to another until the light disappears in the darkness of orderless matter.[271] Dionysius derives the verb ἱεραρχεῖν from ἱεραρχία, to emphasize the goal of the hierarchy, which is to perform the function of the hierarchy, namely to purify and illuminate the levels below, and then return to the deity.

**Platonic influence**

[268] Cf. Dom Placid Spearrit 1970: 382.
[269] Florovsky 1987: 221.
[270] Florovsky 1987: 221. See also trinitarian theologies of illumination in the fourth century, especially Basil (*Against Eunomius* 2.11; *Holy Spirit* 18.47) Nazianzen (*Fifth Oration*), Nyssa (*Ad Ablabium*) and Didymus (*Holy Spirit*). It is a common theme, especially in those devoted to the thought of Origen. Often in these the angelic order is ignored, however: the indwelling Spirit lays the groundwork for participation in Son and Father. This is not to say the angels are necessarily disregarded, just that they were not a topic of importance in the fourth century in the same way in which they are later.
[271] Sheldon-Williams 1964: 299.

The principle of dissemination as a necessary activity from higher to lower levels in a cosmic system is found already in Plotinus: "Everything must give from itself to others, otherwise the good will not be good, the spirit will not be spirit and the soul will not be what it is, if it were another life after the first life, as long as the first one exists. Everything must be arranged in succession, and that forever." (Ἀλλ' ἀνάγκη ἕκαστον τὸ αὐτοῦ διδόναι καὶ ἄλλῳ, ἢ τὸ ἀγαθὸν οὐκ ἀγαθὸν ἔσται, ἢ ὁ νοῦς οὐ νοῦς, ἢ ψυχὴ μὴ τοῦτο, εἰ μή τι μετὰ τοῦ πρώτως ζῆν ζῴη καὶ δευτέρως ἕως ἔστι τὸ πρώτως. Ἀνάγκη τοίνυν ἐφεξῆς εἶναι πάντα ἀλλήλοις καὶ ἀεί).[272] This activity is understood by Dionysius as the goodness of God that is "flowing over".[273] To describe this, Dionysius often uses Proclean terms such as: ὑπερβλύζω, ἐκβλύζω and ἀναβλύζω.[274] In other places he mentions it as the dissemination of light and love by the hierarchies.[275] The purpose of this light dissemination by and within the hierarchy is *anagoge*, to lift the creation up to divinization.[276] This is an idea that has many similarities to proponents within Platonism. René Roques sees the whole process of divinization with its emphasis on union (ἕνωσις) and divinity (θέωσις) as a summary of the very ideal of wisdom in Platonism, and the same applies to an endeavor or purification (κάθαρσις) and return (ἐπιστροφή).[277] We find this explicitly elaborated in Plato's *Politeia* for example, where the goal is θεωρία, the beholding of the ideas. This presupposes an intellectual purification by the philosopher, whereby they undergo various stages in their ability to behold. Plato describes the stages as four-fold in the allegory of the line (*Politeia* 509e ff.), which can be interpreted as an abstraction of the allegory of the cave (*Politeia* 514a f.): 1) εἰκασία has the presumption that the depiction of the sensible is the reality, 2) πίστις, the belief that everything that lives

[272] Plotinus, "Against the Gnostics," in *Ennead* 2.9.3.
[273] *DN* II, 11
[274] In *CA* ὑπερβλύζω occurs eight times, ἐκβλύζω three times and ἀναβλύζω twice. See Dillon and Wear 2007: 51.
[275] *CH* III, 2; DN IV, 13. Dionysius seems to prefer the Neoplatonic term *eros* to the Johanneic term *agape*. For Dionysius, *eros* is an aspect of God himself while creating and caring for all that is created.
[276] Rorem 1984: 99–116.
[277] Roques RAC II, s. 1094.

and is made is the most real, 3) *διάνοια*, where one relates to a thinking that is no longer bound by the senses, 4) νοῦς, the beholding of the ideas in their pure form (θεωρία). A similar principle is expressed in Dionysius' symbolic theology as a methodical way in which one must first disengage from sensual images and comprehensions, and through the interpretation of biblical symbols and church rituals come to eventually reach a true knowledge of and a higher degree of participation in the divine.[278] We shall look closer at his method of interpreting symbols in chapter four.

**Triads in the hierarchy: Neoplatonic influence**

Dionysius' hierarchical cosmology represents both unity and trinity by pattern: Everything is unity, and at the same time all existence has three aspects held in it. The hierarchy is an integrated whole, and at the same time it is divided into the three triads. It is well-established scholarly understanding that Dionysius took over a Neoplatonic triadic pattern of rest (μόνη), procession (πρόοδος) and return (ἐπιστροφή), and adapted it to his own system. Indeed, a triadic division of the hierarchy is a common feature for both Proclus and Dionysius, along with several other Neoplatonists from Plotinus to Damascius.[279] According to E. R. Dodds, these triads are a main principle in Proclus' dialectics.[280] Proclus writes that "the triad measures and bounds all things",[281] and he further tells that Iamblichus had "three triads of intelligible gods in the intelligible Hebdomad".[282] Porphyry (234–301), student under Plotinus and later Iamblichus' teacher, also counted on a triadic order. For him, the number 9 was sacred because of its composition of three lots of 3-numbers.[283] Triadic structures are also central in the Chaldean oracles that later Neoplatonists referred to as sacred scripture.

[278] *CH* II; Heil 1986: 25.
[279] See Dodds 1933: 252ff .; Dillon and Wear 2007: 57; Louth 1981: 163.
[280] Dodds 1933: 220.
[281] Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* (Taylor 1994: 26).
[282] Proclus, Commentary on the Timaeus (Diehl 1903: 308).
[283] Lydus, *De Mensibus* (Taylor 1994: 56).

Porphyry writes the following in his comment on the Chaldean oracles: "This Oracle gives knowledge of the three orders of angels: those who perpetually stand before God; those who are separated from him and who are sent forth with a view to certain messages and ministrations; those who perpetually bear his throne... and perpetually sing."[284] Damascius (458–538) emphasizes how the triad is associated with the monad: "In every world a triad shines forth, of which a monad is the principle."[285]

Triadic structures can thus be understood as a general cosmogonic principle among several Neoplatonists in late antiquity. Such a triadic structure for the heavenly realm has a much more difficult or obscure background in Scripture, and it is perhaps remarkable that Dionysius should have felt moved to propound it so stringently. He may, as John Dillon suggests, have been so profoundly impressed by the elaborate structuring of the spiritual realm developed by the Athenian School, that he applied the triadic order of rest (μόνη), procession (πρόοδος) and return (ἐπιστροφή) to a rather more chaotic assemblage of Christian angelic entities.[286] However, this point should also be weighed against the context of Christian teaching about the Trinity, which is older than Neoplatonism, and likewise in comparison to earlier Christian writers such as Origen (his pedagogic sequence of ethics, physics, epopteia), so it may not be as unexpected as some make it out to be that Dionysius would apply such a structure to the heavenly realm.

Dionysius' borrowings from Neoplatonism apply to both the division of the hierarchy into three triads and in its mutual causality relationship. Proclus and later Neoplatonism depend on Plotinus, whose philosophy understands all existing things as emanations of the One, which in itself remains unchanged and untouched.[287] The One is described as the entity

[284] Lewy 1978: 13f.
[285] Damascius, *On the Parmenides* (Taylor 1994: 25).
[286] Dillon 2014: 118–19.
[287] *Enn.* V 2, 2, 27.

that holds the world together and is present in the world, at the same time as it is beyond all knowledge. From the One emanates Nous, from the Nous emanates the soul, and then comes matter, which is the lowest level of being.[288] If so, then we are dealing with three levels of hypostases: The One—Nous—and soul. These are emanated from each other, that is, each level gains their being from the level above. Plotinus puts this as: "It is therefore in a way as a long life stretched out over a distance, each of its parts differing from those that come next" (Ἔστιν οὖν οἷον ζωὴ μακρὰ εἰς μῆκος ἐκταθεῖσα, ἕτερον ἕκαστον τῶν μορίων τῶν ἐφεξῆς, συνεχὲς δὲ πᾶν αὐτῷ, ἄλλο δὲ καὶ ἄλλο τῇ διαφορᾷ).[289] Proclus adapts Plotinus' concept of mediation. He expands the three hypostases and provides a more systematic representation of the world's structure from the supreme principle. Following his predecessor Iamblichus, Proclus seeks to nuance the relationship and distinction between the One and Intellect. In doing so he distinguishes between the intelligible Being (*to noêton*—what is the object of intellectual intuition) and the intellective (*to noeron*—what is intelligizing), and introduces between both, as an intermediary level, the *noêton-noeron* (what is being intelligized and intelligizing).[290] These three ontological levels – Being, Life, and Intellect – thus correspond to the triad of Being, Life, and Intellect, which already played an important role in Plotinus' and Porphyry's speculations about the procession or 'emanation' of the intelligible world from the One.[291] The levels are arranged by degree of perfection and their interrelationship is the origin of the basic structure uniting all causes to their effects, namely the relation of immanence, procession and reversion.[292]

[288] I find *Nous* to be a more helpful term here than spirit. Dean Inge and others have argued for "Spirit" as the translation of this, but it must not be confused by "spirit" as the translation of pneuma in both Stoic and Christian traditions. Cf. Dean Inge's Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917–1918, on the philosophy of Plotinus (Inge 1929).
[289] *Enn.* V 2, 2, 27 (Loeb 1984: 64).
[290] Wallis 1972: 138-59; Armstrong 1967: 297–301.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* prop. 35.

From each of the hypostases derive a multitude of beings that he adapts from the pagan pantheon, thus upholding the tradition of the Old Academy and the ancient interest in mythology. From the One derive *henads* or gods; from the Intellect derive intelligences; from the soul derive souls, such as human souls. These are emanations from the One, that is, a hierarchy of beings flowing from the One (though the One is also transcendent and beyond classification), with each being obtaining its being from the level above.[293] The classic problem of how emanations from the One can be described without the One dissolving and losing its unity, Proclus solves by introducing the concept of divine entities or *henads.*[294] In Proclus' system, the *henads,* from which other entities emanate, are the first emanations or processions of the One, namely the noetic triad; that is, the intelligible—the intelligible/intellectual—the intellectual; which is being—life—thought.[295] Each one of these is again the source of a *hebdomad* that consists of a number of deities from the pagan pantheon.[296] From these emanate souls. At the last, comes matter.[297]

The highest triad in Dionysius corresponds closely to the highest, noetic realm in Proclus' system. Proclus presents this as being particularly connected to the realm of the One, with a multiplicity of characteristics present from the realm of Intellect.[298] The reference which Dionysius makes to the angels as "henads" is also interesting.[299] In *DN* 588B he describes God as "a united thing uniting all other units" (ἑνὰς ἑνοποιὸς ἁπάσης ἑνάδος), which implies that God is responsible for the degree of unity which is present in every being

[293] *DN* 588B. For more on Proclean Neoplatonism, see Beierwaltes 1979; Lioyd 1970: 302–25; Wallis 1972: 138-59; Armstrong 1967: 297–301 and Dodds's edition of *The Elements of Theology* with an important introduction and commentary from 1933.
[294] On the *henads* see Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* prop. 113–27.
[295] As for emanations, it may be worth urging caution in the use of this term as nothing actually comes "out of" the One, for example.
[296] Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* prop. 113–27.
[297] See Proclus, *Theol. Plat* III, 24.
[298] Ibid.
[299] It is worth recalling that Origen also calls God henad and monad in *First Principles* 1.1, and that this is an echo of the Platonic *Philebus*.

at every level.[300] As Dillon notes, and what Eric Perl has also shown, is that Dionysius seems to subsume the different layers of divine reality in the Neoplatonic universe under the providential activity of God himself, thus "producing a more monistic system, suitable to the Christian perspective", as Dillon puts it.[301]

**Angels and henads**

Similarities have been postulated between the henads and Dionysius' angels by scholars such as E. R. Dodds, who sees them as equivalents.[302] There are some problems with this assumption. John Dillon and Sarah Klitenic Wear have pointed out that one cannot, at least from a Neoplatonic perspective, equalize Dionysius' angelic beings with the entities of Proclus' system, as the henads are understood as belonging to a higher level of being - the sphere of the One, and not the sphere of the intellect, which is a lower level, where Dionysius' angelic triads belong.[303] In this sense, the equalization of Dionysius' angelic beings with the beings of the intellect refers to them being differentiated anagogically, meaning both are ranked according to their levels of purification and illumination, that is, according to their division into three levels. Moreover, both the angels and the beings of the intellect are, according to Dillon and Wear, outside the henadic sphere, which they describe as "a sort of bridge between the absolute unity and the transcendence of the One".[304] The equalization of the angelic beings to the Neoplatonic entities has been further problematized by Sheldon-Williams, who argues that "the Dionysian hierarchies, unlike those of the Neo-Platonists, are not potent in their own right but are the agents of the potency of God".[305] Alexander Golitzin claims, in line with Sheldon-Williams, that an important difference is that

[300] *DN* I, 1, 588B (ed. Suchla 1990: 109).
[301] Dillon and Wear 2007: 73.
[302] Dodds 1933: 260, n. 3; Saffrey 1982: 64–74.
[303] Dillon and Wear 2007: 73.
[304] Ibid. 72.
[305] Sheldon-Williams 1967: 471.

the Neoplatonic beings are seen as autonomous gods and not mere mediating beings between God and creation as in Christianity.[306] Golitzin does not deny the Neoplatonic influence, however, he finds that Dionysius uses Proclean categories and language to express already long existing Christian speculations about angelic beings. Where the Neoplatonists promote an ontological hierarchy where the angels convey being to each other, the function of the angels in Dionysius' hierarchy is, according to Golitzin, "limited" to conveying illumination. He points to this as being the main difference between Dionysius' hierarchy and Proclus' system: "Insisting on the God of Christian tradition, and especially on Jesus as the unique and immediate cause and agent of creation, Dionysius has effectively broken the back of Proclus' *seira* or hierarchies."[307] This is an important point made by Golitzin. Proclus does certainly not refer to Jesus as the source of the hierarchies like Dionysius does. For Dionysius it is Jesus Christ who is the creator and keeper of the whole hierarchical structure.[308] This structure, which has both a heavenly and earthly dimension, consisting of the angelic beings and clerics and other members of the church, shows us that Dionysius' view is in line with the early Christian tradition, expressed e.g., in the Nicene Creed, which states that God created through the Son both things invisible and visible. This is the same that Dionysius is stating, although his arrangement of angels and orders may be more original.

Despite the fact that Proclus does not see the hierarchical structure as an instrument for Christ as Dionysius does, there are actually many similarities in how both Proclus and Dionysius understand hierarchy and mediation: if one sees God or the One as manifest in all hierarchical activities and on every hierarchical level, then all creation must in principle be

[306] Golitzin 1994: 142f.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Cf. *EH* I, 1.

the One that works at a higher or lower level, since all creative entities are explained as emanations of the One. We shall look closer at this idea in the following.

**Emanation or creation?**

The question of creation is perhaps the most focal point within Dionysius scholarship. According to Andrew Louth, Dionysius confesses to the Christian creation doctrine "creatio ex nihilo", the doctrine of creation out of nothing by God, which states that all levels in the hierarchy and all creation is derived from God alone.[309] Louth acknowledges that Dionysius adapts the Neoplatonist idea of a hierarchy of intelligible beings in which the lower levels depend on the higher ones, but he rejects any idea that being should be conveyed down through this ladder, so that each level derives their being from the level above into a successive order: "Denys does not believe in emanation. As a Christian, he believes in the doctrine of creation out of nothing by God."[310] Ronald Hathaway, on the other hand, would hold that "the idea of creation in its traditional form is wholly absent in Ps.-Dionysius [...] To argue that he preserves, restores, or saves the Biblical idea of creation is like arguing that Aristotle is the guardian of Hesiodic theogony".[311] Here we witness two different interpretations of Dionysius' view of creation; we are at the core question of whether Dionysius advocates a Neoplatonic emanation doctrine or a Christian creation doctrine, which will be the topic of the discussion in what follows.

Views about the creation of the universe were not unambiguous among thinkers in Late Antiquity. For all Christians and some Neoplatonic philosophers, the cosmos was brought into existence by a divine being's creative act. Whereas the Neoplatonic thinkers, who drew on Plato's views in the *Timaeus*, would endorse either creation from pre-existent

[309] Louth 1989: 85.
[310] Louth 1981: 176.
[311] Hathaway 1969: XVI f.

[existent] material or suggest a non-creation account, Christians held to the notion that matter had a beginning from nothing. According to Richard Sorabji, the various views led to a major confrontation by Christian academics in 529 AD.[312] In this year, John Philoponus (about 490–570), a Christian thinker from the Platonic Academy in Alexandria, endeavored to disfigure the ancient view of an eternal world without a beginning or end.[313] In his treatise *De Aeternitate Mundi contra Proclum*, directed against Proclus, he set forth 18 arguments against Proclus' view of the world as eternal.[314] Without going further into his argumentation, we should note that his argued conclusion of the world having an *ex nihilo* beginning is what first led Christianity into an offensive debate on this question.[315] For posterity, there are three criteria that have been left as the foundation of a Christian creation doctrine: 1) God created from his own free will; 2) He did not create from an eternal pre-existent material; 3) He created the world in such a way that it had a temporal beginning.[316] According to Torstein Tollefsen, there does not seem to be any clear foundation for these criteria in Dionysius; at least no clear reference to divine will or freedom (the first criterion) in the work of Dionysius, the creation of the world seems rather to take place from a necessity in the nature of God.[317] On the other hand, he finds that Dionysius does not dispute the second criterion, that God did

[312] Sorabji 1987: 167.
[313] 529 is, incidentally, a remarkable year with several parallel events of significance to Christianity: Emperor Justinian closed the Platonic Academy in Athens and St. Benedict of Nursia builds a new monastery for his monks over the ruins of an temple of Apollo at Monte Cassino in Italy.
[314] Philoponus, *Against Proclus's ~~s~~ "On the Eternity of the World" 1–5*. See Sorabji 1987: 167. It is worth mentioning that while Philoponus is the most cogent champion of the Christian view, Augustine rejects the "Platonic" notion of an eternal universe. The same applies to early apologists such as Athenagoras and Theophilus.
[315] Sorabji 1987: 224.
[316] It is unknown when these requirements first occur in the history of Christianity, but we find them in several of the Orthodox Fathers of the fourth and fifth century: in Athanasius' works *Oratio contra gentes*, *Oratio de incarnatione Verbi*, and *Orationes contra Arianos*; in Basilius' *In hexaemeron*, Ambrosius' first books in Hexaemeron and Augustine's 11th book of *Confessiones* and 11th and 12th book of *De civitate Dei*. It is probably earlier than the fourth century, even if it becomes more popular then. Philo makes this claim in *De Opificio Mundi*; Tatian, Justin in *First Apology)* and Theophilus in *To Autolycus* book 2, esp. 10 onwards. We should also keep in mind that the Arian controversy assumes that Christians acknowledged the world to have a distinct temporal beginning, since much of it revolved (at least in the eyes of Alexander and his followers) around whether the Son was begotten eternally or as the first creature. Time must therefore begin with creation, and so the universe has a temporal beginning, being the beginning or temporality.
[317] Tollefsen 2004: 3.

not create the world from a pre-existent material.[318] Dionysius writes: "If it [matter] has any form of being, it must also emanate from the good, since everything that has being originates from the good" (Εἰ δέ πως ὄν, τὰ δὲ ὄντα πάντα ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ, καὶ αὐτὴ ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἂν εἴη).[319] This does not necessarily mean, of course, that he believes the world has a temporal beginning. According to Tollefsen, this third criterion of a temporal beginning of the world appears to be absent from Dionysius. R. F. Hathaway also notes that Dionysius in no place denies that the perceptible part of the world is eternal, and that it has not been proved that Dionysius professes to the doctrine *creatio ex nihilo,* it is certainly not a term Dionysius uses anywhere in his corpus, nor is the word "creation" central to him.[320] This is not the place for an in-depth engagement with Dionysius' view of creation, however, we may state that altogether there does not seem to be a clearly elaborated creation doctrine in Dionysius' system, something which could mean that this is just not a central topic to him. As Louth points out, he seems to be more interested in the interrelationship of the created order, and he prefers to say that we come from (*ek*) God, than from nothing.[321] What is central to Dionysius' understanding of God's relationship with creation is the manifestation, or *theophany*, of God in the world. God's theophany in the world means that God is immediately present to the whole creation as its creator – an understanding which, without being explicitly stated, must necessarily presuppose a doctrine of creation.[322]

The fact that Dionysius is not explicit with regard to *creatio ex nihilo*, and that he seems to adapt the Neoplatonist idea of a hierarchy of intelligible beings, may make us jump to conclusions that Dionysius proposes a Neoplatonic emanation doctrine. But Christian thinkers in late antiquity would usually not take Plato as an authority on the question of how

[318] Ibid.
[319] *DN* IV, 28, 792A (ed. Suchla 1990: 174).
[320] Hathatway 1969: 114.
[321] Louth 1989: 85.
[322] Cf. Louth 1989: 84-85.

the universe was created, they would respond to him only indirectly when engaging with Neoplatonists.[323] The issue for Christians was often that scientific language that one might employ for a creation account was Platonic: they rejected his ideas but the use of his language—and that of his later interpreters—was simply unavoidable. The Christians were part of the intellectual culture of the ancient world, which disproportionately used Platonic language to describe cosmological and metaphysical phenomena. Indeed, understanding how they saw creation perhaps only truly brings us closer to their general concept of causation. We may see creation as happening first temporally or being prior in a metaphysical sense, and as a foundation to how intra-cosmic causations are explained accordingly. If God creates the cosmos in a particular way, certain implications will follow about the nature of that cosmos, including human agents. But other points of agreement will remain. We shall now look at the causal relationship between God and the world in the system of Dionysius and how it corresponds to the Neoplatonists' dialectic between *mone, proodos, epistrophe.*

**The causal relationship between God and the world**

Dionysius uses the motive of *proodos*, or the movement "from Him" in relation to creation. *Proodos* is creation, all things are the result of the same *proodos;* they possess their existence as the result of God's message in the cosmos. In *CH* he writes, beginning with a reference to Scripture, that "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights" (Πᾶσα δόσις ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δώρημα τέλειον ἄνωθέν ἐστι καταβαῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν φώτων.)[324] Since God is "paternal light" (πατερικόν φῶς), any gift is light radiance, and at the same time the light beam leads us back to unity with the

[323] This argument is made well by Mark Edwards in *Origen Against Plato* (2002).
[324] Jas 1:17.

Father as the beginning of *CH* shows us: "Furthermore, every procession of the light, proceeding from the Father, spreads itself generously towards us, and in its power to unify it restores us by lifting us up, and returns us to the oneness and to the deifying simplicity of the Father. (Ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσα πατεροκινήτου φωτοφανείας πρόοδος εἰς ἡμᾶς ἀγαθοδότως φοιτῶσα πάλιν ὡς ἑνοποιὸς δύναμις ἀνατατικῶς ἡμᾶς ἀναπλοῖ καὶ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς τὴν τοῦ συναγωγοῦ πατρὸς ἑνότητα καὶ θεοποιὸν ἁπλότητα)."[325] This statement is followed by another scriptural quotation: "from him and to him are all things."[326] Dionysius clearly chooses a Christian basis for his text as he begins by quoting two passages from the Scriptures.[327] At the same time the scriptural quotations he chooses bracket the Neoplatonic theme of procession and return. The motif "from him" and "to him" is a theme that traditionally has been understood as part of the cyclical pattern of *mone, proodos*, *epistrophe* ("rest", a downward "procession", and an upward "return") that was essential to the structures of late Neoplatonism.[328] *Mone* is the source or the One that rests permanently in itself. *Proodos* is the eternal procession that creates new being. *Epistrophe* is return to the source. While each entity of being remains one, they are also part of a multiplicity as they convey their own existence to one another through *proodos*.

By scholars it is generally agreed that Dionysius has adopted this three-part pattern from Proclus, and has been in turn one of the chief exponents of continuing this pattern within Christian theology.[329] In *The Elements of Theology*, Proclus describes the triads as a hierarchy of secondary causes that derive their being from a unity or monad which then

[325] *CH* I, 1, 120B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 7).
[326] *Rom* 11: 36.
[327] Albertus Magnus discussed these fundamental ideas through another Bible verse that he adds in his prologue to the *CH*, *ad locum, unde exeunt flumina, revertuntur, iterum fluant* (*Eccles* 1:7) Albertus Magnus, *Opera omnia* Bd. XIV, see Stein 2006: 327.
[328] Cf. Proclus: "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it", *The Elements of Theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds, no. 35, p. 38.
[329] Cf. Rorem 1993: 51.

conveys this further down the hierarchy.[330] In Proclus the world thus emerges as a process of emanations proceeding from the supreme principle. It is not a static model, but a movement that pulsates through everything in a threefold way.

Proclus thus understands the divine unity as standing in a dialectical process; it remains in itself while it proceeds from itself and then returns to the source. He gives more descriptions of this activity, among other things as a cause-and-effect relationship.[331] In *The Elements of Theology* he writes: "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it."[332] E. R. Dodds describes this as "the three moments of the Neoplatonic world-process, immanence in the cause, procession from the cause, and reversion to the cause."[333] Using such terminology—the process of cause and effect—helps us, as Paul Rorem emphasizes, to avoid the pitfall of considering this theme spatially, especially because of the fact that many writers, both old and modern, overuse pictorial mental representations to explain a downward procession and upward return. In addition, this terminology diminishes the chances of considering procession and return as a temporal movement where procession is followed by return in a stringent order. Rather these are two complementary ways the effect relates to the cause; it both originates from it and returns to it at the same time.[334]

This reasoning that constitutes a framework for the whole of Proclus' philosophy, has been perceived as a parallel to what Dionysius teaches about the relationship between God and the world.[335] Dionysius writes that as the deity allows all beings to partake in its own divinity, it becomes "separated from itself in an aggregate way (διάκρισις καὶ

[330] Dodds 1933: Prop. 21.
[331] Dodds mentions another description Proclus gives of the triad: "identity, difference, and the overcoming of difference by identity. [...] one of the governing principles of Proclus' dialectic." See Dodds 1933: 220. This is thus a principle for the whole universe that can be described as a hierarchical chain, where each part stands in a hierarchical relationship with each other, yet while every being takes part in the One.
[332] Proclus in Dodds 1933: 39.
[333] Dodds 1933: 220.
[334] Rorem 1993: 51.
[335] Dodds 1933: 252ff.

πολλαπλασιασμός)",[336] it is multiplied at the same time as it remains one. The deity gives of itself to all being without ceasing to be uniform, it is both transcendent and at the same time immanent in the universe. To describe this, Dionysius distinguishes between ἕνωσις ("unity") and διάκρισις ("distinction").[337] Unity and distinction exist both in the deity, in the created world, and in the relationship between God and the world.[338] We can imagine a mutual movement which flows through the universe, a procession from a first point of departure and a return of all things.[339] We find this reasoning expressed in several places in the *CA*, for example in *DN* IV, 10: "Briefly said, all that exists originate from, exist in, and return to the beautiful and the good (Καὶ ἁπλῶς πᾶν ὂν ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ἀγαθῷ ἔστι καὶ εἰς τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐπιστρέφεται)."[340] Dionysius also understands *proodos* as a movement of love or *eros* that has its pre-existence in the deity. From the deity it flows out (*proodos*) to all beings and then returns (*epistrophe*) to its starting point.[341] In *CH* I, 2 he says:

> For this radiance never ever leaves its own nature of unity, as it duly, for the sake of goodness, is multiplied and lifts up the created beings and brings them from diversity to higher unity, it still remains in itself, immutable and indivisible, firmly anchored in its own unity, pulling those who, in accordance with their capacity are turning upwards towards it, up towards itself, and unite them in accordance with its own unmixed entity.[342]

For Dionysius it is the triune God, θεαρχία, which rests, proceeds and returns to himself. In *DN* I, 4 he writes that the θεαρχία is "manifested" in a "three-hypostatic" manner. He uses the term "hypostasis" for both the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is thus understood as a manifestation of the highest and transcendent deity. Although God is the

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[336] *DN* II, 11, 649B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 135).
[337] *DN* II, 11 649B.
[338] This is being thematised in all *DN* II.
[339] Cf. *DN* IV, 14 712C; *CH* I, 2.
[340] *DN* IV, 10, 705D (ed. Suchla 1990: 154).
[341] *DN* IV, 14 712C; *CH* I, 2.
[342] *CH* I, 2, 121B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 8): Καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲ αὐτὴ πώποτε τῆς οἰκείας ἑνικῆς ἑνότητος ἀπολείπεται, πρὸς ἀναγωγικὴν δὲ καὶ ἑνοποιὸν τῶν προνο- ουμένων σύγκρασιν ἀγαθοπρεπῶς πληθυνομένη καὶ προϊοῦσα μένει τε ἔνδον ἑαυτῆς ἀραρότως ἐν ἀκινήτῳ ταὐτότητι μονίμως πεπηγυῖα καὶ τοὺς ἐπ' αὐτὴν ὡς θεμιτὸν ἀνανεύοντας ἀναλόγως αὐτοῖς ἀνατείνει καὶ ἑνοποιεῖ κατὰ τὴν ἁπλωτικὴν αὐτῆς ἕνωσιν.

transcendent One, he is at the same time three hypostases. In a passage in *CH* VII, Dionysius praises the highest angelic orders for conveying the message of "this θεαρχία which is a trihypostatic monad and henad, sending out his kindest thought to all beings, from the super-heavenly intellects to the last of the earth, as the most-original origin and cause of every essence, and taking hold of all things super-essentially in a unresisted embrace" (καὶ μὴν ὅτι μονάς ἐστι καὶ ἑνὰς τρισυπόστατος ἀπὸ τῶν ὑπερουρανίων οὐσιῶν ἄχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων τῆς γῆς διεῖσα τὴν ἀγαθωτάτην αὐτῆς ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα πρόνοιαν ὡς πάσης οὐσίας ὑπεράρχιος ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία καὶ πάντων ὑπερουσίως ἀσχέτῳ συνοχῇ περιδεδραγμένη."[343] In *EH*, this three-part activity also receives a liturgical expression; Dionysius draws an analogy to the bishop's movement from the altar down through the church and back to the altar, a symbolic act of *mone* (God who remains in himself, on the altar, the holiest of holies), *proodos* (God coming out to His people) and *epistrophe* (the people's movement back to God).

We have observed above how the causal relationship between God and the world in Dionysius' system may been understood in the light of Proclus' dialectics between *proodos* and *epistrophe*. It is not the place here to elaborate further on the background of this scheme in later Neoplatonism, but it should be pointed out that Proclus is not necessarily the only, maybe not even the main source of inspiration for Dionysius. Dionysius may well have gained knowledge of these principles indirectly from other Neoplatonists or from Church Fathers who were influenced by Neoplatonism. This form of thinking about causality was after all found among other late antique thinkers, and we can also find traces of it in the New Testament. One hypothesis may be that Christian thinkers of late antiquity could easily associate with this Neoplatonic structure, precisely because they were familiar with this type

[343] *CH* VII, 4, 212C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 32).

of causal thinking from the sacred books of their own Christian Tradition. The triadic scheme could therefore be seen as a habitually held, "common sense" idea of causality.

In the New Testament, there are texts that form a connection point to the philosophical etiology of late antiquity. We have the following statement in Col. 1, 16–17: "For by him (*ἐν αὐτοῦ*) were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him (δι' αὐτοῦ), and through him (εἰς αὐτόν)." Expressing causal relationship using prepositions also seems to have been a tendency in Neoplatonism.[344] The preposition ἐκ implies that something comes out of something, while εἰς denotes a movement into something. When the Apostle Paul uses this type of terminology to express that all things come from God and have their goal in him, it is unlikely that he is doing so because he was familiar with Neoplatonic sources. It is more likely that we are facing a special sort of scholarly terminology of the times that he would have known about. At the very least there are certainly connection points in the relationship between Platonic and Christian cosmology.

**Mediation in the hierarchy**

How are we to understand the process of *proodos* and mediation in Dionysius' system? On one side there are those who see it as an emanation of autonomous entities, on the other side those who see it as mediation of knowledge and light. Scholars like Louth and Golitzin have made their position clear: Dionysius does not believe in emanation, but only in a hierarchy of beings conveying light.[345] The Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation (from the Latin emanare meaning "to flow from" or "to pour forth or out of") holds that all things are derived from the first principle, or the One. From the perfect God, by steps of degradation to lesser degrees of

[344] John Dillon (1977: 138f) speaks in this context of "preposition metaphysics."
[345] Cf. Golitzin 1994: 142f.

the first reality or God, and at every step the emanating beings are less pure, less perfect, less divine. Dionysius shares this notion of emanation by insisting that being is derived from God alone.[346] He does, however, not not believe in emanation in a Neoplatonic sense, understood as each being receiving being from the one above. He takes over the Neoplatonic scale of being, and also the doctrine that lower beings depend on higher beings, but he rejects any idea of a whole realm of creative beings as a substitute for the one and only Creator God. For Dionysius all beings are created immediately by God.[347] The dependence of beings upon each other is primarily about *illumination*. Dionysius refers to the "light" that originates from the Father and which illuminates each level down the hierarchy so that every level becomes radiant with light and passes it on to the beings below, but he does not understand emanation as communication of being down the scale. Instead, he refers to mediation of being from God directly, understood as God's theophany or "presence" at all levels.[348] The whole creation is a theophany, or a manifestation of God, in which beings closer to God manifest God to those further away. God is immediately present to every level in the hierarchy of creation as their creator. Such an understanding of the world as theophany therefore presupposes a doctrine of creation, since the world is seen as God's glory made manifest in all its fractions.[349]

Eric Perl gives a clarifying account of this perspective in his excellent study *Theophany*, which suggest that the creation of all things must ultimately be a manifestation or revelation of God—a theophany—and thus that the being of all things is also the being of God.[350] This may look like a pantheistic/panentheistic doctrine, but when Dionysius describes God's creation as the radiance of divine light, it is implied that everything is from God, and also that some of God's *energies* shines through all that is (Light is one of many names for

[346] Louth 1989: 85.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Perl 2007: 65–81.

God discussed in *DN* IV in line with Goodness, Beauty and Love). Illumination can thus be understood in the same vein as creation, something that happens both directly and yet is hierarchically mediated. In this perspective, the whole of Dionysius' creation theology can be understood as a theology that is about light.[351] To help us avoid misunderstandings here, it is useful to make a distinction between God in his *essence* and God in his *energies*. In Eastern Orthodox theology God's essence is called *ousia*, which can be explained as "all that subsists by itself and which has not its being in another", and is distinct from his energies (*energeia*) or activities as actualized in the world.[352] This is a way of expressing the idea that the transcendent God remains eternally hidden in his essence, but at the same time that God also seeks to communicate and the distinction between God's essence and energy unite himself with us personally through his energy.[353] So when speaking of God's theophany or "presence" at all levels in the hierarchy, we mean God in his energies, not in his transcendent essence.

Despite obvious differences between a Christian understanding of God and his relationship to creation, and a non-Christian Neoplatonic approach, there are interesting similarities. Proclus argues in *The Elements of Theology* that the transcendent cause is present in all its *effects*: "In order that as cause it may be in all that can participate in while as a separate and independent principle it is prior to all the things that are filled. From it, it must be at once everywhere and nowhere" (ἵν' οὖν καὶ αἴτιον ὑπάρχον ἐν πᾶσιν ᾖ τοῖς δυναμένοις

[351] Ibid. 131.
[352] Bradshaw 2004: 91-95. The essence–energy distinction was formulated by Gregory Palamas of Thessaloniki (1296–1359), as part of his defense of the Athonite monastic practice of hesychasmos, the mystical exercise of "stillness" to facilitate ceaseless inner prayer and noetic contemplation of God, against the charge of heresy brought by the humanist scholar and theologian Barlaam of Calabria. Hence it is known as "the Palamite" distinction. However, it is found in much earlier sources as well, such as in the Cappadocian Fathers who would use terms such as 'powers' and 'energies', and as Henny F. Hägg has demonstrated, already Clement of Alexandria constitutes a decisive Vorstadium to this dogma. Hägg 2006: 247.
[353] We find this idea widely spread throughout Dionysius' work as an overriding premise in his entire interpretation of the apophatic and cataphatic theology, and in his emphasis on unknowability versus knowability.

μετέχειν, καὶ χωριστὸν ὂν ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ πρὸ πάντων ᾗ τῶν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ πληρουμένων, πανταχοῦ ἐστιν ἅμα καὶ οὐδαμοῦ)."[354] For Proclus, the One is thus creatively present at all levels. In this way we can imagine the different levels of being in the hierarchy as mediating being to each other, but ultimately it is the One that creates directly in them. For Proclus, it is only the One that is the creative aspect that works in the hierarchy.[355] Dionysius would agree that there is only one Creator God. In *CH* III, 2, 165B he states that the hierarchical activity of all being is the divine *activity* (energies) manifested in it. This does not mean, however, that the activity of the hierarchy is about derivation of new being. For Dionysius, it is God's *light* that is the divine energy made manifest in the hierarchy. It is, with other words, God's revelation or his theophany that is communicated through the ranks, it is not a matter of mediation of *being* as in Proclus. For Dionysius, creatures are created immediately by God and have no ontological continuity with him.[356]

According to Proclus the higher, universal cause is cooperating (συνεργεῖ) in creating what the lower causes create, and the lower causes are merely specifications of the higher: "[I]n the activity of the secondary the higher is co-operative, because all the effects of the secondary are concomitantly generated by the more determinative cause (καὶ τοῦ δευτέρου πάλιν ἐνεργοῦντος κἀκεῖνο συνεργεῖ διότι πᾶν, ὅπερ ἂν ποιῇ τὸ δεύτερον, συναπογεννᾷ τούτῳ καὶ τὸ αἰτιώτερον)."[357] Since the One is manifest in all hierarchical *activities* and on all levels of the hierarchy it allows each stage to be creative, precisely because the One is working in and through them. Although not completely analogous, since it in Dionysius' system is about illumination, a similar principle applies when Dionysius uses the terminology of *proodos* and *epistrophe*, not only in the relationship between creation and God, but also in

[354] Proclus (Dodds 1933: prop. 98).
[355] Ibid.
[356] *DN* II, 11, 649B-C; V, 4, 817C. Cf. Louth 1989: 85.
[357] Ibid. 67, prop. 70.

the interrelation between the different levels of the hierarchy.[358] Eric Perl suggests that we may understand this as higher beings proceeding to the lower, and the lower beings returning to the higher; angels proceed to humans, and humans return, not only to God, but also to angels.[359] We find this exemplified in Dionysius's treatment of Isa. 6, 6–7 describing a higher angelic order (seraphim) that *illuminates* a human being (Isaiah).[360] This is a biblical text that challenges the hierarchy of Dionysius by describing a higher angelic order (seraphim) which illuminates and purifies a human being (Isaiah). Usually, only the lowest order, the angels would be directly connected to man according to the Dionysian system, so this is a problem that Dionysius is trying to solve: "this we shall investigate, why it is said that one of the theologians [Isaiah] was visited by a seraph, for one can see a problem in that a being of the highest order is referred to as the one who cleaned the theologian [Isaiah], instead of one of the lowest order of the angels" (Ἄγε δὴ καὶ τοῦτο κατὰ δύναμιν ἐπισκοπήσωμεν ὅτου ἕνεκα πρὸς ἕνα τῶν θεολόγων ὁ Σεραφὶμ ἀποστέλλεσθαι λέγεται. Καὶ γὰρ ἀπορήσειέ τις ὅτι μὴ τῶν ὑφειμένων τις ἀγγέλων, ἀλλ' αὐτὸς ὁ ταῖς πρεσβυτάταις οὐσίαις ἐνάριθμος ἀποκαθαίρει τὸν ὑποφήτην)."[361] Dionysius' interpretation of this scripture is that an angel of the lowest order performs an activity using the power of the seraph that works through him. It was not a seraph that Isaiah directly met, but an angel of a lower order via which the seraph was working.[362] According to Dionysius, this is not clear in Scripture since purification is

[358] *DN* IV, 8, 704D; IV; 10, 708A; IV, 12, 709D; IV, 15, 713AB.
[359] Cf. Perl 2007: 78.
[360] *CH* XIII, 300B.
[361] *CH* XIII, 300B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 43-44).
[362] *CH* XIII, 305D. This view was not commonly accepted in late antiquity. Most followed Pope Gregory the Great's (about 540-604) scepticism towards Dionysius' explanation on this point. But in the twelfth century arguments took a new turn: Thomas Aquinas followed Dionysius' explanation in his *Expositio super Isaiam ad Litteram*, vol. 28. Like Dionysius, he argues that it could not have been a seraph or an angel of the higher order who came to Isaiah. Sew Hankey 1997: 416f. See also Duclow 1994: 233–252. Duclow's concern is to compare Dionysius with Eriugena and illuminate both views of the relationship between man and angels. He finds that Dionysius gives two interpretations to the problem: 1) the first is a functional and semantic analysis. An angel of the lowest order was called seraph since he cleansed Isaiah with fire, which is the name of the seraph. The angel performs in this manner as a seraph. 2) The second interpretation is typically hierarchical, if not bureaucratic, where those who are higher in the hierarchy receive credit for the works of the subordinates, in this case Isaiah's angel attributing God and the Seraphim his own sacred work. Both interpretations show that there is no break in

attributed to the seraph, and because the angel that performed the purification of Isaiah attributes the purifying knowledge and power to God as the cause, and refers to the seraph as the highest efficient hierarch.[363] Dionysius thus solves the conflict between the philosophical "vision" or "système du monde", on the one hand, and "une texte scripturaire" on the other, by demonstrating that the hierarchy with its angels and their place and functions can be adequately interpreted as absolute.

We have seen that the understanding of mediation of light and knowledge in the hierarchy of Dionysius and the Neoplatonists is rather similar. The way Dionysius argues for a higher level of being as also operating at a lower level corresponds with Proclus' explanation that all activity at all levels is due to the presence of the One throughout the entire structure.[364] That which is transmitted through the hierarchy is the presence of God in his *energies* (as contrasted to his being). For Dionysius this is a question of mediation of knowledge and light. To sum up, Dionysius comes close to Proclus's understanding of mediation. A striking parallel is that both assume a system of different levels of beings that are interconnected, belonging to a larger whole, all neatly arranged under the highest principle. Both Dionysius's hierarchy and Proclus' doctrine of 'mediated being' it is only God or the One who is creatively active at each level; all things are ultimately a manifestation or revelation of God. A fundamental difference, however, is that for Dionysius it is not being, but light that is mediated through the ranks, and the light is understood as Christ himself. Not only is Christ the origin of the hierarchies, but also, he is the light which is the spiritual gift transmitted through the hierarchies, and ultimately the goal of all hierarchies.

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the angel hierarchy. Furthermore, Duclow shows how Eriugena in *Exposites* responds to Dionysius' interpretation of the biblical text.

[363] *CH* XIII, 305D; *CH* XIII, 308B.

[364] Proclus (Dodds 1933: 87, prop. 98).

**The purpose of the human being in the cosmos**

Thinkers in both the Neoplatonist and Christian tradition were concerned to understand the human situation in the light of a wider cosmic picture. Human agency and "willing" were understood by comparing it to the agency of God and that of angels. In this section the focus shall be on the human agent. That is, what is the purpose of the human being in Dionysius' neatly organized cosmos?

Dionysius stresses that *deification* is the aim of creation and sees it as realized in likeness and union with God:

> The most supreme Deity - which transcends everything and which is both one and three – and whose will - inscrutable to us, but known to itself – has resolved to ensure the salvation of rational beings, both those among us and above us. But this could not take place if not those who are being saved are being deified. And deification is to be assimilated and in union with God as much as possible.[365]

The purpose of man is to be deified. However, we do not achieve deification solely on account of our own effort, but we are also dependent on God's grace.[366] For Dionysius deification is a "pure gift of divine grace."[367] It is God himself—the source of all divinization—who out of his divine generosity grants man divinization:

> It [the Deity] has bestowed hierarchy as a gift to ensure the salvation and deification [θεώσει] of all rational and intellectual being. And to the supermundane, those who are blessedly above this world, there is given something more immaterial and intellectual. (For Almighty God does not move them from without to the divine things, but he does so intelligibly, from within, and he willingly enlightens them with a ray that is pure and immaterial.)[368]

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[365] *EH* I, 3, 376A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 66): Ταύτῃ δὲ τῇ πάντων ἐπέκεινα θεαρχικωτάτῃ μακαριότητι τῇ τρισσῇ τῇ μονάδι τῇ ὄντως οὔσῃ κατὰ τὸ ἡμῖν μὲν ἀνέφικτον αὐτῇ δὲ ἐπιστητὸν θέλημα μέν ἐστιν ἡ λογικὴ σωτηρία τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς τε καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς οὐσιῶν· ἡ δὲ οὐχ ἑτέρως γενέσθαι δύναται μὴ θεουμένων τῶν σωζομένων· ἡ δὲ θέωσίς ἐστιν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις. His use of theosis and henosis here seem to be perceived as closely if not synonymous. Where "as much as possible like" is qualitative, it seems as if henosis is treated more as a state of being as a human transformed to the likeness of God.

[366] Cf. Louth 1983: 40.

[367] *EH* I, 4, 376B

[368] *EH* I, 4, 376B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 66-67): ἀγαθότητι θείᾳ τὴν ἱεραρχίαν ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ καὶ θεώσει πάντων τῶν λογικῶν τε καὶ νοερῶν οὐσιῶν ἐδωρήσατο, καὶ ταῖς μὲν ὑπερκοσμίοις καὶ μακαρίαις λήξεσιν ἀϋλότερόν τε καὶ νοερώτερον (οὐ γὰρ ἔξωθεν αὐτὰς ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα κινεῖ, νοητῶς δὲ καὶ ἔνδοθεν ἐλλαμπομένων αὐτῶν ἐν αὐγῇ καθαρᾷ καὶ ἀΰλῳ τὴν θειοτάτην βούλησιν).

Dionysius understands deification as a "gift" which the heavenly beings have received uniquely and unitedly, and which has been passed on to man.[369] This pure gift of divine grace is effected by means of the sacraments.[370] It is through the hierarchies that man ascends to divine virtue.[371] As Dionysius says,

> Every hierarchy…has one and the same power throughout the whole hierarchical transaction; and that is the hierarch himself. He is, according to his being and position and rank, initiated into the Divine and deified, and imparts to the subordinates, according to the merit of each, for the sacred deification comes to him directly from God. Subordinates, in turn, follow their superiors, and elevate their inferiors towards things in advance, while these too, as they go forward, are led by others. And so it happens that because of this inspired, hierarchical harmony each one is able to, as far as possible, participate in the truly beautiful, wise and good.[372]

Clearly, Dionysius gives a special cosmic significance to the hierarch. He says that the hierarch who imitates God's generosity, "proclaims to all the good news that God out of his compassion and innate goodness is merciful to the inhabitants of the earth" (ἀνακηρύττει πᾶσι τὰ ὄντως εὐαγγέλια· θεὸν ἵλεω τοῖς ἐπὶ γῆς ἐξ οἰκείας ὄντα καὶ φυσικῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτὸν ὡς ἡμᾶς ἀφικέσθαι)".[373] Then he goes on to say, "because of his love for humanity he came down to us, and like by fire, he has unified with himself all according to their aptitude for deification" (διὰ φιλανθρωπίαν ἀξιώσαντα καὶ τῇ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἑνώσει δίκην πυρὸς ἀφομοιῶσαι τὰ ἑνωθέντα κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν πρὸς θέωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητα)."[374] In the same passage (*EH* II, 2, 1, 393A), Dionysius reminds us of the words from Scripture (Jn 1:12f): "For to all who received him, and to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of

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[369] *EH* I, 4, 376B.
[370] Cf. Thunberg 1995: 429. See: *EH* II, 2, 1, 393A; *EH* VI, 3, 5, 536C.
[371] Thunberg 1995: 429.
[372] *EH* I, 2, 373A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 65): τῆς ἐγγενομένης αὐτῷ θεόθεν ἱερᾶς θεώσεως τούς τε ὑποβεβηκότας ἔπεσθαι μὲν τοῖς κρείττοσιν, ἀνατείνειν δὲ τοὺς ἥττους ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσω, τοὺς δὲ καὶ προϊέναι καὶ ὡς δυνατὸν ἑτέροις ἡγεῖσθαι, καὶ διὰ ταύτης τῆς ἐνθέου καὶ ἱεραρχικῆς ἁρμονίας τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος καλοῦ καὶ σοφοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ μετέχειν ἕκαστον ὅση δύναμις τῆς ἐγγενομένης αὐτῷ θεόθεν ἱερᾶς θεώσεως τούς τε ὑποβεβηκότας ἔπεσθαι μὲν τοῖς κρείττοσιν, ἀνατείνειν δὲ τοὺς ἥττους ἐπὶ τὰ πρόσω, τοὺς δὲ καὶ προϊέναι καὶ ὡς δυνατὸν ἑτέροις ἡγεῖσθαι, καὶ διὰ ταύτης τῆς ἐνθέου καὶ ἱεραρχικῆς ἁρμονίας τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος καλοῦ καὶ σοφοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ μετέχειν ἕκαστον ὅση δύναμις.
[373] *EH* II, 2, 1, 393A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 70).
[374] Ibid.

God" (Ὅσοι γὰρ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, οἳ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκός, ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν)".[375]

We may thus conclude that for Dionysius, deification is affected by the agency of divine grace, the medium of which is the Church and the sacraments. Dionysius puts forth a rhetorical question in *EH* II, 1, 392A: "What, then is the source for the sacred performance of the most revered commandments?" (Τίς οὖν ἐστιν ἀρχὴ τῆς τῶν σεπτοτάτων ἐντολῶν ἱερουργίας).[376] He goes on to answer, "It is this, to prepare our souls into an aptitude and reception of the sacred words and to the divine workings of God, for the first movement of the mind upwards towards the divine, is to acknowledge our most divine and sacred regeneration being from God. (ἡ πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἱερολογιῶν καὶ ἱερουργιῶν ὑποδοχὴν ἐπιτηδειότατα μορφοῦσα τὰς ψυχικὰς ἡμῶν ἕξεις, ἡ πρὸς τὴν τῆς ὑπερουρανίας λήξεως ἀναγωγὴν ἡμῶν ὁδοποίησις; Ἡ τῆς ἱερᾶς καὶ θειοτάτης ἡμῶν ἀναγεννήσεως παράδοσις)."[377]

As we saw in the previous section, purification, illumination, and perfection, is the major scheme for the process of deification in Dionysius' system. This means deification is a continuous process and not only limited to the highest stage of spiritual perfection. Since deification is being worked out already in the *vita practica* there seem to be no fixed chronological order between the different elements in Dionysius' scheme of spiritual perfection. For Dionysius, divinization, or θέωσις, is seen as the continuous act of conversion, as well as the act whereby God creates, sustains, and perfects his created beings. Although we can distinguish "moments" within that act, there are no separate acts as such. For Dionysius the πρόοδος from God is, in a certain sense, already the start of the ἐπιστροφή

[375] Ibid.
[376] *EH* II, 1, 392A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 68).
[377] *EH* I, 2, 392A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 68-69).

back to God.[378] From creation through redemption to final glory—God's act is his cosmos in one pattern of breath.

What then is Dionysius' understanding of the position and function of man? Dionysius emphasizes man's role in participation. It is by participation in God that created beings exist. We have already seen how the work of the hierarchies cooperates with God for the divinization of man. The hierarchies are God's creation at the service of himself and for the mutual service of created beings for one another.[379] Every part of the hierarchy has its role to fulfil in the purifying, illuminating and perfecting work of God. The actual approach to God comes about through the hierarchy.[380] Dionysius explains:

> For it is the love of God which is the first movement of the mind towards the divine. Our being from God is the ineffable divine engendering, the very first step of the sacred performance of the divine commandments. For deification is to have a divine birth.[381] No one could ever know, and certainly not perform any of the divine truths, if he did not have a divine beginning in God.[382]

The divine love is like the light in the hierarchy; it is communicated through all levels and passed on from level to level. Although the different levels in a passive manner are lifted up to union with the divine, they also have a task suited their abilities to bring light further down the hierarchy and pass the light to a lower level.[383] Man's place in the hierarchy, thus, has ethical implications. He is like the rest of creation an object of divine love and has a responsibility to convey love's unifying force to underlying levels of creation. It is the divine love that people love with. Man's love reflects the divine and takes part in this love at a lower level. Love brings ecstasy at all levels, both the descending divine love for creation, and the

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[378] Cf. Riordan 2008: 169.
[379] Ibid.193.
[380] Cf. Roques 1956: 6.
[381] i.e. baptism.
[382] *EH* II, 1, 392B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 69): ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα πρωτίστη κίνησις ἡ ἀγάπησίς ἐστι τοῦ θεοῦ, τῆς δὲ ἱερᾶς ἀγαπήσεως ἡ πρὸς τὴν ἱερουργίαν τῶν θείων ἐντολῶν ἀρχικωτάτη πρόοδος ἡ τοῦ εἶναι θείως ἡμᾶς ἀρρητοτάτη δημιουργία. Εἰ γὰρ τὸ εἶναι θείως ἐστὶν ἡ θεία γέννησις, οὐ μή ποτέ τι γνοίη τῶν θεοπαραδότων οὔτε μὴν ἐνεργήσειεν ὁ μηδὲ τὸ ὑπάρχειν ἐνθέως ἐσχηκώς.
[383] *DN* IV, 15.

ascending love which denotes man's way (ἀναγωγή) to unification (ἕνωσις). Lars Thunberg has described how this is an act of grace where man is given his true identity:

> This is effected through a process, in which the mind is brought to nakedness and a unified understanding, which reflects the divine simplicity. There again by grace man is given identity and simplicity from God. Together with the immortality of the body and the immutability of the soul, this simplicity is the final gift which deification implies. That this is granted to man, however, will be finally revealed and realized only after death – in the life hereafter which is given to man through Christ as an "ever-well-being".[384]

We see from this how man, both as soul and body, has his natural place in the divine order. The cooperative act of man with the angels and within the orders of the church for the process of deification is integral for Dionysius. It is in this dynamic context through God and his cosmos that man is knowing God and loving God. If man should choose to place himself above or outside of this context, he falls away from God.[385]

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the structure and work of Dionysius' hierarchical cosmos. It is well-established that Dionysius invented the term *hierarchy*, proposing a hierarchy of angels and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, which for him reflected the order, understanding, and activity of all of reality. More important than the structure itself, is what the hierarchy does. We saw that the hierarchy is primarily about *mediation* between heaven and earth, God and creatures. The activity and goal of the hierarchy is the communication of divine mediation through interpersonal relations in a sacred "arrangement". The hierarchies are mediating the light of God's revelation. This means they are manifesting God's theophany, in other words his energy and power active in creation – but, also, at the same time, a reflection of the capacity of creation to participate in divinity. Dionysius says that God is "present to the

[384] Thunberg 1995: 432
[385] *DN* 708A; 712AB; 912BD; 972A; 990B.

whole and is everywhere, according to the one and the same and the all itself."[386] This means that cosmos has come from God, and that God is manifest in creation, and, as Eric Perl has observed, that the "the whole of reality" is seen as the "differentiated presence of God," pointing to its accomplishment of communicating God into creation and enabling humanity to receive and participate in God through it.[387] God is immediately present to his creation as its creator, and creatures are called to be deified and to know God. Such knowledge implies a deepening likeness to God. The deified creature becomes, as Louth has observed, so united with God that its activity becomes Gods activity flowing through it.[388] In this way, creatures show forth the divine energy manifested in them, and the hierarchy as a whole becomes a vehicle of God's revelation.[389]

Dionysius speaks of God in terms of 'light' and 'knowledge' permeating the whole created order. At the highest ranks of angelic beings the divine light is derived being which derives further as being makes its way down to the material world, to human beings, and in the rites and ceremonies of the Church, which for Dionysius are the very vehicle of illumination.[390] The hierarchies thus become a theophany of God and by responding to that theophany creatures are assimilated to God and deified."[391] Clearly, the divine light does not just shine, it also depends on those who receive it, the capacity and responsiveness of the receiver, so that it can be passed further down.[392] Dionysius understands the light as being Christ himself. Not only is Christ the origin of the hierarchies, but also he is the light which is the spiritual gift transmitted through the hierarchies, and ultimately the goal of all hierarchies: "Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being

[386] *DN* V, 10, 825B
[387] Perl 2007: 65.
[388] Louth 1989: 39.
[389] *CH* III, 2.
[390] Cf. Louth 1989: 39.
[391] Cf. Louth 1989: 106.
[392] Louth 1989: 40.

underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God."[393] Being like Christ is the goal for Dionysius, because it is Christ who transforms all beings and he assimilates them to his own light.[394] The consequence for us is thus that "formed of light… we shall be perfected and bring about perfection."[395] This means that each being becomes radiant with light and then capable of passing this light on to beings lower down.

To sum up, the very point of Dionysius' hierarchies, as we have seen, is to be a way by which God may express his love for creatures that have lost their awareness of divine origin, and a way by which to call such creatures back to him, each and every one according to their receptiveness to the divine power revealed to them. The creature's response to God is, as Louth has pointed out, not to ascend the hierarchy, but for beings to conform themselves to God, by fulfilling their role in the created order.[396] Louth writes: "the hierarchies *are* the creation, the cosmos, and intelligent creatures, who have free choice, can enhance or mar the transmission of the divine glory through the hierarchy".[397] For Dionysius, this is, as we saw, the very purpose of the hierarchy, "assimilation with God and union with him, as far as possible."[398]

This chapter observed further how Dionysius takes over certain cosmological structures from Neoplatonism and applies them to his vision of the hierarchies, both in terms of the division into three triads and in its mutual causality of relationality. Clearly, Dionysius was intimately familiar with Neoplatonic notions of unity and multiplicity, and very successfully he managed to incorporate these notions within his own Christian vision of the hierarchy. Not only did he take over Neoplatonic ideas of a hierarchy of being, but, as we

[393] *EH* I, 1. καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς, ὁ θεαρχικώτατος νοῦς καὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἡ πάσης ἱεραρχίας ἁγιαστείας τε καὶ θεουργίας.
[394] *EH* I, 1.
[395] *EH*, I, 1.
[396] Louth 1989: 107.
[397] Louth 1989: 108.
[398] *CH* III, 2, 165A.

have seen in this chapter, Dionysius represents a corrective to Neoplatonism in that he rejects any idea that being is passed down the hierarchy. For the Neoplatonists, creation is not reserved to the One, the whole realm of being that flows from the One is perceived as creative. The Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation holds that all things are derived from the first principle, or the One. From the perfect God, by steps of degradation to lesser degrees of the first reality or God, and at every step the emanating beings are less pure, less perfect, less divine. This is, perhaps, the most significant difference between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists: for Dionysius, it is God's light as divine revelation that is manifested and communicated through the ranks, it is not a matter of emanation of being as in Neoplatonism. For Dionysius, creatures are created immediately by God and have no ontological continuity with him.[399]

In this chapter, we saw that, unlike Proclus who offers a polytheistic religious system of autonomous creative gods, Dionysius emphasizes the fundamental difference between God and his creation, and he insists that being is derived from God alone. In the discussion of the Proclean henads, I pointed out that while the Proclean henads are actual conduits of unity and being between the One and the world, the Dionysian God is the single and transcendent, but immediate, source of the unity by which each individual being exists and to which they return. Clearly, for Dionysius, there are no henadic intermediaries in this transmission of unity and being. As a Christian Dionysius accepts only one God. God's manifestations in creation are not seen as autonomous beings, or henads, who have emanated from God, rather they are simply divine creations of the one God. This is because, Dionyisus affirms, "only the transcendent being itself can be the source, the being, and the cause of the being of beings."[400]

[399] *DN* II, 11, 649B-C; V, 4, 817C. Cf. Louth 1989: 85.
[400] *DN* XI, 6, 953C-956A.

Finally, to summarize in full, Dionysius does not advocate a doctrine of emanations of intermediary gods as in Neoplatonism, but rather of the presence of the one transcendent God in the various levels of the hierarchy. Unlike the impersonal One of the Neoplatonists, the personal God of Dionysius, who receives a human face in Jesus Christ, is at the same time transcendent and immanent throughout creation and extends directly and immediately to each and every creature. Moreover, for Dionysius, the hierarchy is an ethical system, where human beings have an important responsibility as recipients of divine light. As mediators they must help divinize and realize the potential of the whole creation. Every human being is a central aspect and key part of this great chain of being, and—in being a chain of interrelations—this great chain of being is, like any chain, only as strong as its weakest link.

# CHAPTER 2: THE INCARNATION AS CONDITION FOR THE CONVERSION

## Introductory remarks

In the present chapter I shall survey Dionysius' Christology, and, more specifically, his view of the Incarnation as the condition for man's transformation and deification. Dionysius has been accused of not taking into full account the Incarnation and its implication for man's salvation and relationship to God. Yet the *CA* mentions Christ fifty-six times, even calling upon him in prayer. This is difficult to square with modern scholars claiming that Dionysius gives insufficient treatment of Christ in his work. This was never an issue for early readers of the *Corpus*. During the Christological controversy of the early sixth century, both Monophysites and Chalcedonians convey with confidence that Dionysius supported their own Christological views, and the *CA* was never accused of lacking a sufficient Christology. It can be admitted that statistics do not of themselves solve the problem of Dionysius' affiliation. The bare figures concerning the references to Jesus Christ in *CA* cannot reveal whether Dionysius was "primarily" a Christian thinker or not. Yet, it can be noted that much of the apologetic literature from the second century similarly refrains from referring to Christ. In Gregory of Nyssa and other Fathers before Maximus the Confessor, Christian contemplation tended to be more God-centred than Christ-centred.[401] Not even the prototype of Christian apology, the Areopagus-speech by Paul—a speech to which the scriptural Dionysius the Areopagite was listening—mentions Christ by name. Nevertheless, it was indeed the resurrection of Christ that Paul preached in Athens.

[401] See, for example, Origen, *On Prayer*, in Origen, and Jay 1954.

As regards Dionysius' doctrine, we should keep in mind that the content of the CA does not seem to have frightened the Orthodox fathers. In the first half of the sixth century commentaries were written by both John and George Scythopolis, by Maximus the Confessor in the seventh, and by Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople in the eight.[402] Not only did they aspire to defend the genuineness of the corpus but also its orthodoxy. The first readers and defenders of the texts, however, seem to belong to a network of Syrian Monophysites connected to the circles around Severus of Antioch. It is in this milieu that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* first emerges, and also its earliest documented use. It is therefore no wonder that so many theories about the origin of the texts refer to these circles.[403] In Dionysius scholarship the attention given to the Christology of Dionysius has overall traditionally dwelt on questions concerning his position between the Monophysites and Chalcedonians. Even so, the corpus itself does not clearly support either the Monophysite or the Orthodox Christological view. One would assume that the author would have taken a clear position on the opinions of his own theological circles. Yet, Dionysius seems to avoid burning theological disputes of the time. There may be several explanations for this: the corpus, or parts of it, could have been written before a clear division between the parties had taken place in the mid fifth century. The differentiation between the Monophysite and Orthodox sides was a long process where the theologians tried to set forth their questions and clarify definitions. The emperor tried to reconcile the factions of the controversy in a council in 482 and harmonize the views, but it took time for things to settle, and the Monophysites separated themselves from the Orthodox into a church of their own only after the mid sixth century. It is also not unlikely that Dionysius deliberately equivocates between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian tendencies, since for him, the goal of his doctrine of Christ was not to

[402] Cf. Sheldon-Williams in Armstrong (ed.) 1967: 474.
[403] Cf. Frotingham 1886; Stiglmayr 1928; Hausherr 1935; Louth 1989; Arthur 2008; Golitzin 1994; Perczel 2008 and Fiori 2010.

repudiate one faction or another, but to recentre him at the heart of all things. This would mean to recall him as the being we are all called to imitate, as it is in the Mimesis of the enfleshed Christ that mankind becomes deified and comes to be as one with the divinity that was incarnate in him. Thus, the present chapter will not focus specifically on dealing with issues concerning Monophysite and Chalcedonian Christology. The intention is rather to show how Christ's person and work bears on Dionysius' system, that is, how central Jesus' *theandric* activity is to the process of *theosis.*[404] In other words, how the actions of the incarnate Christ inform discussion on the nature of the human ascent to God, and the extent to which the incarnation instituted or altered the human capacity for divinization.

Whereas it has been said in previous scholarship that Christ does not have a significant role in *CA*, it will be argued here that the incarnation of Christ is the cornerstone of the deification theme in Dionysius' theology.[405] The present chapter observes how Dionysius' Christology, apart from its sacramental significance, receives predominantly moral and gnoseological application. In this context it evaluates the role of personal virtuous qualities as conditions for deification, since humankind according to Dionysius must cooperate in its own divinization and since "everybody will have a sacred reward proportionate to his merits" (*EH* VII, 3).

**Christ in the Corpus Areopagiticum**

One suspects that much of the modern criticism of the *CA* lacking Christology stems from Luther's famous dismissal, "Dionysius Platonises more than he Christianises."[406] The essence

[404] This is a similar question to the one put forward by Bernard McGinn (2004: 180).
[405] Following earlier fathers, e.g., Origen, Athanasius, and Gregor of Nyssa, it feels that the incarnation is the moment *theosis* as a process is enabled. See esp. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54: "God became man so that man might become God."
[406] *Babylonian Captivity* 1520, WA 6, 562 in Luther and (eds.) Herrmann and Robinson 2016.

of Luther's remark is that Dionysius' Platonism distorts his Christianity, and that Dionysius therefore is really a Platonist, and only nominally a Christian. For Luther, not only is Jesus Christ absent from Dionysius' theology, but it is also declaimed that a Christian will be deprived of his Saviour merely by reading Dionysius.[407] A number of scholars have later repeated Luther's accusation, stating that whatever Christology the *CA* holds, it is largely "cosmetic", masking his true Platonic commitments.[408] Vanneste thinks of Dionysius' mystical writings as unrelated to any genuine Christian "experience", being an echo of Neoplatonic mystical techniques with a rather thin Christian surface.[409] Bernard Brons repeats these thoughts by stating the Neoplatonic character of *CA* in general and dismissively suggests Dionysius is modifying a current worldview.[410] In my opinion, these accusations are unconvincing. We have to remember that by "Christocentric" Lutherans understand "centered on justification by the cross". Before Schweitzer they gave little thought to the Pauline doctrine of the corporate life of Christians within the body of the risen Christ. In this chapter I will demonstrate that Dionysius has a rather practical idea of Christianity, where participation in ritual leads to divinization as equally as *theoria*—or perhaps more forcefully. This is an important point that I intend to return to in chapter 4, where I survey the importance of the body for man's salvation and how sacraments are the modus operandi in the process of the deification of man. Dionysius, himself, says that the divine works (*theourgia*) consummate or complete the divine words (*theologia*). His background for such a remark seems to be his envisioning of theurgic or liturgical celebration and the experience of the divine works as more perfecting than scriptural contemplation or theorizing.

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[407] Ibid.

[408] This critic appears perhaps in its sharpest form in Anders Nygren 1953: 576–593. See also Vanneste 1959 and Brons 1976; Sheldon-Williams 1964: 293–302; Saffrey 1966 and 1982. For the relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity in Dionysius, see for instance the discussion between Alexander Golitzin and Kenneth Paul Wesche. Wesche 1989: 53–73.

[409] Vanneste 1959.

[410] Brons 1976: 329. Die Verkündigung von Gericht und Gnade in Christus in die geringfügig modifizierende Übernahme einer gerade gängigen Weltanschauung umschlagen können.

In *CA* Christ is cited in three of the main treatises—though not in *MT*, which seems to be the main basis for Luther's criticism—and is also mentioned explicitly in many of the letters of Dionysius.[411] In *DN* Dionysius discusses initially which names belong to the entire Godhead and which ones to the distinct persons of the Trinity. Consequently, much is said about the Son and the names He is given in the Scriptures, though the names given to the entire Trinity—names such as Good, Love, Life—play the main part in the tract. These terms, which are also strongly reminiscent of Neoplatonic language, may make Dionysius appear less Christocentric than is the case. His use of love, however, to characterize God's relation to the world is surely more Christian than Platonic. Although explicit references to Christ are rather few, one should not jump to conclusions that Christ has no position, or only a modest one, in Dionysius' theological system. What is said about Christ should be more important than how often something is said about Christ. It is also of considerable interest that wherever Dionysius refers to Christ by name, he does so remarkably often by using the name "Jesus". Even the rather intimate expression "my Jesus" is once used (*CH* II, 5). A tentative explanation of such intimate language is to postulate this as a reference to Dionysius's personal experience of Union with Christ. However, there is no explicit reference to such an experience in *CA*. Yet, one should not forget that implicit references are not uncommon in patristic literature.

References to Christ in *CA*, are frequently made by using "*logos*" ("the Word"), with various attributes ascribed therein. Thus, Christ is "the divine Word (θεῖος λόγος)" (*DN* II, 1), "the transcendent Word (ὁ ὑπερούσιος λόγος)" (*DN* II, 6), "the Word of God (θεοῦ λόγος)" (*EH* III, 3). Terminologically the Christology of *CA* thus represents no consistent logos-Christology. In addition to "*logos*" a number of other names are applied to Christ, of which "Light" is one of the most predominant ones. According to *CH* I, 2 Christ is the light of the

[411] Only in *Ep* I and *Ep* II Christ is not mentioned.

Father (*πατερικὸν φῶς*), and is of the Father himself, the original light (*ἀρχίφωτος πατήρ*). Light as a metaphor should be seen here as being close to the idea of revelation. The lights of Jesus (used plurally) are *θεουργικά*, "theurgical lights" (*CH* VII, 2), which implies that the light of Christ is more than just passively divine; it is a transforming power.

> Jesus who is the utterly divine and transcendent mind, the source and the essence, underlying every hierarchy, sanctification and all the workings of God, he who is the most supreme divine power—illuminates the beings who are above us, in a manner more clear, and at the same time more intellectual, and assimilates them to his own light, as far as possible. And by our love for the beauty which elevates us upwards and which is elevated to him; it pulls together all our many diversities. He perfects us into a uniform and divine life, disposition and activity, and he bestows on us the power of the divine priesthood. Thus, by approaching the holy activity of the priestly office, we ourselves become closer to the beings above us. By imitating as much as we can their abiding and unchangeable holy steadfastness; we thereby come to look upwards to the blessed and supremely divine ray of Jesus himself. Having reverently beheld whatever we are permitted to see, enlightened by the knowledge of the visions, we shall be able to become consecrated and consecrators of the divine mysteries. Shaped by light, and initiates in God's work, we shall be perfected and bring about perfection.[412]

Since Christ is understood as "the light", it is not only "through" him, but it is Christ himself who is communicated to us down through the cosmic hierarchy. Dionysius says that Jesus is the source of hierarchies, the gift given through the hierarchy and the hierarchy's ultimate goal.[413] By turning towards the source of light "we thereby come to look up to the blessed and ultimately divine ray of Jesus himself"[414] and through Jesus our nature undergoes a complete transformation. The references to Christ as "light", which can be seen as a reminiscent of John 8,12; John 9,5; 1 John 1,5; 2 Cor 4,6; Eph 5,8; Col 1,12, will be discussed further in chapter four, where the light symbolism in *CA* will be treated. When

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[412] *EH* I, 1, 372A–B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 63-64): καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς, ὁ θεαρχικώτατος νοῦς καὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἡ πάσης ἱεραρχίας ἁγιαστείας τε καὶ θεουργίας ἀρχὴ καὶ οὐσία καὶ θεαρχικωτάτη δύναμις, ταῖς τε μακαρίαις καὶ ἡμῶν κρείττοσιν οὐσίαις ἐμφανέστερον ἅμα καὶ νοερώτερον ἐλλάμπει καὶ πρὸς τὸ οἰκεῖον αὐτὰς ἀφομοιοῖ κατὰ δύναμιν φῶς ἡμῶν τε τῷ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀνατεινομένῳ καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀνατείνοντι τῶν καλῶν ἔρωτι συμπτύσσει τὰς πολλὰς ἑτερότητας καὶ εἰς ἑνοειδῆ καὶ θείαν ἀποτελειώσας ζωὴν ἕξιν τε καὶ ἐνέργειαν ἱεροπρεπῆ δωρεῖται τῆς θείας ἱερωσύνης τὴν δύναμιν, ἐξ ἧς ἐπὶ τὴν ἁγίαν ἐρχόμενοι τῆς ἱερατείαςἐνέργειαν ἐγγύτεροι μὲν αὐτοὶ γινόμεθα τῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς οὐσιῶν τῇ κατὰ δύναμιν ἀφομοιώσει τοῦ μονίμου τε καὶ ἀνεξαλλάκτου τῆς αὐτῶν ἱερᾶς ἱδρύσεως καὶ ταύτῃ πρὸς τὴν μακαρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ θεαρχικὴν αὐγὴν ἀναβλέψαντες ὅσα τε ἰδεῖν ἐφικτὸν ἐποπτεύσαντες ἱερῶς καὶ τῆς τῶν θεαμάτων γνώσεως ἐλλαμφθέντες τὴν μυστικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἀφιερώμενοι καὶ ἀφιερωταὶ φωτοειδεῖς καὶ θεουργικοὶ τετελεσμένοι καὶ τελεσιουργοὶ γενέσθαι δυνησόμεθα.
[413] *EH* I, 1.
[414] *EH* I, 1.

speaking of Christ Dionysius often does so by referring to the Trinity, which is also the object of adoration and praise in the opening hymn of *MT*. In *CA* the word trinity, *Τρίας*, is mentioned in twelve places, whereas the term for God, *θεαρχία* or *θεότης*, is four times as frequently used. θεός is used 16 times as often.[415] The oneness of the Godhead and the distinction between the three persons are both frequently treated by Dionysius. He begins his discussion from the One supreme God and comes to the Trinity later. The term "hypostasis" is often used of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Cf. *DN* I, 4), dividing—as one would expect—the Father, Son, and Spirit on account of their "hypostasis".

**Christ in the Trinity: the One and the Three**

A full theological exposition of the Trinity is not to be found in *CA*.[416] Dionysius is, however, quite explicit about the Trinitarian character of the Thearchy (*θεαρχία*), which he acknowledges as: the Godhead; the principle and end of all; the source; the cause of all being;[417] and as both one and triune. He writes: "They also describe it as a Trinity, for with a transcendent fecundity it is manifested as three persons (τριάδα δὲ διὰ τὴν τρισυπόστατον τῆς ὑπερουσίου γονιμότητος ἔκφανσιν)."[418] There is thus a specific plurality in God's mode of being, and the prime structuring of this plurality in Dionysius is the Trinity.[419] In *DN* XIII Dionysius addresses the issue of the unity and differentiations within the Trinity:

> Hence when we speak of the transcendent unity of God, which surpasses all things, as an Unity and Trinity, these are not names that can be known by us or any other creature, for the transcendent being is above every being. No unity or trinity or number or oneness, no fecundity or any other existing thing, or thing that can be known to any existing thing, is able to utter the hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which surpasses all things.[420]

[415] Ritter 1991: 81f.
[416] For a defence of Trinitarian theology in Dionysius see Jones 2000: 645–57.
[417] *DN* II, 1, 636C.
[418] *DN* I, 4, 592A (ed. Suchla 1990: 113).
[419] Cf. Golitzin 1994: 68.
[420] *DN* XIII, 3, 980D–981A (ed. Suchla 1990: 229): ἀλλὰ ἵνα καὶ τὸ ὑπερηνωμένον αὐτῆς καὶ τὸ θεογόνον ἀληθῶς ὑμνήσωμεν, τῇ τριαδικῇ καὶ ἑνιαίᾳ θεωνυμίᾳ τὴν ὑπερώνυμον ὀνομάζομεν, τοῖς οὖσι τὴν ὑπερούσιον. Οὐδεμία δὲ μονὰς ἢ τριάς, οὐδὲ ἀριθμὸς οὐδὲ ἑνότης ἢ γονιμότης οὐδὲ ἄλλο τι τῶν ὄντων ἤ τινι τῶν ὄντων

The Godhead which transcends every being is "manifested (ἔκφανσις)" in a "tri-hypostatic (τρισυπόστατος)" way, Dionysius explains.[421] The Trinity is understood therefore as a manifestation of the highest and most transcendent form of deity. In a passage in *CH* VII Dionysius praises the highest orders of beings for conveying the message of "this thearchy which is a monad and a tri-hypostatic unity "τῆς θεαρχικῆς ὡς …ἐστι καὶ ἑνὰς τρισυπόστατος" that reaches out to all, and that "in an unworldly way draws everything back to itself in an eternal embrace (καὶ αἰτία καὶ πάντων ὑπερουσίως ἀσχέτῳ συνοχῇ περιδεδραγμένη)."[422] In *DN* God is expressed as a sum of distinctions, which implies a series of processions, which also involve the Trinity: "Then there are the names expressing distinctions, the transcendent name and proper attribute of the Father, of the Son, of the Spirit. Here the titles cannot be interchanged, nor are they held in common (Τὰ δὲ διακεκριμένα τὸ πατρὸς ὑπερούσιον ὄνομα καὶ χρῆμα καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ πνεύματος οὐδεμιᾶς ἐν τούτοις ἀντιστροφῆς ἢ ὅλως κοινότητος ἐπεισαγομένης)."[423]

Dionysius uses the language of flowers and light to signify how two of the members of the Trinity (the Son and Spirit) relate to the Father.[424] In *DN* 645B, he says that "the Father is the originating source of the Godhead and the Son and the Spirit are, so to speak, divine offshoots, the flowering and transcendent lights of the divinity (ὅτι μέν ἐστι πηγαία θεότης ὁ πατήρ, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς θεογόνου θεότητος, εἰ οὕτω χρὴ φάναι, βλαστοὶ θεόφυτοι καὶ οἷον ἄνθη καὶ ὑπερούσια φῶτα".[425] The Father is the source and the Son and Spirit flow out from him. And in *DN* II, 4, 641AB, when discussing the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity, Dionysius writes that:

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συνεγνωσμένων ἐξάγει τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα καὶ λόγον καὶ νοῦν κρυφιότητα τῆς ὑπὲρ πάντα ὑπερουσίως ὑπερούσης ὑπερθεότητος.

[421] *DN* I, 4.

[422] *CH* VII, 4, 212C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 32).

[423] *DN* II, 3, 640C (ed. Suchla 1990: 125).

[424] *DN* II, 7, 645B.

[425] *DN* II, 7, 645B (ed. Suchla 1990: 132).

For example, with regard to the divine unity, or the super-essence, that the indivisible trinity holds within a kindred and common unity without distinctions its subsistence beyond being, its super-divine godhead, its super-good goodness, the supreme identity, beyond all things of its transcendently individual nature, its oneness beyond unity, its ineffability, its multiplicity of names, its unknowability and perfect intelligibility, the affirmation and denial of all things, that which is beyond every affirmation and negation, and finally, the abiding and steadfastness, as it were, of the divine persons in an utterly undifferentiated and transcendent unity.[426]

Thus, the unity of the Godhead appears to transcend all distinctions; it even supersedes any variation within the Trinity, as all the three hypostases are of one essence, and equally mixed and united. Dionysius does not seem to use the term ὁμοούσιος once in the entire corpus. Language of *likeness* (ὁμοιότης), on the other hand, is relatively common, but *unity* seems to be his preferred term. He uses 1 Cor 8:5–6 to show how each hypostasis is a monad, with its unity holding a higher place than its differentiation.[427]

For even if there are so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as there are many "gods" and many "lords," but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.[428]

Union has a predominant place in Dionysius' doctrine of "union in distinction". He describes God as consisting of a series of divine unities as well as differentiations, which are the processions or revelations of God (*DN* 641A). Every name of God, when applied to any of the persons in the Trinity, must be taken, without distinctions, as belonging to the entire

[426] *DN* II, 4, 641AB (ed. Suchla 1990: 126-127): Οἷον ἐπὶ τῆς ἑνώσεως τῆς θείας ἤτοι τῆς ὑπερουσιότητος ἡνωμένον μέν ἐστι τῇ ἑναρχικῇ τριάδι καὶ κοινὸν ἡ ὑπερούσιος ὕπαρξις, ἡ ὑπέρθεος θεότης, ἡ ὑπεράγαθος ἀγαθότης, ἡ πάντων ἐπέκεινα τῆς ἐπέκεινα πάντων ὅλης ἰδιότητος ταὐτότης, ἡ ὑπὲρ ἑναρχίαν ἑνότης, τὸ ἄφθεγκτον, τὸ πολύφωνον, ἡ ἀγνωσία, τὸ παννόητον, ἡ πάντων θέσις, ἡ πάντων ἀφαίρεσις, τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν καὶ θέσιν καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν, ἡ ἐν ἀλλήλαις, εἰ οὕτω χρὴ φάναι, τῶν ἑναρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων μονὴ καὶ ἵδρυσις ὁλικῶς ὑπερηνωμένη καὶ οὐδενὶ μέρει συγκεχυμένη.
[427] Lilla 1997: 125.
[428] *DN* II, 11, 649D–652A (ed. Suchla 1990: 136-137): Καὶ γὰρ εἴπερ εἰσὶ λεγόμενοι θεοὶ εἴτε ἐν οὐρανῷ εἴτε ἐπὶ γῆς, ὥσπερ» οὖν «εἰσὶ θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί, ἀλλ' ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατήρ, ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν.

Godhead (cf. *DN* II, 11, 652A). Dionysius considers each name of union and distinction in God as an aspect of God's overall unity, which must be expressed in multiplicity.[429]

As stated above, Dionysius does not use the term *homoousion.*[430] The trinity is, however, understood as God's differentiation, as God is called a *triadic henad,*[431] *henadic triad,*[432] and a *trihypostatic henad*.[433] God as Trinity expresses the immanent relationship of the three persons in God without blurring or erasing the distinctions between the three. The nature of God as unity depends upon the distinction of these three persons since within the Godhead "there is distinction in unity and there is unity in distinction."[434] The coincidence of unity and distinction within God is the source of Dionysius' doctrine of the Trinity, however it is also the source of his understanding of God's activity in the world. The Trinity expresses, for Dionysius, at once God's transcendent self-relation and the identity of that relation with God's immanent activity in creation.

Although Dionysius gives only a very brief account of the Trinity, there are several passages in the corpus where the trinity is present: In *DN* 2, 5, 641D Dionysius talks about Trinitarian processions; in *DN* II, 4, 641 AC and II,7, 645B he provides Trinitarian analogies; in *CH* I, A212CD he points out that human knowledge about the Trinity is mediated by angels; in *DN* IV, 3, 10, 484A he indicates the contribution of the whole Trinity in the incarnation of Christ and in the plan of salvation; in *MT* III, 1032D–1033A he even indicates that, in more detail, he discussed the Trinity in his *Theological Representations*.[435]

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[429] *DN* II, 11, 652A.
[430] But see other terms like *homoagathos* and *homotheos.*
[431] *DN* I, 5, 593B.
[432] *DN* II, 4, 641A.
[433] *CH* VII, 4, 212C.
[434] *DN* II, 4, 641B.
[435] Dionysius refers to seven works that have been lost. Among these is the *Theological Representations.* Within Dionysius scholarship there are differing views on whether these seven works have ever existed. Due to the fact that there are neither references nor quotes from any other authors than Dionysius himself to these works, and since it is hard to imagine that such a large part of the Areopagitica have disappeared so quickly from history, a number of scholars assume that it is fictional writings (Ritter 1994: 87).

**Christ as the source of all hierarchy**

As we saw in chapter one, hierarchies have a rather central role in Dionysius' system. Two of his extant four treatises are devoted to this theme, forming more than half of the text of *CA*. Thus, the role that Christ plays in this context should be regarded as rather crucial to the question of Christ in the whole of Dionysius' theology. To appreciate the Christological dimensions in the *CA*, we must recall his definition of hierarchy. As we saw in chapter one, a hierarchy is "a sacred order, an understanding, and an energy which is being approximated as closely as possible to the divine."[436] Thus the hierarchy is God's providential ordering of the world and Christ is related to this hierarchy in specific ways. In particular, as Jesus the Word he is identified as the Source of all hierarchies both in *CH* and *EH*.[437] He is "the source and the perfection of every hierarchy (τὴν πασῶν ἱεραρχιῶν ἀρχήν τε καὶ τελείωσιν)":[438]

> Because of his goodness and his love for humanity the simple, hidden oneness of Jesus, the most divine Word, has taken the route of incarnation for us and, without undergoing any change, has become a reality that is composite and visible. He has beneficently accomplished for us a unifying communion with himself. He has united our humility with his own supreme divinity. But we in our turn have to cling to him like the members of one body and we do so by the conformity that comes with a divine life of sinlessness... If our longing is for communion with him, then we must give our full attention to his divine life in the flesh.[439]

Not only is he the origin of all hierarchies, but also he is the gift given by the hierarchies and is the ultimate goal of those hierarchies: "Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God…(καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς, ὁ θεαρχικώτατος νοῦς καὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἡ πάσης ἱεραρχίας ἁγιαστείας τε καὶ θεουργίας)."[440] Dionysius here refers to Christ by using Paul's words about God who "works all things in all" (1 Cor. 12: 6). Consequently, the hierarchy is

[436] *CH* III, 1, 164D.
[437] *EH* I, 2, 372A; 373C.
[438] *EH* II, 2, 373B.
[439] *EH* III, 3, 12 (444AB). Cf. *DN* I, 4 (592AB); II, 10; *EH* 3, 3, 3 (429A); III, 3, 13 (444C); IV, 3, 10 (484A); *MT* III (1033A); *Ep*. 3–4. From Philo, *De Cherubim* onwards, goodness tends to emanate benevolence to the world in Christian and Jewish parlance. In Platonism it signifies (a) superabundance and (b) final causality in relation to both physical motion and moral aspiration.
[440] *EH* I, 1, 372 A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 63).

instrumental in the work of Christ, and not a substitute for Christ. A hierarchy is, according to Dionysius, a sacred order (*CH* III, 1). The spiritual gift transmitted through this order is called "light", a light that is understood as being Christ himself. The "light" is often referred to as "knowledge". A certain kind of activity belongs to each member of the hierarchy. These faculties make it possible for the hierarchies to serve those lower down the hierarchical scale:

> The purpose of the hierarchy is thus to achieve the greatest possible assimilation and unity with God. It has him as the leader of all sacred insight and activity, and constantly looks towards God's most divine beauty and imitates this as far as possible. By perfecting its own members as divine images of God, pure and spotless mirrors, able to receive the original light that comes from God himself. They are completely filled with the radiance that is given to them, and in obedience to the Divine, they generously pass on this light to beings who are lower in the hierarchy.[441]

The Seraphim (for example), the highest order in the hierarchy, are allowed to enter into *κοινωνία* with Christ and participation (*μετουσία*) in His light.[442] Whilst the human being (in his/her place of the hierarchy) must turn his/her mind upwards to the origin of the light: "We come to look up to the blessed and ultimately divine ray of Jesus himself (καὶ ταύτῃ πρὸς τὴν μακαρίαν Ἰησοῦ καὶ θεαρχικὴν αὐγὴν ἀναβλέψαντες)."[443] In the human being the process is more arduous and hard won, and must ultimately ascend through the hierarchy to the summit. As the Sun turns the plant towards itself, God turns the soul towards Him by giving light. And too, as the light passes from the Sun through many states before reaching the plant, so too does the light of God (as Christ) pass through hierarchy to reach man. The goal of the hierarchical system is Christ himself. Being like Christ is explicitly mentioned as an eschatological goal in *CA*.[444] Christ transforms all beings and assimilates them to his own

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[441] *CH* III, 2, 165A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 17-18): Σκοπὸς οὖν ἱεραρχίας ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις αὐτὸν ἔχουσα πάσης ἱερᾶς ἐπιστήμης τε καὶ ἐνεργείας καθηγεμόνα καὶ πρὸς τὴν αὐτοῦ θειοτάτην εὐπρέπειαν ἀκλινῶς μὲν ὁρῶν ὡς δυνατὸν δὲ ἀποτυπούμενος καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ θιασώτας ἀγάλματα θεῖα τελῶν ἔσοπτρα διειδέστατα καὶ ἀκηλίδωτα, δεκτικὰ τῆς ἀρχιφώτου καὶ θεαρχικῆς ἀκτῖνος καὶ τῆς μὲν ἐνδιδομένης αἴγλης ἱερῶς ἀποπληρούμενα, ταύτην δὲ αὖθις ἀφθόνως εἰς τὰ ἑξῆς ἀναλάμποντα κατὰ τοὺς θεαρχικοὺς θεσμούς.
[442] *CH* VII, 2.
[443] *EH* I, 1, 372B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 64).
[444] *DN* I, 4.

light.[445] The consequence for us is thus that "formed of light… we shall be perfected and bring about perfection."[446] In *EH* II, 1 Christ is said to bring fire to rational beings: "Like a fire, he has made one with himself those capable of being divinized (καὶ τῇ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἑνώσει δίκην πυρὸς ἀφομοιῶσαι τὰ ἑνω- θέντα κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν πρὸς θέωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητα.)."[447] Having stated this, Dionysius quotes John 1. 12: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (Ὅσοι γὰρ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι,)." Accepting the fire of Christ thus brings about *ἕνωσις* —the Neoplatonic understanding of union with what is fundamental in reality—and *θέωσις*—Dionysius' Christ-centred vision of what that fundamental reality is—both terms are used explicitly in this passage.

Ultimately, for Dionysius, Jesus Christ is the source (ἀρχὴ) and being (*οὐσία*) underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God (θεουργία), "he is the perfecting power which makes for the workings of all holiness in us."[448] Jesus Christ is the arranger (*δημιουργός*) in the hierarchic rites (*ἱεραρχικὸς τελουμένος*), [449] and as the scriptures, clerical orders, and sacraments extend from his divinized humanity, he is the arranger (*δημιουργός*) of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[450] As the Incarnation Jesus is "our first and divine consecrator" and "our most divine altar", and, finally, the source of the theurgic, or as Dionysius puts it, the "hieratic" power of the ecclesiastical initiators.[451] In Jesus is the perfection of the whole creation. Dionysius is clear in *DN* that within Jesus both the human and the divine are preserved, something which gives good evidence against the Monophysitism of the time:

[445] *EH* I, 1.
[446] *EH* I, 1.
[447] *EH* II, 1, 392A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 68-69).
[448] *EH* I, 1, 372A, 373B, 484D–485A.
[449] *EH* I, 5-6, 401C–404A.
[450] *EH* III, 1, 428B.
[451] *EH* V, 3, 512C; *Ep*. VIII, 1096A; *EH* 484D–485A; *EH* 372B; *EH* 513C.

And out of his loving kindness, he, the transcendent God, has come down to our level of nature, and become man (we must speak with reverence of such things beyond human thought and language). Even in all this he retained his supernatural and transcendent existence. Not only did he share in our humanity, without undergoing any change or confusion – the fullness of his godhead suffered no loss as it remained unaffected by the ineffable emptying of self – but also, while being above nature, he kept his manhood, and thereby he exalted the manhood far above us.[452]

Dionysius thus emphasizes that "the transcendent God" has become man. Transcendence is a frequently mentioned attribute to Christ. By and in his transcendence, Christ can dwell among men (out of love he has come to be at man's level of nature and has become a being). This brings us to the next aspect of Dionysius' teaching of Christ: The Incarnation.

## The Incarnation

The term *φιλανθρωπία*[453] is a term that Dionysius often uses with reference to the incarnation. He mentions the word in connection to the goodness of God manifested in incarnation: "Out of his very great love for humanity [*φιλανθρωπία*], he became quite truly a human, both superhuman and among humans; and, though himself beyond being, he took upon himself the being of humans."[454] *φιλανθρωπία* is here understood as God's procession through, by and in the Incarnation.

God's outpouring of himself is an expression for Christ's great love for humans, both in creating them and in redeeming them.[455] The incarnation of Christ is mentioned and discussed numerous times in the *CA*, and Christ's love for us is cited repeatedly as the motive

[452] *DN* II, 10, 648D–649A (ed. Suchla 1990: 134-135): Ὅθεν ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἕως φύσεως ὑπὲρ φιλανθρωπίας ἐλήλυθε καὶ ἀληθῶς οὐσιώθη καὶ ἀνὴρ ὁ ὑπέρθεος ἐχρημάτισεν, ἵλεω δὲ εἴη πρὸς ἡμῶν τὰ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ λόγον ὑμνούμενα, κἀν τούτοις ἔχει τὸ ὑπερφυὲς καὶ ὑπερούσιον, οὐ μόνον ᾗ ἀναλλοιώτως ἡμῖν καὶ ἀσυγχύτως κεκοινώνηκε μηδὲν πεπονθὼς εἰς τὸ ὑπερπλῆρες αὐτοῦ πρὸς τῆς ἀφθέγκτου κενώσεως, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ τὸ πάντων καινῶν καινότατον ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς ἡμῶν ὑπερ- φυὴς ἦν ἐν τοῖς κατ' οὐσίαν ὑπερούσιος πάντα τὰ ἡμῶν ἐξ ἡμῶν ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς ὑπερέχων.

[453] The term *philanthropia* is also used by Clement at several places: "love towards men" (*Strom* 2, 9, p. 135, 3ff; M8, 977A); "of divine love towards humanity" (prot.10, p. 67, 20; M. 8. 204 B), "divine love of Logos" (paed. 1, 6, p. 120, 21; M.8. 309C) in Origen "divine love of Christ" (comm. In Mt. 10.1, p. I.5; M.13. 836A) and in Gregory of Nyssa (ep. Can, M. 45, 225D); See Lampe 1969: 1475f. See also Vasilakis 2020: 177-178. n 127.

[454] *Ep*. IV, 1072B.

[455] Possibly an allusion to Philippians 2:6.

for the Incarnation: "the mystery of Jesus' love for humanity" (*CH* 181B): "for Jesus in his endless love for us" (*EH* 512C); "out of his very great love for humanity" (*Ep*. IV, 1072AB); "the love of Christ for humanity" (*Ep*. III, 1069B); "out of love he came down" (*DN* 648D); "yet the goodness of the Deity has endless love for humanity… it took upon itself in a most authentic way all the characteristics of our nature" (*EH* 441A). Through his philanthropic *kenosis* he descended to become true man. The Incarnation is characterized as an act of mercy: "The hierarch…proclaims the good news to all that God out of his own natural goodness is merciful to the inhabitants of earth, that because of his love for humanity he has designed to come down to us (Ὁ μὲν ἱεράρχης … ἀνακηρύττει πᾶσι τὰ ὄντως εὐαγγέλια· θεὸν ἵλεω τοῖς ἐπὶ γῆς ἐξ οἰκείας ὄντα καὶ φυσικῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτὸν ὡς ἡμᾶς ἀφικέσθαι διὰ φιλανθρωπίαν ἀξιώσαντα)."[456]

In *DN* I Dionysius emphasizes Scripture's celebration of God as the Incarnate Christ:

> Especially it is called loving toward humanity because, in one of its hypostases, it had a true share in our human lot, calling up toward itself and uplifting the lowliness of humanity, out of which in an ineffable manner, the simplicity of Jesus took on a complex state, and the eternal took on a temporal existence, and he, who totally transcends every rank of the natural world, was born in our human nature with the unchanging and unconfused foundation of his ultimate properties.[457]

God, in one of His hypostases, or Persons, took on humanity because of His love of humanity, and did so to draw humanity back to Himself.

Unlike the angels, human beings participate in both the incorporeal (intellectual) as well as the corporeal (sense-perceptible) realm. Thus, when Christ became human and raised "all of the things which belong to us out of us and above us" he raised all Being by doing so,

[456] *EH* II, 2, 1, 393A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 70).
[457] *DN* I, 4, 589D–592B (ed. Suchla 1990: 112-113): τὴν ἱερὰν τῶν θεολόγων ὑμνολογίαν εὑρήσεις πρὸς τὰς ἀγαθουργοὺς τῆς θεαρχίας προόδους ἐκφαντορικῶς) [...] φιλάνθρωπον δὲ διαφερόντως, ὅτι τοῖς καθ' ἡμᾶς πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ὁλικῶς ἐν μιᾷ τῶν αὐτῆς ὑποστάσεων ἐκοινώνησεν ἀνακαλουμένη πρὸς ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἀνατιθεῖσα τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἐσχατιάν, ἐξ ἧς ἀῤῥήτως ὁ ἁπλοῦς Ἰησοῦς συνετέθη καὶ παράτασιν εἴληφε χρονικὴν ὁ ἀΐδιος καὶ εἴσω τῆς καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐγεγόνει φύσεως ὁ πάσης τῆς κατὰ πᾶσαν φύσιν τάξεως ὑπερουσίως ἐκβεβηκὼς μετὰ τῆς ἀμεταβόλου καὶ ἀσυγχύτου τῶν οἰκείων ἱδρύσεως.

the incorporeal and the corporeal. Through the mediation of becoming human Being God effects the salvation of all His creation.

The Incarnation is therefore often emphasized by contrasting it with Christ's original transcendence:

> "Suddenly" means that which, contrary to hope, is brought out of what was invisible into the manifest. And I think Scripture uses this term for the philanthropy of Christ, to hint that the transcendent has proceeded out of its own hiddenness and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being. But even after this revelation he is hidden, or, to put it in a more divine way, is hidden even within the revelation. For the mystery of Jesus remains hidden, and can be brought forth neither by word or mind. What is to be said of it remains ineffable, and what is to be understood of it remains unknowable.[458]

By using the term "suddenly" (Ἐξαίφνης), Dionysius points to the element of surprise with respect to the incarnation. The word shows the punctual, historically unique character of the event. The term Ἐξαίφνης has a long history in Platonist literature. The frequent use of it by Dionysius has been read by scholars as just another example of his Neoplatonist roots.[459] This is quite possible as we see interesting parallels between the use of the term in the Platonist tradition and *CA*. Ronald Hathaway tells us for instance that "suddenly" in Dionysius is an obvious reference to the Third Hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, which deals with "the nature of the moment of simultaneous change (*τὸ* Ἐξαίφνης)".[460] In *Parmenides* the *exaiphnes* marks the timeless moment of transition between the unmoving sphere of ideas, the realm of

[458] *EP* III, 1069B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 159): Ἐξαίφνης» ἐστὶ τὸ παρ' ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐκ τοῦ τέως ἀφανοῦς εἰς τὸ ἐκφανὲς ἐξαγόμενον. Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν φιλανθρωπίας καὶ τοῦτο οἶμαι τὴν θεολογίαν αἰνίττεσθαι, τὸ ἐκ τοῦ κρυφίου τὸν ὑπερούσιον εἰς τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐμφάνειαν ἀνθρωπικῶς οὐσιωθέντα προεληλυθέναι. Κρύφιος δέ ἐστι καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἔκφανσιν ἤ, ἵνα τὸ θειότερον εἴπω, καὶ ἐν τῇ ἐκφάνσει. Καὶ τοῦτο γὰρ Ἰησοῦ κέκρυπται, καὶ οὐδενὶ λόγῳ οὔτε νῷ τὸ κατ' αὐτὸν ἐξῆκται μυστήριον, ἀλλὰ καὶ λεγόμενον ἄῤῥητον μένει καὶ νοούμενον ἄγνωστον. This superhumanity even in human actions has often been regarded as a distintively Dionysian feature, or some would say a distinctively miaphysite one. It seems to be inconsistent with any form of Mopestutian or Nestorian Christology, perhaps even with the Athanasnian, Tertullianic and Leonine division into acts performed as God and acts performed as man.

[459] See Beierwaltes 1967: 271–283.

[460] Hathaway 1969: 79f. This point, made by Hathaway, has been cited by Rorem in his notes to Luibhéid's translation of the *CA*, leaving, as Charles Stang (2008: 113) has noted, the average reader with no sense that the third epistle has anything to do with Paul or his blinding vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus.

*stasis*, and the flux of material phenomena, *kinesis*.[461] These are important terms that Dionysius makes use of, about both God and the world. Another appearance of the "sudden" is in Plato's *Symposium* where Diotima's speech has "sudden" marking the climax and goal of the ascent of *eros*, i.e., the vision of beauty itself. And in Plotinus the vision of the One occurs "suddenly", and the initiate sees it by, through and in the light of its own presence.[462]

What is new in comparison with the Platonists' use of Ἐξαίφνης is that in *CA* it refers to a physical event, the Incarnation. What may be the reason for Dionysius' use of the term? Mortley suggests that "Dionysius is attempting to reconcile the Christian incarnation with the Neoplatonist moment of transformation ... the Biblical allusions do not help, since … [he] means to offer a demythologized account of Christ's epiphany."[463] He further sees Dionysius as striking "a new note in the philosophy of classical antiquity" that hearkens back even to the literature of the gnostics.[464] Golitzin however criticizes Mortley's dismissal of the important role of biblical allusions. He points to the five times Ἐξαίφνης appears in the *NT*, and argues that these allusions play directly into the themes in *CA* as do Plato and Plotinus.[465] Of the various instances in which the Bible uses the word "suddenly,"[466] the account of Paul's conversion from Acts fits best with Dionysius' use of the term, which in the third epistle relates to themes such as "the love of Christ for humanity" and his "becoming a human being".[467]

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[461] *Parmenides* 156de.
[462] *Enneads* V.3. 17; 5.7 and VI.7.36.
[463] Mortley 1986: 237.
[464] Ibid.
[465] He points to Acts 9:3 and 22:6, in the context of the narratives of the key events in Paul's life, his conversion on the road to Damascus, where a great light from heaven shone "suddenly" around him. In Luke 2:13 the "sudden" appears in connection with an angelic epiphany. In Mark 13:36 where the "sudden" is connected to the eschaton. Golitzin 1994: 226.
[466] Malachi 3:1; Mark 13:36; Luke 2:13, 9:39; acts 9:3, 22:6 As in the phrase "likeness to god", so here there seems to be a sort of purposeful over-determination, a deliberate choice of expressions which have both a Platonic and a Christian pedigree.
[467] This point has also been made by Stang (2008: 113).

As we just saw above, in passages dealing with the Incarnation, love is unambiguously a "downward" movement from God to men. Eros is also described as a descending, philanthropic force in Proclus.[468] Dionysius certainly may have been influenced by the Neoplatonists here. Yet, in teaching a descending love which reveals itself in the incarnation of Christ, then Dionysius surely aims to transform this understanding. Numerous times Dionysius states the fact that the loving subject, the person who loves, is Jesus himself: "Out of Love he has come down to be at our level of nature and has become a being. He, the transcendent God, has become man (Ὅθεν ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἕως φύσεως ὑπὲρ φιλανθρωπίας ἐλήλυθε καὶ ἀληθῶς οὐσιώθη καὶ ἀνὴρ ὁ ὑπέρθεος ἐχρημάτισεν)."[469] For Dionysius "So God loved the world" (John 3:16) has become "So Jesus loved mankind." *EH* III, 3, shows the same: "For because of his goodness and his love for humanity, the simple, hidden oneness of Jesus, the most divine Word, has taken the route of incarnation for us, without undergoing any change, and has become a reality that is composite and visible. (Διαγράφει γὰρ ἐν τούτοις αἰσθητῶς ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων Ἰησοῦν τὸν Χριστὸν τὴν νοητὴν ἡμῶν ὡς ἐν εἰκόσι ζωὴν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ τὸ θεῖον κρυφίου τῇ παντελεῖ καὶ ἀσυγχύτῳ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐνανθρωπήσει φιλανθρώπως ἐξ ἡμῶν εἰδοποιούμενον)."[470] We see that the Christian gospel of Dionysius is not a message about God's love in general, similar to the Neoplatonic doctrine of the goodness of the One, but a message about Christ's love in particular, revealed in the Incarnation.

**The Humanity of Christ**

Dionysius stresses the importance of Jesus—in the incarnation—keeping both his divinity and humanity intact: "It [the Deity] became one with us in our lowliness, losing nothing of its own real condition, suffering no change or loss (πρὸς τὸ ταπεινὸν ἡμῶν ἑνοποιηθεῖσα μετὰ

[468] See Van den Berg 2001: 197. See also ch. 2 in Vasilakis 2020.
[469] *DN* II, 10, 649A (ed. Suchla 1990: 135).
[470] *EH* III, 3, 492B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 83).

τῆς τῶν οἰκείων ἀσυγχύτου καὶ ἀλωβήτου)."[471] Moreover, "out of love for humanity Christ emerged from the hiddenness of his divinity to take on human shape, to be utterly incarnate among us while yet remaining without confusion (Διαγράφει γὰρ ἐν τούτοις αἰσθητῶς ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγων Ἰησοῦν τὸν Χριστὸν τὴν νοητὴν ἡμῶν ὡς ἐν εἰκόσι ζωὴν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ τὸ θεῖον κρυφίου τῇ παντελεῖ καὶ ἀσυγχύτῳ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐνανθρωπήσει φιλανθρώπως ἐξ ἡμῶν εἰδοποιούμενον)."[472] Indeed, this latter passage prompted John of Scythopolis to interpret Dionysius' Christology in a Chalcedonian, anti-Monophysite direction: "He says 'utterly' [incarnate] since he took on both a rational soul and an earthly body. Rightly does he speak of an unconfused Incarnation, for when he appeared as a human, he remained God and preserved the properties of each of the two natures. Note also that this is against the Apollinarians".[473] He even notes that Dionysius (who he sees as a much earlier figure) had anticipated the language of Chalcedon: "Note also that the expressions "without confusion" and "without change," which he used, are from the apostles, as also is the expression 'the whole man.'"[474] Whilst the debate between the Monophysites and Chalcedonians should not distract us, it is apt that John should so easily see orthodoxy in Dionysius' Christology on this point, since the term "without confusion" is used four times in *CA* regarding the Incarnation.[475] As this was done to safeguard the distinction between Christ's humanity and divinity, it further emphasizes the cosmic structural relevance Dionysius saw in God becoming human.[476]

Scholars have often claimed that the "human nature" of Christ has no place in Dionysius' Christology.[477] This is a somewhat hasty conclusion. There is admittedly no

[471] *EH* III, 3, 11, 441B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 91).
[472] *EH* III, 3, 13, 444D (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 93).
[473] SchEH 149, 15; Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 72.
[474] SchEH 197, 2; Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 73.
[475] See also Vasilakis, "Dionysius versus Proclus on Undefiled Providence", Studia Patristica 2017.
[476] Cf. Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 73.
[477] Cf. Brons 1976.

discussion of Christ's body and soul, a matter that had preoccupied Eastern theology since the time of Apollinaris. But we may assume that this was implied since he attributes "complete humanity" to the Logos as the result of the Incarnation and the *kenosis* that then unfolded.[478] A purely metaphorical interpretation of the humanity of Christ is explicitly rejected in *Ep*. IV.[479] In what can be called his "Christological Epistle," *Ep*. IV, Dionysius states that: "Being above men he yet fully did become man. Furthermore, it was not by virtue of being God that he did divine things, nor by virtue of being man that he did what was human, but rather, by the fact of being God made man he accomplished something new in our midst, the activity of the God-man (οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπος ἦν, οὐχ ὡς μὴ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀνθρώπων ἐπέκεινα καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἀληθῶς ἄνθρωπος γεγονώς, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δράσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ, καινήν τινα τὴν θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῖν πεπολιτευμένος)."[480] In *DN* II, 3 Dionysius also stresses that Christ became like us, in our likeness.

The distinction of the two natures of Christ appears to further be explicated in any case, in the following passage, where Dionysius gives the impression of applying "Son" and "Jesus" to two different natures:

> The differentiated names, on the other hand, are the transcendent names and attributes of the Father, of the Son and of the Spirit. The titles cannot be interchanged, nor are they held in common. There is, moreover, another differentiation: the perfect and unchangeable being of Jesus among us, and all the mysteries of his love and being which are manifested therein.[481]

The name "Jesus" designates a nature, or ὕπαρξις, which takes on human nature. The full assumption of human nature is strongly implied again at *CH* IV, 4 where Dionysius says that

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[478] A point also made by Grillmeier 2013: 317. See *Ep*. IV, 1072A.
[479] 1072A.
[480] *Ep*. IV, 1072B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 160). In addition to Theandrites at Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 19, note *deus homo* in Origen, *First Principles* 2.6.3–4.
[481] *DN* II, 3, 640C (ed. Suchla 1990: 125-126): Τὰ δὲ διακεκριμένα τὸ πατρὸς ὑπερούσιον ὄνομα καὶ χρῆμα καὶ υἱοῦ καὶ πνεύματος οὐδεμιᾶς ἐν τούτοις ἀντιστροφῆς ἢ ὅλως κοινότητος ἐπεισαγομένης. Ἔστι δὲ αὖθις πρὸς τούτῳ διακεκριμένον ἡ καθ' ἡμᾶς Ἰησοῦ παντελὴς καὶ ἀναλλοίωτος ὕπαρξις καὶ ὅσα τῆς κατ' αὐτήν ἐστι φιλανθρωπίας οὐσιώδη μυστήρια.

Jesus, when he entered into our condition without change from his own condition beyond being, fully subjected himself to the mediation of the angels in accordance with the humanity which he took upon Himself:

> Let us lift our eyes to the highest revelations of scripture. Jesus himself, he who is the transcendent cause of the supernatural beings, came to us and took on human form, without changing his own nature. Never once did he overstep the good human order, which he had arranged and chosen, but obediently submitted himself to the dispositions of God the Father, through the angels and their mediation.[482]

Thus, Dionysius does appear to see both natures as equally present in the incarnate Jesus, and this further emphasizes the centrality that Jesus holds to his cosmology.

Dionysius' Christ is the Christ of the Gospels, and especially the Christ of John and Paul.[483] By emphasizing the incarnation and the true humanity of Christ, Dionysius could well be rejecting ideas held by radical Monophysites of the time.[484] If so, the reason seems to lie in Dionysius' broader theme, that Christ is more than a symbol of the universal sanctifying activity of the Logos. It is the loving Jesus in "human form" (ἀνθρωποειδῶς), who condescended to rescue us out of sin and death: "Jesus in a most glorious and divine descent willingly died on the cross for the sake of our divine birth, so that he generously snatches

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[482] *CH* IV, 4, 181C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 23): Ἀνανεύσω δὲ καὶ πρὸς τὰς ὑπερτάτας τῶν λογίων φωτοφανείας. Ὁρῶ γὰρ ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς ἡ τῶν ὑπερουρανίων οὐσιῶν ὑπερούσιος αἰτία πρὸς τὸ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀμεταβόλως ἐληλυθὼς οὐκ ἀποπηδᾷ τῆς ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ταχθείσης τε καὶ αἱρεθείσης ἀνθρωποπρεποῦς εὐταξίας, ἀλλ' εὐπειθῶς ὑποτάττεται ταῖς τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ θεοῦ δι' ἀγγέλων διατυπώσεσιν, καὶ διὰ μέσων αὐτῶν ἀγγέλλεται τῷ Ἰωσὴφ ἡ πρὸς τοῦ πατρὸς οἰκονομηθεῖσα τοῦ υἱοῦ πρὸ Αἴγυπτον ἀναχώρησις καὶ αὖθις ἡ πρὸς τὴν Ἰουδαίαν ἐξ Αἰγύπτου μεταγωγή, καὶ δι' ἀγγέλων αὐτὸν ὁρῶμεν ὑπὸ ταῖς πατρικαῖς θεσμοθε- σίαις ταττόμενον. Ἐῶ γὰρ εἰπεῖν ὡς εἰδότι τὰ ταῖς ἱερατικαῖς ἡμῶν παραδόσεσιν ἐκπεφασμένα καὶ περὶ τοῦ ἀγγέλου τοῦ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐνισχύσαντος ἢ ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς κατὰ τὴν ἡμῶν σωστικὴν ἀγαθουργίαν εἰς ἐκφαντορικὴν ἐληλυθὼς τάξιν «Ἄγγελος μεγάλης βουλῆς» ἀνηγόρευται. Καὶ γὰρ ὡς αὐτὸς ἀγγελοπρεπῶς φησιν, ὅσα ἤκουσε παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀνήγγειλεν ἡμῖν.

[483] His view of Christ at least resonates with John's image of Jesus as well as that of the Pauline Epistles, such as Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Hebrews.

[484] Andrew Louth argues for this in a recent article (Louth 2008: 574–575), using evidence provided by Rorem and Lamoreaux (1998), that the Dionysian corpus was not controversial amongst its first readers for any apparent heresy, Monophysite or otherwise. The difficulty with the corpus stemmed only from the fact that earlier Church Fathers had not known of the corpus; furthermore, those same readers who expressed this difficulty also suggested that the Fathers would have used the corpus had they known of it. This could hardly be the case if the corpus proposed Monophysite doctrine in an obvious way. This point by Louth makes sense when we think of a man such as Maximus the Confessor (580–662), who is known for his struggle against heresies; why would he take up the writings of one hitherto unknown as Dionysius and adopt so much out of them if he considered them heretic? This point was also made by William Riordian 288: 58.

from the old swallowing pit, the ruinous death, anyone who, as scripture mysteriously expresses it, has been baptized 'into his death (αὐτοῦ <τοῦ> θανάτου διὰ σταυροῦ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὑπὲρ τῆς ἡμῶν θεογενεσίας καταδυόμενον αὐτῇ τῇ θείᾳ καὶ ἀκρατήτῳ καθόδῳ τοὺς εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὸ κρύφιον λόγιον βαπτιζομένους ἐκ τῆς τοῦ φθοροποιοῦ θανάτου)."[485] Christ is seen as the Eternal Word, God, who has emptied himself, condescending out of love for us, to become wholly one of us while remaining wholly himself.

Dionysius shares the early Christian conviction that Christ must be like us and we like him if salvation is to be reached. Christian life, for Dionysius, means that one strives to become like Christ.[486] Through communion with Christ we can become completely changed, that is, divinized: [487] "[God] gave us a most perfect share of his nature by completely taking on our own, and that in this way he made it possible for us to enter into communion with himself." [488] In order to achieve communion with Christ, we should "give our full attention to his divine life in the flesh. His sacred sinlessness must be our model so that we may aspire to a godlike and unblemished condition (εἰς τὴν θειοτάτην αὐτοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ζωὴν ἀποσκοπεῦσαι τῇ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἀφομοιώσει τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀναμαρτησίας εἰς τὴν θεοειδῆ καὶ ἀλώβητον ἕξιν ἀναδραμεῖν)."[489]

Hence, Christ's humanity is of pivotal importance for Dionysius. It is through his birth, life and death, descent, and resurrection and all the other acts comprising the salvific deeds that our redemption is being accomplished.[490] The salvific efficacy of these acts then becomes available to us through the sacraments, which leads us to the next section.

[485] *EH* IV, 10, 484B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 102).
[486] See *EH* VI, 1. For the *Imitatio Christi* concept in *CA*, see: *EH* III, 3, 12; Völker 1958: 57.
[487] *EH* III, 3, 11.
[488] *EH* II, 2, 8.
[489] *EH* III, 3, 12, 444B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 93).
[490] Riordan 2008: 163.

**Christ in the sacraments**

Dionysius seems unambiguous that our primary access to the salvific energies of Christ is through the orders and the sacraments of the church. His view is that sacraments are enacted to recreate the divine work of the incarnation of Christ. The works of Christ - or the historical divine acts recalled in liturgical celebrations or sacraments *(τελεται*) – are: 1) the Divine Birth (baptism); 2) the Gathering or Synaxis (the Eucharist); and 3) the Myron (blessing the oil used in anointing). These three sacraments will be treated more extensively in chapter four, but for now it is enough to establish that for Dionysius the salvific efficacy of the sacred acts of Christ becomes available to man through the sacraments, which are themselves participatory historical acts. The sacraments act on the soul spiritually and on the body physically; they are the theurgic activities of Christ who is purifying, illuminating, and perfecting at each level. For Dionysius, the Incarnation and salvific energies of Christ are central to the sacraments as they are manifested gifts revealing the works of God in the created world. I have earlier pointed to the Incarnation as the exemplification *par excellence* of God's philanthropy, generosity and providential *θεουργία* for the salvation of man.[491] Such divine acts, therefore, as performed by divine love, involve the completion of the self of man by converting or drawing man back toward God.

**The new theandrike energeia**

In *Ep.* IV Dionysius draws attention to the *energeia* or the activity of Christ, and uses the phrase, *θεανδρική ἐνέργεια* for it.[492] This term, which was first used by Dionysius, denotes Christ's divine–human activities, or his theandric acts and operations.[493] It is basically a reference to the miraculous events of Christ, such as being born of a virgin, and extraordinary actions, such as walking on water. All these can be understood as divine–human activities

[491] *DN* II, 6, 644CD.
[492] *Ep.* IV, 1072AB, (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 160).
[493] According to Lampe's *Greek Patristic Lexicon* (1962) the first recorded use of '*theandrikos*' is in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*.

and they refer mainly to the miracles Jesus performed. Dionysius explains that Christ "did not perform divine acts as God nor human acts as man, but as the Godman he manifested a kind of new theandric operation."[494] He summarizes his thoughts on the *θεανδρική ἐνέργεια* in *Ep.* IV:[495]

How, you ask, could it be that Jesus, who is beyond all, is considered to be in the same category as all men, of one and the same nature as them? It is not in the capacity of being the cause of man that he is called man, but rather as being in absolute whole essence truly man. But we do not define Jesus as a man, for he is not only a man, neither would he be transcendent if he were a man only, but out of his special love for humanity he became truly man. Both higher than man and man himself, since he, the transcendent, took upon himself the substance of men. He who is ever transcendent, and super-full of super-essentiality, has become man, he who is being beyond being, and above man works things of man. The evidence is a virgin supernaturally conceiving, and flowing water, holding up weight of material and earthly feet, and not giving way, but, by a supernatural power standing together so as not to be divided, demonstrate this. And there are many other things to say, who could list it all? He who looks at this with a divine will know in a manner that transcends the intellect, that the things affirmed about Jesus' love for humanity possess a force of superlative negation. For, if we sum it up; he was was not man, not in the sense of not being man, but though he was born of men, he was superior to them and above them, yet having truly become man. And for the rest, it was not by virtue of being God that he did divine things, not by virtue of being man that he did what was human, but rather, as a God who had become man, he accomplished something new among us, the activity of the Godman.[496]

What Dionysius describes here is the being of Christ in his human and superhuman reality. We shall take a closer look at the term Dionysius uses for this, *θεανδρική ἐνέργεια* (*theandrike energeia*)**.** The linguistic composite of *θεός* and *ἀνήρ* in this neologism makes clear that God (*θεός*) has become man (*ἀνήρ*). This is the main topic and the context of the fourth letter (quoted in its whole above), in which Dionysius focuses on the contrast between

[494] *Ep.* IV, 1072AB, (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 160).
[495] Grillmeier notes that one may ask whether 'theandric' is reserved exclusively for miracles, or if they may as well be applied to the everyday events in the life of Jesus, which, from a Chalcedonian point of view, ought also to be called 'theandric' since its bearer is the divine subject. Grillmeier 2013: 334.
[496] *Ep.* IV, 1072AB, (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 160): Πῶς, φῄς, Ἰησοῦς, ὁ πάντων ἐπέκεινα, πᾶσίν ἐστιν ἀνθρώποις οὐσιωδῶς συντεταγμένος; Οὐ γὰρ ὡς αἴτιος ἀνθρώπων ἐνθάδε λέγεται ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ὡς αὐτὸ κατ' οὐσίαν ὅλην ἀληθῶς ἄνθρωπος ὤν. Ἡμεῖς δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν οὐκ ἀνθρωπικῶς ἀφορίζομεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος μόνον —οὐδὲ ὑπερούσιος, εἰ ἄνθρωπος μόνον—, ἀλλ' ἄνθρωπος ἀληθῶς ὁ διαφερόντως φιλάνθρωπος, ὑπὲρ ἀνθρώπους καὶ κατὰ ἀνθρώπους ἐκ τῆς ἀνθρώπων οὐσίας ὁ ὑπερούσιος οὐσιωμένος. Ἔστι δὲ οὐδὲν ἧττον ὑπερουσιότητος ὑπερπλήρης ὁ ἀεὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἀμέλει τῇ ταύτης περιουσίᾳ, καὶ εἰς οὐσίαν ἀληθῶς ἐλθὼν ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν οὐσιώθη καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἐνήργει τὰ ἀνθρώπου. Καὶ δηλοῖ παρθένος ὑπερφυῶς κύουσα καὶ ὕδωρ ἄστατον ὑλικῶν καὶ γεηρῶν ποδῶν ἀνέχον βάρος καὶ μὴ ὑπεῖκον, ἀλλ' ὑπερφυεῖ δυνάμει πρὸς τὸ ἀδιάχυτον συνιστάμενον. Τί ἄν τις τὰ λοιπὰ πάμπολλα ὄντα διέλθοι; Δι' ὧν ὁ θείως ὁρῶν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γνώσεται καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῇ φιλανθρωπίᾳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καταφασκόμενα, δύναμιν ὑπεροχικῆς ἀποφάσεως ἔχοντα. Καὶ γάρ, ἵνα συνελόντες εἴπωμεν, οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπος ἦν, οὐχ ὡς μὴ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀν- θρώπων ἐπέκεινα καὶ ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον ἀληθῶς ἄνθρωπος γεγονώς, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δράσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ, καινήν τινα τὴν θεανδρικὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῖν πεπολιτευμένος.

"divine" and "human" in Christ, and also considers the ways in which the union of the two functions has an effect in the actions or *energies* of Christ.

The concept of the divine *energeiai* is commonly associated with the late Byzantine theologian Gregory Palamas, who set forth the distinction between God in his *essence* and God in his *energies*.[497] In fact, however, the term *energeia* has biblical origins and figures prominently in Greek patristic theology from at least the fourth century. In Corinthians 12 where Paul speaks of the "gifts of the Spirit" as including both miraculous powers such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the discernment of spirits, he uses the term *energemata* (works performed) of the Spirit, and the Spirit as "working" (*energon*) them.[498] The Pauline usage of energeia became crucial and continues through the Cappadocian Fathers, Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas.[499]

The essence–energy distinction, which was first explicitly formulated by Gregory Palamas, differentiates between God in his essence and God in his energies.[500] God's essence is called *ousia*, and means God as God is, transcendent and uncreated, and distinct from his energies (*energeia*), or activities as actualized in the world.[501] The transcendent God remains eternally hidden in his *essence*, but at the same time he seeks to communicate with us and unite himself with us personally through his *energy*. John of Damascus explains this in

[497] Lossky 1997: 73–75.
[498] The Greek word for activities, *energemata*, is here used as a word of active, miraculous power. Activities is the same word as working in 1 Corinthians 12:10 (the working of miracles). Differences of activities means that God displays and pours out his miraculous power in different ways, but it is always the same God doing the work.
[499] The divine processions in Dionysius can be understood as equal to the divine energies in the Cappadocians, although Dionysius enriches the concept by setting it within the context of a Neoplatonic pattern of procession and return.
[500] Lossky 1997: 73–75.
[501] Bradshaw 2004: 91-95. The essence–energy distinction was formulated by Gregory Palamas of Thessaloniki (1296–1359), as part of his defense of the Athonite monastic practice of hesychasmos, the mystical exercise of "stillness" to facilitate ceaseless inner prayer and noetic contemplation of God, against the charge of heresy brought by the humanist scholar and theologian Barlaam of Calabria. Hence it is known as "the Palamite" distinction. However, it is found in much earlier sources as well, such as in the Cappadocian Fathers who would use terms such as 'powers' and 'energies', and as Henny F. Hägg has demonstrated, already Clement of Alexandria constitutes a decisive Vorstadium to this dogma. Hägg 2006: 247.

chapter 4 in *De fide orthodoxa*: "all that we say positively of God manifests not his nature but the things about his nature."[502] The important point being made here is that while God is unknowable in his essence, he can be known or experienced in his energies, and such experience changes neither who or what God is. According to Vladimir Lossky of the neo-patristic school, this distinction protects the border between the procession of the divine persons (as existences and/or realities of God) and the creation of the world. This is to avoid a equalization between the being and the action(s) of God, that is what is uncreated and created, something which would lead to the teaching of pantheism.[503]

Dionysius takes up these ideas and develops them. In fact, we find the essence–energy distinction widely spread throughout his work as an overriding premise in his entire interpretation of the apophatic and cataphatic theology, and in his emphasis on unknowability versus knowability. The term that he coins, *θεανδρική ἐνέργεια*, about the "totally new divine-human activity," is the activity that Christ performs, and corresponds to the "proof" of the one activity grown together from both God and man.[504] The *theandric* acts of Christ is the Godman who possess both divine and human character and efficacy. "It was not by virtue of being God that he did divine things," says Dionysius, and it was "not by virtue of being man that he did what was human, but, rather, by the fact of being God-made-man (*ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ*) that he accomplished something new among us, the activity of the Godman (*θεανδρική ἐνέργεια*)."[505]

The *theandric* energy of Christ bears divine power of salvation to man in a human manner, so that each of us may be divinized. This can happen because Christ became man and assumed our human nature. In doing so, he was able to perform the theandric acts, since

[502] John of Damascus in (ed.) Hathaway Chase 1958: 337-339.
[503] Lossky 1997: 73–75.
[504] See Grillmeier 2013: 333.
[505] *Ep*. IV, 1072AB.

these acts implies both human and divine character and efficacy. Participation in the life and activity of God is participation in the divine energies, or the theandric acts of Christ, who has provided the example of a human life conforming perfectly to God. It is through the transformative power of Christ's historical acts, which is also transhistorical and divine, and holds the sacred power of salvation, that we may be transformed and deified. With other words, it is through his birth, life, death, descent, resurrection, and all his salvific deeds that our redemption is being accomplished. The redeeming efficacy of these acts is available to us through the sacraments, which are reenactments of the historical acts, and in their essence also living historical acts. Participating in the sacraments is participating in Christ's divine energies, that is in his theandric acts. The theandric Christ thus generates other "theandrites," or divinized human beings.[506]

The "divine-human energy of Christ" therefore enters the evolution of man through Christ the Godman and is a uniting of God's creative impetus with human nature, through which man (and the world) will become spiritually enlivened. Dionysius propounds the concept as a way of grasping the unique nature of the presence of God in Jesus: "He was human in a divine way; he was divine in a human way." In this respect, in his understanding of the divine–human energy, Dionysius may have furnished the basis for a genuine reconciliation between those who emphasized the human reality of Jesus and those who stressed the overwhelming presence of God in the Salvation Events. In this way he may have helped Christianity to move forward, turning from abstractions to the unique activity or

[506] Roques 1955: 268; Riordan 2008: 163. It has been speculated that Dionysius' use of the term *theandrikos* derives from Proclus' hymn to the Semitic God Theandrites, who was honored in Arabia. This hymn was familiar to the Neoplatonic school; Marinus and and Damascius allude to it. John of Schythopolis, the first scholiast and commentator of the Areopagitica, stressed that one should on no account confuse this term *theandrike* with the god Theandrites, as if Dionysius were suggesting a connection between such a god and Jesus Christ. Henri-Dominique Saffrey suggests that John would hardly made such a remark had he not had in mind that Dionysius might have been familiar with, and influenced by, Proclus' hymn. See Saffrey1982: 64. See also Dillon and Wear 2007: 6. According to Lampe1962: 62), the term *theandrite* (man–god) is coined to describe Christ as a compound being, divine and human natures being commingled, and is referred to in St. Maximus, *Schol. Ep.* 4; and, in Dionysius, *MT* IV, 536A.

energy of God that transformed the human situation. Certainly, from the seventh century onward, in the wake of the 6th Council, the "divine human energy" became a part of orthodox faith. It was described by some of the Fathers as the new Christ-impulse.[507] John Damascene referred to the divine energy as a "movement" (*κίνησις*), and still more strikingly as a divine *ἔξαλμα*, a rare Greek word from the verb meaning to "rush out", "spring forth" or "rear up"—an impetuous act of God. The term "energy", like "economy," was long a religious concept before it became a contemporary scientific one. God "descends into the world," explains Lossky—following Philotheus of Constantinople's teaching about energies—by the acts of his providence, by his economy, which literally means the 'construction' or 'administration of a house.[508] This was an area of thought which was closely tied together with the concept of *θεανδρική ἐνέργεια* (rather than to the topic of the eternal divine nature, which can also be studied in theology).

Grillmeier further compares the Dionysian concept of the "totally new divine-human activity" to references of Christ's acts in Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria. For Gregory Christ's work of salvation is a "movement of choice".[509] One characteristic example that he gives is the freedom of Christ's soul when performing miracles, such as in the miraculous healing of a leper (Matt. 8: 3). Gregory stresses how the soul and the spirit of the human Jesus, exerts a "powerful act of will" for the cure of the leper: the soul (*psyche*) posits the act of the will, and the body participates when Jesus touches the sick man, and through them both suffering vanishes.[510] The healing is done by the "divine power" through Christ. It is the Godhead which is active in body and soul as a function of *gnorismata*, a sign of recognition of the divinity of Christ.[511] For Cyril of Alexandria an example of the divine-

[507] St. John Damascene, *de Fide Orthodoxa* I,14: discussed in Lossky 1944: 73.
[508] See Lossky 1944 and esp. pp. 138–40.
[509] Grillmeier 2013: 332.
[510] Gregory of Nyssa in (ed.) Gebhardt 1967: 292, 15–16; Grillmeier 2013: 332.
[511] Cf. The raising of Jairus' daughter.

human activity is the life-giving power of the eucharist. Cyril speaks of it as "one activity grown together", which is the unity of the divine and human that is present at every reception of communion.[512] The *sarx* of Christ is consumed and assimilated. It effects a "complete transformation" in the recipient (*metapoiesei gar pantos*), which is comparable to a resurrection from the dead.[513]

**Dying with Christ**

Although he does not centre himself on the life, ministry, and death of Christ, Dionysius is interested in the resurrected Christ, who appears to us as light.[514] There is no extensive treatment of the crucifixion of Christ in *CA*. The passion and death of Christ that is central for Christian belief seems to be phrased more generally as the "acts" of Christ.[515] Dionysius does, however, quote the famous passage of Ignatius of Antioch (Rom. 7:12): "He for whom I yearn has been crucified (ὁ ἐμός ἔρως ἐσταύρωται)."[516] As Charles Stang has noted, this pun operates on different levels: 1) Jesus—for whom I yearn—has been crucified; 2) Jesus himself is love crucified, figured both as God's "love for humanity" (*φιλανθρωπία*) and also the ecstatic ἔρως or yearning that once prompted God to create the world and now prompts God, pre-eminently through the Incarnation, to bid us return to him; and 3) *our* yearning has been crucified.[517] The context in the *CA* though, seems to aim to clarify the term "yearning" rather than elaborate on the theology of the cross. An Ignatian type of mysticism of passion and identification with the suffering Christ does not seem to be the focus for Dionysius. However, although suffering and dying with Christ is not mentioned as elements of everyday

[512] Cyril of Alexandria, *In Ioann. Ev. IV* 2: PG 73, 577C3–580A2; Grillmeier 2013: 332–333.
[513] Ibid.
[514] Stang 2011: 10f.
[515] *EH* III, 3, 4.
[516] *DN* IV, 12. This has also been quoted with much the same meaning in the proem to Origen's *Commentary on the Song.*
[517] Stang 2008: 118.

Christian life, they are mentioned in connection to baptism: "By his triple immersion and emersion he [the one who is baptized] imitates, as far as the imitation of God is possible to men, the divine death of one who was three days and nights in the tomb, the life-giving Jesus (ἐν τῷ ὕδατι τρισὶ καταδύσεσι τὸν θεαρχικὸν τῆς τριημερονύκτου ταφῆς Ἰησοῦ τοῦ ζωοδότου μιμεῖσθαι θάνατον ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀνδράσι τὸ θεομίμητον)."[518] "By dying to sin in baptism one could say mystically that he shares in the death of Christ himself (ὑπάρξεις συναποθνήσκει Χριστῷ μυστικῶς εἰπεῖν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ κατὰ τὸ βάπτισμα)."[519] In baptism we "mystically" share in the death.[520] This interpretation of the baptismal rite stems from Paul: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"[521] Dionysius explains that "—when the hierarch pours the ointment in drops to form a cross. [...] He thereby shows to those able to contemplate that Jesus in a most glorious and divine descent willingly died on the cross for the sake of our divine birth, that he generously snatches from the old swallowing pit of ruinous death anyone who… has been baptized 'into his death', and renews them in an inspired and eternal existence (ἐν σταυροειδέσι βολαῖς ἐπιχέων ὁ ἱεράρχης ὑπ' ὄψιν ἄγει τοῖς θεωρητικοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἄχρις καὶ αὐτοῦ <τοῦ> θανάτου διὰ σταυροῦ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὑπὲρ τῆς ἡμῶν θεογενεσίας καταδυόμενον αὐτῇ τῇ θείᾳ καὶ ἀκρατήτῳ καθόδῳ τοὺς εἰς τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὸ κρύφιον λόγιον βαπτιζομένους ἐκ τῆς τοῦ φθοροποιοῦ θανάτου παλαιᾶς καταπόσεως ἀγαθοπρεπῶς ἀνασπῶντα καὶ ἀνακαινίζοντα πρὸς ἔνθεον καὶ αἰώνιον ὕπαρξιν)."[522] The effect of Christ's death, offered through baptism, is the death of the former life, new birth to a fresh life, and

[518] *EH* II, 3, 7, 396C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 72).
[519] Ibid.
[520] For more on Baptism and the holy sacraments, see chapter 4, "The Body and the Means of Conversion".
[521] Rom 6, 3; cf. Col 2, 12: "and you were buried with him in baptism".
[522] *EH* IV, 3, 473B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 95-96).

renewal. Thus, herein lies Dionysius' account of the cross, which scholars since Luther's time have criticized Dionysius for supposedly undermining.[523]

## Conclusion

The prevalent type of Christology in *CA* is a Trinitarian one. The Son has a prominent role in the Trinity. Being the eternal Light of the Father, Christ plays a crucial role in all communication between God and his creation. He is also the source of all hierarchies. His love for mankind makes him become man, without losing his eternal identity. Despite some relatable points made, within this positioning Dionysius does not seem to have much particular interest in the fifth-sixth century debate concerning Christ's nature. In fact, he never mentions the two natures of Christ or uses the word hypostasis in its technical, Christological sense.[524] In certain respects, he expresses himself in a way acceptable for both Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians, because of this larger picture he has in mind.

It is certainly then unfair to speak of only a "thin Christian veneer" in Dionysius' worldview. The central elements of Christology are, as we have seen, all present. The fact that Dionysius uses the name "Jesus" for Christ and stresses Christ's love for mankind (not only God's) shows us a Christocentric emphasis that goes beyond even that of early Christianity, especially in its wide-reaching cosmic implications. For Dionysius the human Jesus survives the resurrection, albeit in a transfigured form. That there exists no chapter on Christology in *CA* or other references to the "historical Jesus" seems to have particularly contributed to the criticism of Dionysius' Christology. Protestant critics of *CA* often criticize the weight given to eternity and *theosis* instead of forgiveness, justification, and the miracles

[523] A point also made by Stang (2008: 118).
[524] This has been noted by Grillmeier 2013: 339.

performed by Christ. This is, however, a common feature of the Christology of the Byzantine theologians. Dionysius concentrates his theology on *theosis,* on striving towards God and becoming like God.

Dionysius emphasizes that the incarnate Christ has, through his divine goodness, generosity, and philanthropy, given man "access" to God; the power to become like God, that is the possibility of assimilation into, and participation in, the divine reality. Participation in the life and activity of God lies in participation with the divine energies, or with the *theandric activity* of Jesus Christ, who has provided the example of a human life conforming perfectly to God.

# CHAPTER 3: DIONYSIUS' ACCOUNT OF THE HUMAN BODY AND SOUL

## Introductory remarks

In this chapter I will outline Dionysius' accounts of the human soul's divisions as well as the human body, to assess what these elements represent, and to try to determine which part, or what more precisely, constitutes the essential human being. Unfortunately, Dionysius' anthropology is neither explicit nor systematic. Indeed, he tells us that full treatment of the soul is to be found in his *Peri psyches*,[525] but this is a work that remains unknown to us. In general, little scholarly effort has been made to explore Dionysius' anthropological and psychological ideas. I. P. Sheldon-Williams already commented in 1967 that anthropology is the most neglected part of the Dionysian system, and this appears to still be the case today.[526] Wiebke-Marie Stock, an exception, has made vital contributions to this topic, examining how Dionysius transformed Neoplatonic ideas about the body–soul relationship within a Christian context.[527]

As one would expect, the term employed by Dionysius for the soul is ψυχή. Unsurprisingly this term is closely linked to the body, as human nature is a composite of both body and soul. Yet, Dionysius does not tell us much of how the soul is related to the body, but rather speaks of body and soul together constituting the whole man.[528] Whereas in Neoplatonism the emphasis lies with the soteriology of the human soul, in Dionysius's works we encounter the deification of the whole human being. Plato's dialogues had established a kind of semi-dogma about the soul as the true self, and the body and its passions as the main

[525] *DN* 145, 17, 696C.
[526] Armstrong 1967: 473, n. 5.
[527] Stock 2008.
[528] *EH*, 7, 3. 9.

obstacle to the soul's ascent and deification. Later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus, however, have a more positive view of the body as a potential tool for the ascent of the soul. Dionysius adopts and, we may say, baptizes these ideas, that is, he transforms, and applies them to a comprehensively different context – the Christian ecclesiastical one. In line with Christian tradition, the body is given an inevitable significance as the soul's companion, both in this life and in the hereafter. For Dionysius, the body is not only a companion but is indispensable to the deification of the soul. The body's presence and participation in the church's rituals is a prerequisite for the ascent of the soul. The soul depends on assistance from the sensible to ascend, no matter if it concerns the liturgy or material images in Scripture.

Whether Dionysius was primarily a Neoplatonist, or a Christian has been the subject of contention and a debate that has been occurring for the last two centuries. Yet, a more interesting and complex endeavor is to place aside bigoted suppositions and aim understand this author via his particularities, gaining a sense of his own 'possible' agenda. There seems to be something obvious in arguing that he is inspired by both traditions in his thoughts about body, soul and mind, but, given this background historical debate, it must be stated. This chapter will argue that he does in fact insightfully and deliberately use Neoplatonic ideas and terms to propagate his own Christian thoughts about body and soul, as well as confronting the classic philosophical problem about the ascent of the soul.

The chapter is divided into three main parts: I. Dionysius' account of body and soul, II. The problem of evil (and its implications for the body), and III. Dionysius' view of the nature of the human soul. The chapter begins with the soul which is next to the angels in

Dionysius' *scala naturae*, and derives its intelligence, immortality, and indestructibility from God.[529]

## I. DIONYSIUS' ACCOUNT OF THE HUMAN BODY AND SOUL

### Various descriptions of the soul

A look at the architecture of the Dionysian cosmos will shed light on the cosmological position and nature of the human soul, in its relation to the body. We saw in the first chapter how Dionysius' cosmos is neatly organized in triads from the Trinity itself, via the intelligible realm or the celestial hierarchy that consists of three groups of angelic beings, where each group again consists of three orders, down to the sensible realm or the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is also divided into groups of three, consisting of sacraments (Myron, Eucharist, and baptism), "initiators" (hierarchs, i.e. bishops, priests, and deacons) and "initiates" (monks, "sacred people", and "those being purified). Within this hierarchical cosmos we have the following *scala naturae* of divine minds or angelic beings (pure intelligences) and human souls (reason), living beings or animals (sensation) and plants (life), and merely existent beings. Next to the angels are the souls that derive their own intelligence, immortality, and indestructibility from the Good.[530]

### Platonic notions of the soul

For Dionysius' Platonic predecessor, Plotinus, the universe contains three hypostases: the One, the Intellect (the realm of Platonic forms and Ideas and primary beings), and the Soul. From the Soul emanates particular souls such as human souls. These particular human souls

[529] See *DN* V, 8, 821D; IV, 2, 696C; VI, 1, 856B.
[530] Ibid.

are capable of living both in the realm of the Intellect and in the sensible world. The emanation continues into purely sensible forms; unanimated bodies and matter represent the lowest levels. Plotinus' understanding of the human soul is based on a dualistic view of all psychic being; the notion of the undescended human souls and the descent of souls into bodies. The hypostatic Soul precedes particular bodies. It is of a single and simple nature; incorporeal and immortal, and it has eternal residence amid the Forms of the intelligible world where it leads a life of pure intellection. This is the higher part of the soul that has not descended completely into the material world. This higher soul is transcendent, and considered to be the true, essential self.[531] For Plotinus, all particular human souls are, thus, of the same form of nature as the hypostatic Soul. Since it is not fully descended the particular human soul can ascend without external material help. This is explained by the conviction that salvation presupposes that a part of the human soul is unsullied, and not descended. If the soul were fully descended, salvation would depend on external assistance, such as divine intervention and sacred rites, which Plotinus opposes. We are, says Plotinus, naturally divine, and thus innately empowered to ascend to the One. Contemplation and philosophical purification are how one achieves union with the One. The fallen part of the soul has descended from simplicity to multiplicity, and needs to return to the divine, by recovering its simplicity. This happens via purification by removing what causes impurities, and restoring that which is true and beautiful, which constitutes the true self. In this way, the soul is once again able to fully share in the divine. Purification, for Plotinus, is therefore less about pursuing moral virtue in the sensible realm, but rather about virtue being obtained by the soul detaching itself from the sensible realm and then being purified intellectually.[532]

[531] *Enn.* I.1.2.; VI.9.1; IV.7.2-8; III.6.1, IV.7.9-14. What follows is also largely based on these passages.
[532] *Enn.* V.9.5.

Plotinus holds that the descent of the soul into the body is in accordance with the universal order. It is necessary as its mission is to form and govern affairs of the sensible realm.[533] The human soul's embodiment is not evil. On the contrary, the soul's engagement in the lower, sensible world can be valuable. The soul's experiences in the material world provide beneficial perspectives: compared with the better things the soul has encountered in the higher, intelligible world, the experiences from the lower realm can contribute to, for example, a clearer knowledge of the good, because one has a basis for comparison with what is less good. The problem lies in the difficulties the individual soul may have in directing its own body by getting too much involved in the material world, so much so that it forgets its divine origin.[534] However, since the human soul has not entirely descended a higher part of it will always remain in the intelligible world. Plotinus asserts that every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of the Intellect.[535] The human soul is thus capable of living both in the realm of the Intellect and in the sensible world. With its essence, at its higher level, the soul is united with the higher, divine beings (Soul, Intellect, and the One), from which it emanates.[536] The higher soul is naturally divine and immortal, and represents the "true" or "inner" man.[537] The lower soul, on the other hand, is the soul that has moved from divine simplicity to multiplicity, and through its involvement with the fragmentations of the bodily realm, represents the "outer man". Some of these souls have become fallen souls, or as Plotinus puts it 'dwellers in the Place of Unlikeness, where, fallen from all resemblance to the Divine, we lie in gloom and mud'.[538] In this state the soul's simplicity and likeness to the divine has been obscured. The call of the

[533] *Enn*. IV.8.5; IV.8.6; IV.3.13
[534] *Enn*. IV.8.4.
[535] *Enn*. IV.8.8.
[536] The Soul emanates from Nous, which emanates from the One. The emanations of the Soul are the various forms of embodied life, of which matter is the lowest.
[537] *Enn*. I.1.10.
[538] *Enn*. I.8.13.

soul is then to return to its divine origin, which means to its true self in its fullness of being. To acquire this, the soul needs to recover its simplicity, becoming more truly what it is, by purifying itself. Plotinus asserts that the soul must "wake up to what it really is," to realize its divine origin, and unite its lower part with its higher, essential part. This means a movement of return. Indeed, everything that exists desires to return to the One of which all things are an outflow. This movement is nourished by and expressed in contemplation and in philosophical purification.

Purification, *katharsis,* is a fundamental idea in Plotinus' thought. It involves the pursuit of moral virtues. However, Plotinus sees the contemplative life as superior to the active life. The danger is that the soul's actions in the sensible realm can bind the soul to that realm, so even the most noble of actions can in this way become a hinder to the soul's ascent.[539] Only the contemplative life is free. All actions are – in their true nature - aiming at contemplation, says Plotinus, "for the man of action is satisfied only when he contemplates its results within his own mind, and it is this satisfaction that is his real goal".[540] For Plotinus, the pursuit of "virtue" therefore revolves around purification. Purification, correctly pursued, prepares the soul for contemplation. Since the human soul has a lower and a higher part, purification must be a twofold discipline: firstly, the higher soul's purification is concerned with the soul's life in the sense-world, but 'the soul's life in the sense world' only in the sense of unfolding its detachment from this selfsame sense-world; and, of course, in order to be restored to its original divine status.[541] Second, the lower soul's purification aims at tranquility by calming the passions so that the soul can turn inward.[542] Both ways of purification lead to the soul's integration and perfection of its self-knowledge.[543] Having been

[539] *Enn*. V.9.5.
[540] *Enn*. III.8.6.; Wallis 1972: 85.
[541] *Enn*. I.2.3.
[542] *Enn*. I.2.5.
[543] *Enn*. I.4.4; V.3.4; VI.7.41.

purified the soul now realizes that the higher beings – Soul, Intellect and the One – are present within it. It learns that it is divine and immortal, and an intelligible universe (*kosmos noetos*) in itself.[544] Through contemplation of the intelligible realities the soul becomes a seer that also is unified with the seen.[545]

Philosophy is thus innately more than mere abstract academic discipline for Plotinus. The training he advocates for is both moral and intellectual. For Plotinus philosophy presupposes virtue, and virtue presupposes dialectic.[546] Plotinus identifies the very aim, goal and purpose of the soul as assimilation to God through virtue. Plotinus's virtue predominantly denotes those disciplines that purify the soul for contemplation.[547] Through a rigorous intellectual training the soul undergoes an inner movement that leads it from the 'outer man' to its 'inner self,' which is its true self. By turning inwards, the soul becomes aware of its divinity and in this felt mode of contemplation begins to feel 'at home'.[548]

For Plotinus, the soul only needs to realize its own divine nature in order to initiate its return. There is no need for bodily theurgic assistance nor any form of worship or religious practice. Such a confidence in the higher undescended soul, which possibly derives from Plotinus' personal mystical experiences[549], was criticised by later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus for being unsubstantiated.[550] If, as with Plotinus, the soul is undescended, and is naturally divine and eternally united with the higher realities, then traditional forms of religion and worship will be superfluous to its attainment of divine likeness and immortality. If, on the other hand, the soul is fully descended and of a humbler

[544] *Enn*. III.4.3.
[545] *Enn*. V.8.3; VI.6.7; I.2.4.
[546] Wallis 1972: 85.
[547] Wallis 1972: 85.
[548] *Enn*. I.6.9.
[549] Plotinus speaks of his own "waking up from the body" and experiences of the Intellect in *Enn*. IV.8.1.1-11; I.6.7.2; VI.9.9.46; VI.4.14-15.
[550] Wallis 1972: 72-82; 92-93.

status, the soul will require external assistance for its purification and salvation. Among Plotinus' immediate successors both Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus disagreed with him, and they also disagreed with each other as to how damaged the soul is and how much assistance from the gods man needs to remedy it.[551]

Porphyry believes the damage of the soul to be less serious than Plotinus did, but still, he finds it necessary to assist the soul by means of religious rituals.[552] He does, however, follow Plotinus' teaching on the incorporeality and the nature of Soul to a large extent.[553] He upholds both the unity and totality of Soul and the distinctiveness of individual souls. Facing the problem of the soul's embodiment, Porphyry preserves, through the Plotinian notion of the undescended soul, both the unity of all individual souls in Soul, and the essential nature of each soul as an independent, incorporeal reality.[554] Further, Porphyry asserts that, both in the body and after its death, souls keep to their own *τάξεις*.[555] When the soul descends into the body, it suffers no loss or change. The entire soul does not descend into the body; however, its essential aspect remains in union with all other souls in the hypostatic Soul, and it is only its lower part which is implicated in the body. Porphyry seems committed to Plotinus' teaching on the lower soul's need to reintegrate itself with the higher soul. In contrast to Plotinus, Porphyry seems not nearly as confident as Plotinus in the lower soul's ability to ever realize its divine kinship with Intellect, so he searches for a more universal way of salvation and emphasizes both virtue and theurgy for purification of the lower soul.[556] For Porphyry, it is only the higher or philosophical part of the soul that can be raised to the One by the means of philosophy alone (without the help of theurgy).[557] Iamblichus criticizes

[551] On late Neoplatonic views of the soul, see Steel 1978.
[552] Cf. Wallis 1972.
[553] Wallis 1972: 110–118; Steel 1978: 38 (n. 21).
[554] See Armstrong 1988: ch. 13. For Porphyry's psychological works, see Bidez 1913: 17, 33–38, 44, 73.
[555] Wallis 1972: 113.
[556] Smith 2008: 28–39, 56–68.
[557] Ibid. 28–39, 56–68.

Porphyry for precisely this idea, and says that "thinking by itself cannot unite the philosopher with the gods (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἔννοια συνάπτει τοῖς θεοῖς τοὺς θεουργούς)."[558] Becoming united with the One presupposes action and performance, not just philosophizing.[559] As we shall see in the next chapter, this is an attitude that is much more important from a Dionysian point of view, as Dionysius emphasizes the importance of ritual acts since he regards God's act of theurgy as necessary for all.[560]

Iamblichus rejects Plotinus' notion of the undescended soul.[561] For Iamblichus, the soul descends as a whole, and there is no part of the soul which remains above, pure and impassive. At the same time, he identifies a divine presence of the One within the soul which links the soul to the divine. This divine principle within is described in diverse ways as "the one" of the soul, a "certain divine good", "pre-established as more ancient than our nature", the transcendent "first principle" in us, an "innate knowledge" of, and an essential desire or eros for, the gods.[562] By means of this inner presence and knowledge of the divine, the rational soul can purify itself of the soul's lower, irrational lives' desire and return to the purity of its essential nature.[563] But for Iamblichus, the human soul is not capable on its own to return to the divine; the return requires divine assistance. This divine assistance is made available to souls through theurgy.[564] Theurgic ritual cleanses the rational soul and its vehicle of the stains of matter and awakens the eternal and intelligible principle within the soul; and ultimately it reunites the soul's activity with its essence.[565]

[558] *De Myst*, 9.11.
[559] *De Myst*, 11.
[560] In the next chapter, I shall explain how Dionysius understands theurgy as opposed to the traditional Neoplatonic understanding of it.
[561] See Steel 1978: 38–45.
[562] Shaw 1967: 118–126.
[563] Shaw 1967: Ch. 4.
[564] Ibid.
[565] Iamblichus, *DM*.97.15–19, 136.6–10. Cf. Finamore 1983: 34–36, 50–53.

To what extent is the human soul uplifted to the divine? For Iamblichus, the soul never moves beyond its own rank. Unlike Plotinus, he sees the human soul as being of a different rank from the divine mind, and prevailingly unlike it. There can be no fundamental transformation of the human soul into divine souls or gods. Unlike the gods we make mistakes and thus need illumination from outside. Nevertheless, the human soul is, through the will of the gods, capable of various degrees of perfection and, in this, has the possibility of assimilating itself to the higher divine order.[566] The gods further assist the soul in acquiring a "theurgic union," that is experienced, not merely contemplated.[567] This very much resembles Dionysius, who understands the human soul as graciously being assimilated to the One—as far as possible—yet never confused with it. In the process of being reunited with its essence, the soul depends on ritual acts, for in this manner the soul's proper movement can be restored. We shall get back to the meaning of the sacraments, which is essential for Dionysius' soteriology, in the next chapter, but first we shall look at his view of nature and composition of the human soul.

**The "anatomy" of the human soul**

Dionysius thinks of the soul as comprising a double nature, one which can think without bodily influence, and one which requires bodily influence.[568] *Ep*. 9 describes the human soul as divided, according to its mode of knowing, into a passionless and passionate part.[569]

> For also human life, which is at once indivisible and divisible, should be illuminated by divine knowledge in a manner suitable to itself. And the passionless part of the soul is in tune with the simple, and interior visions of the most godlike images. But the passionate part of the soul, as befits its nature, waits upon, and, at the same time, strives for the most divine realities by way of symbolic representations.[570]

[566] Iamblichus, *DM*. 69.5-19; cf. Finamore 1983: 154–155.
[567] Cf. Wallis 1972: 107.
[568] *Ep.* IX, 1, 1108A.
[569] See *Ep.* IX, Letter to Titus and *EH* 3, 7, 433D–436A.
[570] *Ep.* IX, 1, 1108A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 198): ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ζωὴν ἀμέριστον ἅμα καὶ μεριστὴν ὑπάρχουσαν οἰκείως ἑαυτῇ τὰς θείας ἐλλάμπεσθαι γνώσεις καὶ τὸ μὲν ἀπαθὲς τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς τὰ ἁπλᾶ

The soul's passionless part part (*ἀπαθὲς*) is "attuned to the simple and interior visions of divine images".[571] It has immediate access to the divinity, and needs no exterior aid to affect it from outside.[572] The soul's passionate part, on the other hand, "honors and rises up toward the most divine realities by way of symbolic representations".[573] The passionate (*παθητικόν*) part of the soul should be understood, as its root indicates, to "be affected". The senses are affected by things outside them, so knowledge gained through sensation and symbolic representations is "passionate", whereas knowledge unaffected by outside objects is "passionless".

The distinction between the passionless (*ἀπαθὲς*) and the passionate (*παθητικόν*) part of the soul resembles Plato's *Republic,* where Plato distinguishes between the rational and the non-rational soul.[574] For Plato the lower, non-rational part of the soul, is seen as lacking virtue and thus allowing for the passionate part of the soul to grow potentially without limit, taking over the other parts of the soul. For Dionysius, however, it is not seen as a "lower" part of the soul that needs to be kept under control or educated; it is actually much closer to the passionless part of the soul, and is in fact also yearning upwards towards illumination.[575] Although passions can be seen as an obstacle, the understanding of *pathetikon* as yearning upwards, shows that passions too participate in the Good and yearn for the highest Good. Hence, as both "undivided and divided", the human soul receives, according to Dionysius, "in an appropriate way the enlightenment of divine knowledge".[576] Through its "passionate aspect" (τὸ παθητικόν τῆς ψυχῆς), it is, in accordance with its nature, enlightened externally, and arrives at simple and unified contemplations of the intelligible realities by way of the

καὶ ἐνδότατα τῶν θεοειδῶν ἀγαλμάτων ἀφορίσαι θεάματα, τὸ δὲ παθητικὸν αὐτῆς συμφυῶς θεραπεύειν ἅμα καὶ ἀνατείνειν ἐπὶ τὰ θειότατα τοῖς προμεμηχανημένοις τῶν τυπωτικῶν συμβόλων ἀναπλασμοῖς.
[571] *Ep.* IX, 1, 1108A.
[572] Ibid.
[573] Ibid.
[574] Plato, *Politeia* 431ad.
[575] *DN* XI, 5, 953A.
[576] *Ep.* IX, 1, 1108AB.

symbolic and perceptible.[577] Through its "impassible aspect" (τὸ ἀπαθὲς τῆς ψυχῆς), however, it is capable of interior illumination, of immediate, direct, and simple conceptions of the intelligible realities.[578]

The passionless nature can be understood as *the divine, true self* that is able to comprehend the intelligible truth in reality, whereas the passionate nature is the part attached to images and discursive expressions.[579] This distinction in the soul also occurs in *Ep*. VIII: "So then give the appropriate place to desire, to anger, and to reason (Αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν ἐπιθυμίᾳ καὶ θυμῷ καὶ λόγῳ τὰ κατ' ἀξίαν ἀφόριζε)."[580] Later in the letter, Dionysius rebukes Demophilus about his behaviour towards his parishioners, warning him to correct his "untamed passions (ἀτίθασοι πάθοι)".[581] Also in *DN* IV, where he speaks of good and evil, Dionysius refers to the "inner conflict" between the rational and the passionate soul: "but also before the difference between the just person and their opposite manifests itself externally, firstly, in the very soul itself the vices separate fully from the virtues, and the passions rebel against reason (ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἔξω φαινομένης τοῦ ἐναρέτου πρὸς τὸν ἀντικείμενον διαστάσεως ἐν αὐτῇ πολλῷ πρότερον τῇ ψυχῇ καθόλου διεστήκασι τῶν ἀρετῶν αἱ κακίαι καὶ πρὸς τὸν λόγον τὰ πάθη στασιάζει)."[582] Dionysius introduces us to a paradox here: if everything has some share in the Good, and if evil has no being, then virtue and vice must be exactly the same; whatever conflicts with virtue cannot be evil, and yet the opposite of moderation is excess and the opposite of justice is injustice.[583] This also has repercussions for how he views the passions:

> For instance, the depraved sinner, though deprived of the Good by his irrational desire, he is in this respect lacking in being and desires that which has no being. But still, he participates in the Good,

[577] *Ep*. IX, 198, 5–14.
[578] *Ep*. IX, 1, 1108AB.
[579] Cf. Dillon and Wear 2013: 88.
[580] *Ep*. VIII, 4, 1093C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 183).
[581] *Ep*. VIII, 5, 1097A.
[582] *DN* IV, 19, 717A (ed. Suchla 1990: 164).
[583] *DN* IV, 19, 716D.

since there is in him a distorted reflection of real love and unity… And even he who desires the very worst life; yet in so far as he feels desire at all, and desires life, and what he thinks the best kind of life, thus participates in the Good.[584]

Thus, a will to do evil does not exist. Yet, there is evil in the human soul, says Dionysius, and it does not owe its origin to matter, but comes from disorder and error.[585] Those "rejoicing in strife, anger, change, and instability (τοὺς ἔρισι καὶ θυμοῖς καὶ ἀλλοιώσεσι καὶ ἀκαταστασίαις χαίροντας)" do not have bad intentions really, says Dionysius, they do not want to do evil; they are just "being moved to tumultuous passions and unskillfully trying to calm them (πρὸς παθῶν ἐνοχλούμενοι πολυκινήτων καὶ ταῦτα ἱστάν ἀνεπιστημόνως)."[586] Even the passions (*πάθη*) are movements, yearning for the good, in some sense, but they are driven by *ἀταξία*, disorder, which causes evil in the human soul.[587] Passions are a consequence of the fall: "From the very beginning human nature has stupidly glided away from those good things bestowed on it by God. It turned to the life of the most varied desires (Τὴν ἀνθρωπείαν φύσιν ἀρχῆθεν ἀπὸ τῶν θείων ἀγαθῶν ἀνοήτως ἐξολισθήσασαν ἡ πολυπαθεστάτη ζωὴ διαδέχεται)".[588] Accordingly, the human nature that freely chooses to glide away from God is unreasonable (*ἀνόητος*), and the lack of reason has its repercussions:

But as for those infected by stain and sin, even though they have experienced some level of initation, yet, which they of their own accord stupidly abandoned so that they could give themselves over to destructive desires, these people – when they come to the end of their earthly lives – will no longer view the divine ordinance of the Scriptures with similar contempt, but regard the destructive pleasures of their own passions with different eyes and pronounce as blessed the holy life that they had stupidly abandoned they are piteously and unwillingly separated from this present life, not lead to holy hope on account of their wicked life.[589]

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[584] *DN* IV, 20, 720B-C (ed. Suchla 1990: 166-167): Οἷον ὁ ἀκόλαστος, εἰ καὶ ἐστέρηται τἀγαθοῦ κατὰ τὴν ἄλογον ἐπιθυμίαν, ἐν τούτῳ μὲν οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε ὄντων ἐπιθυμεῖ, μετέχει δὲ ὅμως τἀγαθοῦ κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς ἑνώσεως καὶ φιλίας ἀμυδρὸν ἀπήχημα. Καὶ ὁ θυμὸς μετέχει τἀγαθοῦ κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ κινεῖσθαι καὶ ἐφίεσθαι τὰ δοκοῦντα κακὰ πρὸς τὸ δοκοῦν καλὸν ἀνορθοῦν καὶ ἐπιστρέφειν. Καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ τῆς χειρίστης ζωῆς ἐφιέμενος ὡς ὅλως ζωῆς ἐφιέμενος καὶ τῆς ἀρίστης αὐτῷ δοκούσης κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ ἐφίεσθαι καὶ ζωῆς ἐφίεσθαι καὶ πρὸς ἀρίστην ζωὴν ἀποσκοπεῖν μετέχει τἀγαθοῦ.
[585] *DN* IV, 28, 729B.
[586] *DN* XI, 5, 953A (ed. Suchla 1990: 220).
[587] *DN* XI, 5, 953A; Cf. Stock 2008: 35–39.
[588] *EH* III, 3, 11, 440C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 90).
[589] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 121): Οἱ δὲ μολυσμῶν ἀνάπλεοι καὶ ἀνιέρων κηλίδων, εἴπερ ἱερᾶς τινος τετυχήκασι μυήσεως αὐτοὶ δὲ ταύτην ἐκ τοῦ οἰκείου νοὸς ὀλεθρίως ἀπορραπίσαντες ἐπὶ τὰς φθοροποιοὺς ηὐτομόλησαν ἐπιθυμίας, ὅταν ἐπὶ τὸ τέλος ἔρχωνται τῆς ἐνθάδε ζωῆς, οὐκέτι ὁμοίως αὐτοῖς εὐκαταφρόνητος φανεῖται τῶν λογίων ἡ θεία θεσμοθεσία, τὰς ὀλλυμένας δὲ τῶν οἰκείων παθῶν ἡδονὰς ἑτέροις

Falling away from the holy life is unreasonable and adherence to passions is fatal. Passions lead the soul astray and bring about a state of agitation and unrest.

Apart from the distinction between the impassive and passionate elements of the soul, Dionysius identifies within the soul Platonic aspects such as reason (*λόγος*), passion (*θύμος*) and desire (*ἐπιθυμία*).[590] And yet, in a different passage where he speaks of intellect (*νοῦς*), opinion (*δόξα*), passion, desire and nature (*φύσις*), he emphasises that although the soul may be divided in rational and irrational faculties, it remains indivisible.[591] There is a close link between *πάθος, θύμος, ἐπιθυμία* and *φαντασία* in Dionysius.[592] For example, in characterizing what the evil in the demons means, Dionysius mentions both unreasonable anger (*θύμος ἄλογος*) and ignorant desire (*ἄνους ἐπιθυμία*), and, surprisingly, the hasty/passionate imagination (*φαντασία προπέτες*).[593] In order to arrive at the divine, one has to, not only abandon the "opposing life", but also be purified from the "empty imagination",[594] and even the highest levels in the Dionysian hierarchy need to cleanse their souls from the "last images", as these are material and sensual representations of the beauties of the world that just increase the tendency towards materialism (πρόσυλον).[595]

The soul's inclination towards matter is, however, not the only thing that moves the soul; there is also another impassive part of the soul that is yearning upwards (*ἀνωφερὲς τῆς ψυχῆς*).[596] This higher level of the soul is able to share pure intellection with the angelic beings. And in this way, though embodied and bound in time, human souls are "undivided", just as they are "eternal", insofar as they are like the angels who themselves are the mean of

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ὀφθαλμοῖς ἐπισκοπήσαντες καὶ τὴν ἱερὰν ζωὴν ἧς ἀνοήτως ἐκπεπτώκασιν, μακαρίσαντες ἐλεεινῶς καὶ ἀβουλήτως ἀποσχίζονται τοῦ τῇδε βίου πρὸς μηδεμίαν ἱερὰν ἐλπίδα χειραγωγούμενοι διὰ τὴν χειρίστην ζωήν.
[590] *Ep.*VIII, 1093A.
[591] *DN* IX, 5, 913A; *MT* IV, 1045D; *CH* II, 3,141C–144B; *Ep.* VIII, 3, 1093A.
[592] Stock 2008: 38.
[593] *DN* 725B. See Stock 2008: 38.
[594] *EH* III, 7, 436B.
[595] See Stock 2008: 38; Marmodoro and Cartwright 2018.
[596] *CH* II, 3, 141BC.

undivided and divided being, and of eternity and time.[597] Hence, although differentiated by its rational and irrational faculties, the soul is, according to Dionysius, nonetheless indivisible.[598]

Clearly, the human soul needs spiritual guidance, a *ψυχαγωγία*.[599] It is impossible for man to contemplate the divine without using the aid (χειραγωγία) of material symbols that must be interpreted.[600] The symbols thus have a dialectical function; they provide an educational and anagogic aid to interpretation, a help to lift the soul in a manner suitable to its nature. Dionysius justifies the use of symbols that may seem vulgar or banal, that lead to "incongruous dissimilarities (πρὸς τὰς ἀπεμφαινούσας ἀνομοιότητας)", because they avert misunderstanding among those unable to transcend visible beauty.[601] He argues that it is easier to understand that these symbols cannot say something real about the deity, while "similar" symbols may mislead one to believe that the transcendent deity is possible to describe in a full manner.[602] It was in order to lift up the mind to the spiritual that the scriptural writers used such images, Dionysius tells us, for "by doing this they took account of our inherent tendency toward the material and our willingness to be lazily satisfied by base images. At the same time, they enabled that part of the soul which longs for the things above to rise up (μὴ συγχωροῦσα τὸ πρόσυλον ἡμῶν εἰς τὰς αἰσχρὰς εἰκόνας ἀπομένον ἐπαναπαύεσθαι, διανιστῶσα δὲ τὸ ἀνωφερὲς τῆς ψυχῆς)".[603] We shall look closer at the anagogical function of symbols and divine images in the next chapter, but for now we can

[597] *DN* IV,19, 717A.
[598] *DN* 210, 14–19 (913A).
[599] *EH* 397C; *EH* 428A.
[600] *CH* I, 121.
[601] Dionysius writes ἀπεμφαινούσας ἀνομοιότητας, "different similarities" of "different" symbols, see *CH* II, 4; *DN* IX, 6. I choose to use the term "different symbols".
[602] *CH* II, 2.
[603] *CH* II, 3, 141BC (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 13).

state that the soul depends on material elements for its ascent, something that leads us to the next section, about the status and function of the body.

**The body as necessary for the soul's salvation**

According to Dionysius the human person is a single, undivided unit; embodied and physical. This view implies salvation for the body as well. As even found in the Old Testament understanding of life after death, where the resurrection of the body is either hinted or anticipated (cf. Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2), Dionysius joins a line of thinkers who regard physicality as an essential and enduring element of personhood. He therefore looks beyond the separation of body and soul at death to their future reintegration at the resurrection on the Last Day. Even in this present life, he insists, one should not only simply seek to save one's soul, but also aim to make one's body holy. Dionysius' appreciation of the body is made explicit in *EH* VII, 2 where he mentions the funeral ceremony in which the coffin is left open, allowing those left behind to give a final kiss to the departed, clearly validating the dead body in the coffin as an object of love, not abhorrence.[604] The body is along with the soul called upon to reach its own proper order in relation to the Good, which is its source. Dionysius sees that perfection of the human person and being within the cosmos does not require an escape from the body; rather Life, he says, "has promised us that it will transform what we are—I mean our souls and the bodies yoked to them—and will bring us to perfect life and immortality (ψυχάς φημι καὶ τὰ συζυγῆ σώματα, πρὸς παντελῆ ζωὴν καὶ ἀθανασίαν ἐπήγγελται μεταθήσειν)".[605]

Dionysius speaks of body and soul as constituting together the whole man.[606] This reveals a traditional Christian approach to human nature that differs significantly from non-

[604] *EH* VII, 2. See also Ware, in Coakley 1997: 104.
[605] *DN* VI, 2, 865D (ed. Suchla 1990: 194).
[606] *EH* VII, 3, 9.

Christian approaches. In Neoplatonism, where the human being is similarly understood as a composite of different parts, this composition is only temporal, with the physical body being often seen as an obstacle to the spiritual ascent. Although matter is not necessarily seen as evil, at least not in later Neoplatonism, liberation from the body is often seen as a reward for the virtuous life, and soteriology is merely about the human soul. According to a Platonic text, (*Alcibiades* I, 130C) "the soul is man (ἡ ψυχή ἐστιν ἄνθρωπος)," and within the soul it is only the intellectual part of the soul that possesses immortality. The material body is not seen as evil but needs to be kept under control as established in the analogy of the charioteer in *Phaedrus* 246ab, 253–254b. The true person, as the *Phaedrus* sees it, is a pure intellect, temporarily imprisoned in the body. This negative view of the body remained in Plotinus (204/5 – 270 C.E.), who "seemed ashamed of being in a body (ἐώκει μὲν αἰσχυνομένῳ ὅτι ἐν σώματι εἴη)".[607] Consequently, due to the pessimistic Platonic view of the body, we basically deal with the soteriology of the human soul in Neoplatonism, which pre-existed the body and will survive the body's dissolution. In Dionysius, on the contrary, it is the *whole* composite human being that is to be saved, both body and soul exemplified in the incarnated Christ, who is the "example of human life conforming perfectly to God (τὴν καθ' … θεοειδεστάτην ζωήν.)".[608]

**The body and its cosmic significance: Platonic accounts**

The concept of the human person and the human body amongst Christians in Dionysius' time may be better understood by looking at Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, which was very influential in late antiquity.[609] Its cosmology and anthropology were typical for conceptions of the body

[607] Porphyry (1996), *Life of Plotinus*, 1–2, ed. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1, London. Armstrong 1996.
[608] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C.
[609] See *Timeaus*, trans. by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library, 1929. One recent important work on the body in late antiquity has been published by Coakley 1997: 111f.

at that time.[610] The human person is here seen as an image of the whole cosmos. The cosmos is the great body/world, whereas the human being is the little body/individual. As in the case of the body of the universe, the human body is an animated one, i.e., a body endowed with a soul and reason.[611] Yet, there are also important differences between the cosmic body and the human body and, correspondingly, between the cosmic and human soul. The main difference between the body of the universe and the human body is that the universe constitutes a whole of the bodily mass,[612] whereas the latter is made from parts of this whole.[613] In essence, the human body is seen as part of the cosmos and as an encapsulation of it at the same time. The body reflects the cosmos and is therefore a key to understanding the cosmos.

Christians in late antiquity expressed their "cosmic" understanding of the human person in similar ways to the *Timaeus*, and, as Andrew Louth has showed, this happened both on a practical and theoretical level: first, on a practical level, the position of the body in prayer has "cosmic" significance in that it is held upright.[614] The *Timaeus* gives a rather practical expression of the body as "the sovereign [or the rational part] of the human soul" that "dwells on the top of the body" and "inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, [the soul] raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven":[615]

> And we should consider that God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven. And in this we say truly; for the divine power suspended the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus made the whole body upright.[616]

[610] Cf. Louth, in Coakley 1997: 111.
[611] *Tim.* 30B.
[612] Cf. *Tim*. 32c5–33a2.
[613] Cf. *Tim*. 42e8–43a2.
[614] Louth, in Coakley 1997: 112.
[615] *Timaeus* 90 AB.
[616] *Timaeus* 90 AB: τὸ δὲ δὴ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ' ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἴδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῇδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἑκάστῳ δέδωκεν, τοῦτο ὃ δή φαμεν οἰκεῖν μὲν ἡμῶν ἐπ' ἄκρῳ τῷ σώματι, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ συγγένειαν ἀπὸ γῆς ἡμᾶς αἴρειν ὡς ὄντας φυτὸν οὐκ ἔγγειον ἀλλὰ οὐράνιον, ὀρθότατα λέγοντες· ἐκεῖθεν γάρ, ὅθεν ἡ πρώτη τῆς ψυχῆς γένεσις ἔφυ, τὸ θεῖον τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ῥίζαν ἡμῶν ἀνακρεμαννὺν ὀρθοῖ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα.

Plato's emphasis on man's upright posture and its cosmic significance seems to be a notion that had become a commonplace in antiquity.[617] The early Christians (like the Jews and later the Muslims) took this a step further. They had special instructions on how to pray, as well as certain positions one should assume: the praying Christian should be standing up, with hands raised and face turned to the east as a symbol for "the soul looking towards where the true light arises".[618] There were also instructions for men to keep their heads uncovered.[619] The custom of standing for prayer, which to this day is practiced on Sundays and during Pentecost in Orthodox churches, was given canonical authority by the First Ecumenical Council, held at Nicea in 325.[620] It is a practical expression that gives the body a special significance as well as providing the basis for a notion of sacred space.[621]

On a theoretical level, the human person is given "cosmic" significance in the way the human body is understood in a cosmic context.[622] The early Christians worked out their own version of the ancient cosmic understanding of humankind. Doctrines of creation would refer to God, who created everything, and it was good. Embodied human beings were fashioned in the image of God, but Adam sinned and brought about the Fall. The goal of the Christian life is thus to overcome sin and transcend the duality caused by the Fall.[623] Such ideas would have powerful influence on ideals of Christian living in late antiquity. A characteristic feature of Christian life in that period is the importance given to the ideal of celibacy.[624] As Peter Brown has showed in his survey, *The Body and Society* (1989), various justifications might be given

[617] Louth, in Coakley 1997: 113.
[618] Origen *de Oratione* 32. Churches would also be oriented towards the East.
[619] Louth, in Coakley 1997: 113. Louth is referring here to three treatises on prayer from the pre-Constantine period: Origen's *de Oratione* 31f., Tertullian's *de Oratione* 14, 17 and Cyprian's *de Oratione Dominica* 4ff.
[620] Louth, in Coakley 1997: 113.
[621] Cf. Louth, in Coakley 1997: 114.
[622] Cf. Louth, in Coakley 1997: 115.
[623] Ibid.
[624] See Brown 1988.

for such an ideal. St Paul, for example, defends celibacy on the grounds that it makes us free from worldly concerns.[625]

Dionysius addresses the discrepancies between Church Fathers and the Platonists (or the 'unholy' as Dionysius calls them) in their attitudes towards the body and its relationship to the soul. In *EH* VII, 1, 2 the notions of the dissolution of the body after death and the Platonic separation of the soul and the body are explicitly rejected, as well as the Platonic and Origenistic view of transmigration of souls and the idea that souls will receive other spiritual bodies:

> Among the profane, there are some who illogically think that our bodies go to a dissolution of being. Others believe that the union between body and soul will be broken once for all, since they see it as unfitting for souls to be trammeled with a body in the divine life and blessed lots. Because of their lack of understanding of the divine things, these people do not consider the fact that our Godlike life in Christ has already begun. And there are others who would assign other bodies to the soul, committing injustice, as I see it, to the bodies which have struggled together with the holy souls. They wrongly deprive them of the sacred rewards which they have earned when they have reached the goal of their divine course. And others, again, say that the most holy and blessed beatitude, promised to the saints, is like our life in this world, and they impiously claim that those who have become equal to the angels enjoy the nourishment typical of mutable life. None of the sacred men, however, will ever fall into such errors, for they know that when they come to the goal of this present life, they will, with their whole being, inherit the tranquility that makes them Christ-like.[626]

But, Dionysius states, not everyone will fall into errors as these, i.e., believing: 1) that the body will be dissolved at death, 2) that the link between body and soul will be permanently broken, or 3) that the souls will move into new bodies (cf. transmigration of souls). Religious men, who have a more adequate acquaintance with divine understanding would know that "their whole selves [body included] will receive the Christ-like inheritance" when they have

[625] Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:15-25.

[626] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 121): Τῶν δὲ ἀνιέρων οἱ μὲν εἰς ἀνυπαρξίαν ἀλόγως οἴονται χωρεῖν, οἱ δὲ τὴν σωματικὴν εἰσάπαξ ἀπορρήγνυσθαι τῶν οἰκείων ψυχῶν συζυγίαν ὡς ἀνάρμοστον αὐταῖς ἐν θεοειδεῖ ζωῇ καὶ μακαρίαις λήξεσιν οὐκ ἐννοήσαντες οὐδὲ ἱκανῶς ἐν ἐπιστήμῃ θείᾳ μυηθέντες ἀρχθεῖσαν ἤδη τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐν Χριστῷ θεοειδεστάτην ζωήν. Ἄλλοι δὲ σωμάτων ἄλλων ἀπονέμουσι ταῖς ψυχαῖς συζυγίας ἀδικοῦντες τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ὡς οἶμαι τὰ συμπονήσαντα ταῖς θείαις ψυχαῖς καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀντιδόσεων οὐκ εὐαγῶς ἀποστεροῦντες τὰ πρὸς τὸ πέρας ἐλθόντα τῶν θειοτάτων δρόμων. Ἄλλοι δὲ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐπὶ προσύλους ἐννοίας ἀποκλιθέντες εἰρήκασιν ὁμοειδῆ τοῦ τῇδε βίου τὴν τοῖς ὁσίοις ἐπηγγελμένην ἁγιωτάτην καὶ μακαριστὴν λῆξιν καὶ τροφὰς οἰκείας ἀλλοιωτῷ βίῳ τοῖς ἰσαγγέλοις ἀθεμίτως ἀπέρριψαν.

come to the goal of this present life, Dionysius explains.[627] This is because Christ already has provided the example of the human life as a whole, conformed perfectly to God. These religious men live a more satisfactory life, says Dionysius, they are filled with a "Divine satisfaction" knowing they have good things in store and that they will "hold firmly and everlastingly the good things already acquired".[628] They know they have and always will have the fair reward which they have earned. Believing in transmigration of souls, or reincarnation, is, according to Dionysius, a devaluing of the bodies which have accompanied the souls and shared in the struggles. These bodies are wrongly denied the sacred rewards which they have earned at the end of the divine race.

**The centrality of the body in Greek Patristic thought**

The use of Platonic images in combination with biblical images and concepts was typical for the Church Fathers. Some of them would stick to the traditional Hebraic-biblical tradition which is strongly holistic in its understanding of the human person, others would take a more Hellenistic approach, which is more dualistic and makes a differentiation between soul and body. For the most part the Fathers would argue for the body being part of God's creation, and therefore in itself good.[629] Dionysius uses the expression "yoke-fellows and companions of the holy souls" about the body. He esteems the body and assures that, with proper purification, the body too will enjoy an immortal, divine life. As we are a union of body and soul, our perfection lies not in the isolation of the soul from the body, says Dionysius, but in our emulation of the true union of the divine and human exemplified in Christ, the Godman.

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[627] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C.
[628] Ibid.
[629] See, for example, John Climacus, Abbot of Sinai, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 1982, pp. 185-6. Here he writes about his own body:

"He is my helper and my enemy, my assistant and my opponent, a protector and a traitor. How can I hate him when my nature disposes me to love him? How can I break away from him when I am bound to him forever? How can I escape from him when he is going to rise with me?... I embrace him. And I turn away from him. What is this mystery in me?"

Purification is achieved through the theurgic rites or sacraments which purify and uplift the body and soul according to the nature of each. Contemplation of sacred symbols is also important for the purification:[630]

> Now, the purified bodies which are yoked to and traveling with the holy souls and have fought together with the souls in their struggles throughout the divine life, will also be rewarded for their efforts in the service of God and receive their own resurrection and the same unchanged steadfastness as that bestowed upon souls. For having been united with the holy souls whose companions they were in this present life they have become members of Christ. They will receive in return the Godlike and imperishable immortality, and blessed tranquility. This is why the saints sleep with a joyous and unshaken hope when they reach the goal of the sacred combat.[631]

John Climacus, the Abbot of Sinai, would similarly call the relation of soul and body within the human being 'yoking' (*zeuxis*) and 'blending' (*sygkrasis*).[632] According to Gregory of Nyssa, the principle of this commingling is inexpressive, and its mode is inexplicable and incomprehensive:

> The communion of the mind with the corporeal presents a union which is inexpressible and inconceivable; it is neither within it (for the incorporeal is not contained within the corporeal), nor does it surround it from the outside (for what is incorporeal does not contain anything); but the mind approaching our nature in some inexplicable and incomprehensible way, and coming into contact with it, is to be regarded as both in it and around it, neither implanted in it nor enfolded with it.[633]

Humanity's earthly nature is, writes Christos Yannaras, "the only product in God's material creation in which the supramundane nature of the soul is implanted, permeating each part equally, to mark it out for personal existence, to imprint on the body the image of the

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[630] *EH* VII, 1.

[631] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553AB (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 120-121): Τὰ δὲ καθαρὰ τῶν ἱερῶν ψυχῶν ὁμόζυγα καὶ ὁμοπόρευτα σώματα συναπογραφέντα καὶ συναθλήσαντα κατὰ τοὺς θείους αὐτῶν ἱδρῶτας ἐν τῇ τῶν ψυχῶν ἀτρέπτῳ κατὰ τὴν θείαν ζωὴν ἱδρύσει συναπολήψεται τὴν οἰκείαν ἀνάστασιν. Ἑνωθέντα γὰρ αἷς ἥνωντο κατὰ τὸν τῇδε βίον ἱεραῖς ψυχαῖς, ὡς μέλη Χριστοῦ γεγονότα τὴν θεοειδῆ καὶ ἄφθαρτον ἀθάνατόν τε καὶ μακαρίαν ἀπολήψεται λῆξιν. Ἐν τούτοις μὲν οὖν ἡ τῶν ἱερῶν ἐστι κοίμησις ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ καὶ ἀσαλεύτοις ἐλπίσιν εἰς τὸ τῶν θείων ἀγώνων ἀφικνουμένη πέρας.

[632] In his famous treatise *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, see Luibheid (ed.) 1982.

[633] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, ch. 15 (PG 44:177): Ἡ δὲ τοῦ νοῦ πρὸς τὸ σωματικὸν κοινωνία ἄφραστόν τε καὶ ἀνεπινόητον τὴν συνάφειαν ἔχει, οὔτε ἐντὸς οὖσα (οὔτε γὰρ ἐγκρα- τεῖται σώματι τὸ ἀσώματον), οὔτε ἐκτὸς περιέχουσα (οὐ γὰρ περιλαμβάνει τι τὰ ἀσώματα)· ἀλλὰ κατά τινα τρόπον ἀμήχανόν τε καὶ ἀκατανόητον ἐγγίζων ὁ νοῦς τῇ φύσει, καὶ προσαπτόμενος, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ περὶ αὐτὴν θεωρεῖται, οὔτε ἐγκαθήμενος, οὔτε περιπτυσσόμενος·

personal God as in the impression of a seal".[634] This blending of soul and body, "the highest union" (ἄκρᾱ ἕνωσις), in the words of Maximus Confessor,[635] is, according to Yannaras, what defines the simultaneous identity and difference of the human existence, and what conveys both the ontological distinction of person and nature and the existential mystery of humanity's twofold nature.[636] Yannaras explains:

> Even though the two distinctions soul and body, person and nature—mutually coinhere in existential terms, it is nevertheless impossible for them to be identified without destroying, through an intellectual objectification, the real and ineffable unity of all the "levels" of human existence in the fact of personal ecstasy, the "enhypostatic communion" of corporeal and psychical, of personal and natural, distinctive properties.[637]

**Body and soul compound: doctrinal concerns**

The reverence that the Greek Fathers had for the mystery of the human composite being is expressed in their avoidance of any distinctions and ontological definitions of the elements making up the human composite being—soul and body.[638] Philosophical anthropology's attempt to define human existence as a composite dual reality by distinguishing soul from body or matter from spirit was, as Yannaras notes, accepted by Christian theology with exclusive reference to the *nature* of humanity, or of the ontological distinction between soul and body in the human nature.[639] This duality was discussed at the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451), which pronounced the incarnate God as "truly God and truly man, consisting of a rational soul and a body (θεὸν ἀληθῶς καὶ ἄνθρωπον ἀληθῶς τὸν αὐτὸν, ἐκ ψυχῆς λογικῆς καὶ σώματος,)", a conviction whose meaning and content finds support in the Bible as well as in Patristic texts.[640] "There is nothing more unitary than the person," says, Leontius

[634] Yannaras 2007: 46.
[635] Ibid.
[636] Ibid.
[637] Ibid.
[638] Ibid.: 47.
[639] Ibid.: 44.
[640] Ibid.

of Byzantium, for example, referring to the union of the divine and human in the Person of Christ.[641] However, it does not seem that the early Church Fathers ever gave any precise and consistent definition of the terms of "soul" and "body" or of their difference. The Fathers would admittedly often refer to the two "essences" of human nature. John Chrysostom, for example, speaks of the "incorporeal essence of the soul (τὴν ἀσώματον οὐσίαν τῆς ψυχῆς)" and the "irrational essence of the body".[642] But, taken together, the patristic understanding of the relationship between the material and the spiritual within human nature seems vague or unspoken, and may be referred to as the mystery of mingling.[643] John Climacus would, for example, ask, "What is the mystery concerning me? What is the principle of my constitution?", when writing about his body and its relationship to his soul.[644]

As Peter Brown shows in his survey, *The Body and Society* (1989), there has never been a single universally accepted doctrine of human personhood among the Christians in late antiquity. Our soul and physicality were understood by early Christians in a wide variety of ways. The seven ecumenical councils, which met between 325 and 787, made no formal definitions concerning human nature or the human body.[645] Some early Church Fathers, such as Clement and Origen, would elevate the soul over the body when writing on the role of the body and its relation to the soul.[646] According to them, the body is the inferior partner in the body–soul relationship, a prison of the soul, which would impede the soul in its attempt to be

[641] *Against the Aphthartodocetans* (PG 86:1380b), see Yannaras 2007: 43.
[642] John Chrysostom, Homily on Genesis 14, 5 (PG 53:117).
[643] Cf. Yannaras 2007: 45.
[644] Luibheid (ed.)1982: 185-6.
[645] Ware, in Coakley 1997: 90.
[646] According to Origen, only the soul existed in Paradise—the body was taken on by Adam and Eve as they were cast out of Paradise. The body tends to be oriented towards lust and sin, but it is also a creation of God. God created the body like a work of art in his image. This creation reflects God's intelligence. The human body is somehow similar to God. It is the task for every Christian to become a mirror of him. Unlike the human body, the soul is an image of God. The body cannot be an image of God, otherwise God would look like a human being with a human body. Only the soul can see God, but it is caught between the flesh and spirit. It constantly has to make a choice between the two. See Gahbauer 1984: 51 ff.

the image of God.[647] Images of the soul as being 'bound to the body' and the body as 'the prison of the soul' is something that we recognize already since Plato's dialogues *Phaedrus* (246a-256e), *Phaedo* (62b) and *Cratylus* (400c). Some of the Christian Fathers seem to be inspired by these Platonic images. Others would emphasize that, like the soul, the body is also created by God in his image. Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo applied these views in their teachings on the human body, virginity, and celibacy. So did Gregory of Nyssa who defines man thus, saying, "but man, a single being composed of soul and body (Ἀλλ' ἑνὸς ὄντος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, τοῦ διὰ ψυχῆς τε καὶ σώματος συνεστηκότος)".[648] Such a view of man as a composite human being could also be understood in the terminology of the Bible, where body and soul are related to person and nature, as in Gen 2:7: "And God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul." The soul (*nephesh*), which is the result of the breath that God breathed into man, is not seen as the spiritual part of man as opposed to the material but is rather understood as the entire human being or the human *person*, which is created in the image of God. And the body is the *nature*, the material reality.[649]

**Pauline distinctions**

An important question to have in mind when speaking of the human body is to which level of existence are we referring – the unfallen or the fallen body? Many of the early Church Fathers focused on the body in terms of its origin, as it was in its natural state, created by God. Their theology's focus was on the condition of the body before the Fall of man, and on its destination and its relation to the soul. A holistic view of the person is already evident in St. Paul, who would rather contrast flesh (σάρξ) and spirit (πνεῦμα) than body (σῶμα) and

[647] Origen suggests that Christians should free themselves from bodily restrictions as much as possible in this life. The body is important however, in the context of resurrection. While he pays heed to Saint Paul, who said the resurrection of the body will mean a new body, Origen insists that its identity must be recognizable. See Gahbauer 1984: 52ff.
[648] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Creation of Man* 29 (PG 44:233).
[649] Cf. Yannaras 2007: 45.

soul (ψυχὴ), as is the case in the Letters. "Flesh" is not to be understood merely as bodily or physically, but as both soul and body when separated from God. "Spirit" is not to be understood as the soul, but as the human person in its entirety, as body and soul together, when it is living in communion with God.[650] In short, "flesh" (σάρξ) is the whole person as fallen, whereas "spirit" (πνεῦμα) is the whole person as redeemed. According to Paul, the mind can become 'fleshly' or 'carnal' (cf. Colossians 2:18), just as the body can become 'spiritual' (1 Corinthians 15: 44). While πνεῦμα is used of man in virtue of which he is open to and transmits the life of God (cf. Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 2: 10f.), σάρξ is man in contrast with God, i.e., man in his worldliness (cf. Galatians 6: 8). To "abide in the flesh" (Philippians 1: 24) is to continue living in this life (cf. Galatians 2: 20: "The life that I now live in the flesh"). Wisdom "after the flesh" (1 Corinthians 1: 26) thus simply means "the wisdom of men" (1 Corinthians 2: 5). And when Paul says, "I conferred not with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1: 16) it means "with no other human beings."

While the concept of σάρξ is the key to Paul's anthropology as it establishes man in his 'otherness' from God, σῶμα is the carrier of man's resurrection.[651] The expression which stands in the ancient Greek texts of the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body", is the resurrection of the body (σῶμα), not the flesh (σάρξ). Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corintians 15: 50). The flesh is what stands between man and God, and that needs to be destroyed. It is the body, σῶμα, that will be raised at the end. How did the first Christians conceive this? Paul says in Philippians 3: 21 that at the end Christ will transform our lowly body into the body of his own glory (δόξα). And in 2 Corinthians 3: 18 he says that 'We are being transformed into his own likeness from glory to glory' (ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν). How can we understand glory (δόξα)? The first Christians conceived it as a sort of

[650] Cf. Ware in Coakley 1997: 93.
[651] For the concept of the flesh and the body in St Paul, see Robinson 1952: 17-33.

light-substance, or rather as the shining revelation of the inner being of the divine: In the Book of Revelation, this glory is a substance, which circulates around the throne, radiating out and returning in an eternal cycle. (Rev.4: 2-11). It is the incorruptible body, the σῶμα that is going to be transformed into this glory. It can be raised only if it first dies from its lower part or from the external man, which is the body as commonly understood: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us… (2 Corinthians 4: 10-12). Paul applies the term *soma* both to the human body and to the bread received in the Eucharist and to the community of the church, "the body of Christ". In the next chapter we shall see how this also applies to Dionysius since he includes term "body" on various levels, both as the physical body of the worshipper, the sacramental body that each receives in holy communion, the ecclesial body of the church, and at last the body of the Resurrection. We shall see how these aspects of the body are interconnected and how they represent essential corporeal dimensions in the process of transforming and deifying man. But now we shall take a closer look at the nature of Dionysius' concept of the nature of the soul.

**Divine transcendence and the self-identity of the human soul**

In the *DN* Dionysius addresses various questions concerning the human soul and explains how the soul derives its being from the Good:

> Next to these sacred and holy minds, are the human souls and all the excellences that belong to them. Their being derives from the transcendent God, therefore they too possess intelligence, immortality, and existence. By elevating themselves to the angelic lives, and through their good guidance mount towards the generous Origin of all things, so can they, each according to their capacity, become partakers of the illuminations streaming from above. They too possess and can share this gift as far as

their power extends, and they attend all the other privileges which I described in my book *On the Soul*.[652]

Although the treatise *On the soul* that he mentions does not exist, the qualities he mentions can be reconstructed by what he writes about the soul throughout the corpus. Some questions to be asked are: how does Dionysius preserve the distinct identity of the soul in the face of divine unity? If the soul, as effect, remains in its cause, how can the soul be said to be other than its cause? Is the soul absorbed into the cause in its return? How does the soul affect its return? Dionysius answers these questions in *DN* 11 by referring to the divine name "Peace". He says that God is called peace because "the divine Peace is indivisible (ἀδιαιρέτως δηλαδὴ τῆς θείας εἰρήνης ἑστώσης)" and "permeates the whole world without ever departing from its own identity (διὰ πάντων φοιτώσης καὶ τῆς οἰκείας ταὐτότητος οὐκ ἐξισταμένης".[653] This also counts for creatures since "all things love to have peace and unity in themselves, and remain as it is, without moving or falling away from its own existence and from what it has (Πάντα γὰρ ἀγαπᾷ πρὸς ἑαυτὰ εἰρηνεύειν τε καὶ ἡνῶσθαι καὶ ἑαυτῶν καὶ τῶν ἑαυτῶν ἀκίνητα καὶ ἄπτωτα εἶναι.)."[654] The identity of each is valuable and should not be lost, for "perfect peace guards each individuality, as a providential gift it is keeping all things quiet and free of confusion without and within, and establishing all things, in the power of solid stability, so as to possess their own peace and rest (Καὶ ἔστι καὶ τῆς καθ' ἕκαστον ἀμιγοῦς ἰδιότητος ἡ παντελὴς εἰρήνη φυλακτικὴ ταῖς εἰρηνοδώροις αὐτῆς προνοίαις τὰ πάντα ἀστασίαστα καὶ ἀσύμφυρτα πρός τε ἑαυτὰ καὶ πρὸς ἄλληλα διασώζουσα καὶ πάντα ἐν σταθερᾷ καὶ ἀκλίτῳ δυνάμει πρὸς τὴν ἑαυτῶν εἰρήνην καὶ ἀκινησίαν ἱστῶσα)."[655] God, or

[652] *DN* IV, 2, 696C (ed. Suchla 1990: 145): Ἀλλὰ καὶ μετ' ἐκείνους τοὺς ἱεροὺς καὶ ἁγίους νόας αἱ ψυχαὶ καὶ ὅσα ψυχῶν ἀγαθὰ διὰ τὴν ὑπεράγαθον ἔστιν ἀγαθότητα τὸ νοερὰς αὐτὰς εἶναι, τὸ ἔχειν τὴν οὐσιώδη ζωὴν ἀνώλεθρον αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι καὶ δύνασθαι πρὸς τὰς ἀγγελικὰς ἀνατεινομένας ζωὰς δι' αὐτῶν ὡς ἀγαθῶν καθηγεμόνων ἐπὶ τὴν πάντων ἀγαθῶν ἀγαθαρχίαν ἀνάγεσθαι καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖθεν ἐκβλυζομένων ἐλλάμψεων ἐν μετουσίᾳ γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὴν σφῶν ἀναλογίαν καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοειδοῦς δωρεᾶς, ὅση δύναμις, μετέχειν καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα πρὸς ἡμῶν ἐν τοῖς Περὶ ψυχῆς ἀπηρίθμηται.
[653] *DN* XI, 3, 952C (ed. Suchla 1990: 220).
[654] *DN* XI, 3, 952B–C (ed. Suchla 1990: 220).
[655] *DN* 11, 3, 952B–C (ed. Suchla 1990: 219-220).

Peace thus preserves the individuality of each soul because it is only through the soul's individuality and unity within itself that the individuality is preserved.

One must be careful though when speaking of "individuality" in Dionysius. Kevin Corrigan rightly alerts us to the danger of being anachronistic when treating certain terms in Patristic thought. He explains that "terms like 'personal' and 'human identity' are creations of modern consciousness, situated in the post-Cartesian and post-Kantian context of individualistic subjectivity and of second-order capacities such as the ability to modify one's beliefs and desires by rational reflection".[656] The notions of "identity" and "self" may not have been used in the same way in late antique writers as we expect them to be. Corrigan refers to scholars such as Zizioulas, who has drawn a sharp distinction between modern notions of individuality, personality and other qualities, and, what he sees as, "a richer Eastern view of personhood" that he finds in Gregory and the Cappadocians. He stresses that the notion of personhood and self in the Church Fathers must be understood "relationally, socially and as being in communion prior to individual substances in the image of the Trinity where personal encounter is supreme".[657] These reflections are useful when examining the Areopagite`s notion of the self. Dionysius speaks of the self, using the term *autos*, but not in the meaning of a private, enclosed unity. Eric Perl clarifies this issue:

> In Dionysius' metaphysics, then, there is no such thing as an individual, a being conceived as a closed, self-contained unit which extrinsically enters into relations with other beings. Because the principle of reality is pure Openness or Giving, the very identity, the being of each thing, God-in-it, is its giving to and receiving from others. Each thing, indeed, is nothing but its relations to others, its place within the structure of immediate mediation.[658]

Dionysius' self is in other words a relational self that engages in the community and in the cosmos. For it is in relation to others, and by participation in the Beautiful and Good that the

[656] Corrigan 2009: 175. See also Zachhuber and Torrance 2014.
[657] Corrigan 2009: 176.
[658] Perl 2007.

created beings exist, Dionysius says.[659]As part of a whole, man has an important responsibility of participating in the divine activity of the purifying, illuminating, and perfecting work of God. It is through identification and engagement with the *theandric* acts of Christ that man will be transformed and thus, find his "true self".[660] The divine–human energies that Christ brought into the world bear divine powers of salvation to man in a human manner, so that each of us may be divinized. It is in the image of the Resurrection that we encounter the idea of a fully realized self-knowledge, of knowing which has become being in the most complete sense. There must be a faculty in man that achieves it. For man it must lie as an unactualized potential buried deeply within him, as what we might call his unrealized Christ-nature.[661]

**The fall of human nature and its redemption in the Incarnation**

Deification of man should be seen as continuous with the act whereby God creates. The act of creating, sustaining, and perfecting can thus be seen as one single and continuous act. For Dionysius, the *proodos* from God is, in some sense, already the start of the *epistrophe* back to God.[662] God is at work throughout the entire development of each soul's existence and throughout the whole duration of the development of the cosmos.[663] Through his philanthrophic act—out of his "love of man"—God has become true man, and in this way, enabled man's conversion back to him. Although disrupted in the wake of the soul's rebellion and fall, the soul's kinship with God has been reaffirmed by the Incarnation:

[659] *DN* XI, 5
[660] Roques 1955: 268.
[661] cf. *DN* II, 10; *DN* XI, 5
[662] Cf. Riordan 2008: 169.
[663] Ibid. 143.

When we had lost the divine gifts because of our negligence, God proclaimed to call us back to our first condition, by gifts restored; and by completely taking on what was ours, he gave us a most perfect impartation of his nature, and thus he gave us participation in himself and the things divine.[664]

Dionysius describes how, from the outset, human nature freely and foolishly moved away from the good gifts of God to pursue a life of passions and desires. Having rejected God and his blessings, human nature was left to its own devices and vulnerable to evil. In this, it chose mortality over eternity, for in turning away from God and an uplifting divine life, it took its origin in corruptibility. However, through his endless love of humanity (φιλανθρωπία) manifested in the Incarnation, God delivered human nature from complete destruction, and set it once again on the upward path to God:

But the boundless loving kindness of the supremely divine goodness towards men did not refrain from providing for us but became truly participated in everything that belongs to us, except sin. When it had become one with us in our lowliness, keeping its unconfused and flawless condition, it gave us, as henceforth siblings, communion with itself, and allowed us to share in its own true beauty. Having, as the secret tradition says, lost the power of the rebellious multiplicity, which was our enemy, not with violence, as having the upper hand, but in justice and righteousness. In its goodness it completely transformed our nature to its opposite; for the darkness of our mind, it filled with a blessed and most divine light, and it adorned the formless with divine beauty. The dwelling place of our soul it liberated from the most unclean passions and from destructive stains. Finally, it showed us a transcendent ascending and an inspired way through which we, as far as possible, are brought to a sacred assimilation to itself.[665]

Through the Incarnation humanity's share in God's life and activity has been renewed, its cooperation with the divine will (activity) revitalized by a fresh infusion of divine light and by God's gracious, supernatural bestowal of the divine assistance. The way lies in Christ, the Godman, and his divine life "in the flesh" as the exemplar of a human life conforming

[664] *EH* III, 3, 7, 436D (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 88): ἐξ ἀπροσεξίας ἐγγενομένην ἡμῖν ἐρημίαν τῶν θείων δωρεῶν ἐπισκευαστοῖς ἡμᾶς ἀγαθοῖς εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀνακαλέσασθαι καὶ τῇ παντελεῖ τῶν ἡμετέρων προσλήψει τὴν τελεωτάτην τῶν οἰκείων μετάδοσιν ἀγαθουργῆσαι καὶ ταύτῃ κοινωνίαν ἡμῖν θεοῦ καὶ τῶν θείων δωρήσασθαι.

[665] *EH* III, 3, 11, 441A-C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 91): ἀλλ' ἐν ἀληθεῖ μεθέξει τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς γενομένη πάντων ἀναμαρτήτως καὶ πρὸς τὸ ταπεινὸν ἡμῶν ἑνοποιηθεῖσα μετὰ τῆς τῶν οἰκείων ἀσυγχύτου καὶ ἀλωβήτου παντελῶς ἕξεως τὴν πρὸς αὐτὴν ἡμῖν κοινωνίαν ὡς ὁμογενέσι λοιπὸν ἐδωρήσατο καὶ τῶν οἰκείων ἀνέδειξε μετόχους καλῶν, τῆς μὲν ἀποστατικῆς πληθύος, ὡς ἡ κρυφία παράδοσις ἔχει, τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν καταλύσασα κράτος οὐ κατὰ δύναμιν ὡς ὑπερισχύουσα, κατὰ δὲ τὸ μυστικῶς ἡμῖν παραδοθὲν λόγιον ἐν κρίσει καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ, τὰ καθ' ἡμᾶς δὲ πρὸς τοὐναντίον ἅπαν ἀγαθουργῶς μετασκευάσασα· τὸ μὲν γὰρ κατὰ νοῦν ἡμῶν ἀλαμπὲς ἐνέπλησεν ὀλβίου καὶ θειοτάτου φωτὸς καὶ τοῖς θεοειδέσιν ἐκόσμησε τὸ ἀνείδεον κάλλεσι, τὸ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς οἰκητήριον ἐν παντελεῖ σωτηρίᾳ τῆς ὅσον οὔπω καταπεσούσης ἡμῶν οὐσίας ἐναγεστάτων παθῶν καὶ φθοροποιῶν μολυσμῶν ἠλευθέρωσεν ἀναγωγὴν ἡμῖν ὑπερκόσμιον ὑποδείξασα καὶ πολιτείαν ἔνθεον ἐν ταῖς πρὸς αὐτὴν ἡμῶν ἱεραῖς κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀφομοιώσεσιν.

perfectly to God, and the means in the "theurgic rites" or sacraments and liturgy of the ecclesiastical hierarchy established by Christ. Dionysius specifies that God has promised to "transform what we are, (meaning, he says) our souls and the body yoked to them and will bring us to perfect life and immortality".[666]

## II. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

### The body and the problem of evil

As we have seen in the previous sections of this chapter, the goal for Dionysius is for the *whole* human being to be sanctified; hence he acknowledges the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body.[667] The body is to share in the full rewards of the resurrection effected by Christ. How then does Dionysius view matter and the body with respect to evil? To explore this issue, the following questions shall be raised to serve as a basis for Dionysius' examination of the body and the problem of evil. These are Dionysius' own questions as he formulates them in *DN* IV, 18, 716A:

(1) What is evil?

(2) From what source does evil spring?

(3) In which things does evil exist?

(4) How did He, who is Good, that is, God, will bring evil into being?

(5) How, when He willed it, was He able?

(6) Or if He was not able to will evil, what other cause or causes, besides the Good, explains its existence?

[666] *DN* VI, 2, 856D.
[667] *EH* VII, 1, 2.

(7) If there is divine providence, how can evil come into existence at all? And if it exists, how can it be that it is not destroyed?

(8) How can any rational being with a free will desire evil in comparison with the Good?

The reality of evil has been acknowledged by Greek thought—both in its Neoplatonic and, broadly speaking, pagan aspect and its Christian frame—as a paradox and a mystery. Evil is affirmed as negation, privation, lack of form, and deficiency. These negative attributes precisely denote the challenge that one encounters in attempting to explore further the nature of this controversial reality and its implications in the sphere of being. Without doubt evil is a reality that pervades the world of beings. At the same time, based on the recognition of evil as "that which does not exist" one may reasonably ponder the implications of such a particular reality to the human being. Moreover, considering the central Neoplatonic claim originally formulated by Plotinus in *Ennead* I.8, that evil is total lack of everything and as such is ultimately identical to matter, and the possible Plotinian influences on Dionysius' work, an investigation of the existence of evil and its relation to the body in the thought of the Areopagite becomes of particular interest.

**Evil as man's failure to exist according to his nature**

For Dionysius, the human body is not considered as evil, even though it consists of matter. In his discussion of evil in the second half of chapter 4 of *DN*, Dionysius clarifies that neither our bodies nor the material world in general should be seen as the source of evil:

> Neither is the evil in our bodies. For ugliness and disease are a deficiency in form, and a deprivation of order. This is not altogether evil, but a lesser good. For if beauty, form and order were totally dissolute, the body itself would disappear. That the body is not the cause of evil in the soul is evident, from the fact that evil can be nearby even without a body, as in demons. Evil in minds, in souls, and in bodies is a weakness and defect in the condition of their natural virtues.[668]

[668] *DN* IV, 27, 728D (ed. Suchla 1990: 173): Ἀλλ' οὐδὲ ἐν σώμασι τὸ κακόν. Αἶσχος γὰρ καὶ νόσος ἔλλειψις εἴδους καὶ στέρησις τάξεως. Τοῦτο δὲ οὐ πάντη κακόν, ἀλλ' ἧττον καλόν. Εἰ γὰρ παντελὴς γένοιτο λύσις

How then does evil appear? For Dionysius, evil is a defect in a creature's nature, which results from the privation of a due perfection. It is the opposite of harmony and proportion. This "privation of good" finds it origin in a "false conversion".[669] Evil has numerous causes. They all belong to "impotence and weakness and an inharmonious commingling of discordance".[670] Moreover, evil is "a lack, a deficiency, a weakness, a disproportion, an error, purposeless, unlovely, lifeless, mindless, unreasonable, imperfect, unreal, causeless, indeterminate, unborn, inert, powerless, disordered, dissimilar, indefinite, dark, unsubstantial, in itself without any existence whatsoever (Στέρησις ἄρα ἐστὶ τὸ κακὸν καὶ ἔλλειψις καὶ ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀσυμμετρία καὶ ἁμαρτία καὶ ἄσκοπον καὶ ἀκαλλὲς καὶ ἄζωον καὶ ἄνουν καὶ ἄλογον καὶ ἀτελὲς καὶ ἀνίδρυτον καὶ ἀναίτιον καὶ ἀόριστον καὶ ἄγονον καὶ ἀργὸν καὶ ἀδρανὲς καὶ ἄτακτον καὶ ἀνόμοιον καὶ ἄπειρον καὶ σκοτεινὸν καὶ ἀνούσιον καὶ αὐτὸ μηδαμῶς μηδαμῆ μηδὲν ὄν.)".[671]

What causes this weakness and deviation? The weakness of the souls is caused by disordered and discordant movement: "If they are declared to be evil, the reason lies in their weakness regarding their natural activity. Their deviation is the evil in them."[672] "If a soul is evil, it is so through its own acts; the body is not the cause of evil in the soul…the evil in souls does not owe its origin to matter but comes from disorder and error."[673] The soul, in choosing something that is less good, may miss the mark (*ἁμαρτάνει*), which constitutes failure or sin (*ἁμαρτία*).[674] Dionysius describes how humanity contributed to this cosmic disaster by "stupidly slipping away from the good things of God", and "it received a life

κάλλους καὶ εἴδους καὶ τάξεως, οἰχήσεται καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ σῶμα. Ὅτι δὲ οὐδὲ κακίας αἴτιον τῇ ψυχῇ τὸ σῶμα, δῆλον ἐκ τοῦ δυνατὸν εἶναι καὶ ἄνευ σώματος παρυφίστασθαι κακίαν ὥσπερ ἐν δαίμοσιν. Τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι καὶ νόοις καὶ ψυχαῖς καὶ σώμασι κακὸν ἡ τῆς ἕξεως τῶν οἰκείων ἀγαθῶν ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀπόπτωσις.

[669] Riordan 2008: 140.
[670] *DN* IV, 31, 732B.
[671] *DN* IV, 32, 732D (ed. Suchla 1990: 177).
[672] *DN* IV, 23, 725B.
[673] *DN* IV, 27, 728D, 729B.
[674] *DN* IV, 35, 736A.

subject to the most varied passions and came to the ruinous end of death…"[675] God made man free to know his will, Dionysius remarks, and refers to "those who know the will of God and who do not do it", that is to say, those who, having heard, are too weak in faith either to trust the Good or to do what is good (τὴν γνῶσιν ἢ τὴν ποίησιν ἐξασθενοῦντας καὶ τοὺς εἰδότας «τὸ θέλημα» καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντας, τοὺς ἀκηκοότας μέν, ἀσθενοῦντας δὲ περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἢ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ)".[676] Hence, evil can be understood as "weakness, impotence, a deficiency of knowledge, of ceaseless knowledge, of belief, of desire, and of activity of the Good (ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀδυναμία καὶ ἔλλειψίς ἐστιν ἢ τῆς γνώσεως ἢ τῆς ἀλήστου γνώσεως ἢ τῆς πίστεως ἢ τῆς ἐφέσεως ἢ τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.)".[677] Evil is a metaphysical reality of voluntary deprivation from the participation in God. Consequently, if man chooses to break away from God he will as well deprive himself from divinization, life, and being which bears likeness to God, says Dionysius:[678]

> For instance, the depraved sinner, though deprived of the Good by his irrational desire, he is in this respect lacking in being and desires that which has no being. But still, he participates in the Good, since there is in him a distorted reflection of real love and unity… And even he who desires the very worst life; yet in so far as he feels desire at all, and desires life, and what he thinks the best kind of life, thus participates in the Good.[679]

Man was made to yearn for God, and through the yearning to be drawn into the harmony within the created order. But since man has "fallen away from the yearning for God,"[680] he distanced himself from the good and the beautiful, and the image of God in him became distorted and the whole creation affected. Thus, one can say that evil lies in the failure of man to exist according to his nature. God created man in his image and likeness, and by sinning,

[675] *EH* III, 3.
[676] *DN* IV, 35, 736A (ed. Suchla 1990: 179).
[677] *DN* IV, 35, 736B.
[678] *DN* II, 7, 645AB.
[679] *DN* IV, 20, 720BC (ed. Suchla 1990: 166-167).
[680] *DN* IV, 32, 732D.

man distances himself from the true likeness and his true way. Failing to reach one's potential and determination is evil, i.e., not good.

Such a failure can occur at any level of reality, in the human souls as well as in the angelic intellects. Dionysius says that "the demons are not evil by nature, but by the deficiency of angelic goods".[681] He identifies them with the fallen angels.[682] They are "evil" because they have turned aside from their rightful estate; they have fallen from their angelic state and have assumed the powers of lesser creatures. Thus, Dionysius characterizes them as having irrational passions, thoughtless animal desire and unrestrained phantasy.[683]

> How is it that the demons, having been made wholly from the Good, are not like the Good? Or how, given they were good offspring from the Good, did they change? What was it that made them evil?[684]

They are evil, then, insofar as they lack the perfection proper to them as angels: "They both are from the Good and are good (Ὥστε ὃ εἰσί, καὶ ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ εἰσι καὶ ἀγαθοὶ)… and by deprivation and fleeing away and falling away from the goods that are appropriate to them they are called evil (Καὶ τῇ στερήσει καὶ ἀποφυγῇ καὶ ἀποπτώσει τῶν προσηκόντων αὐτοῖς ἀγαθῶν λέγονται κακοί;)."[685] The same principle applies to human souls: "In what are they made evil, except in the failure of good conditions and activities…? (ἐν τίνι κακύνονται, εἰ μὴ ἐν τῇ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἕξεων καὶ ἐνεργειῶν) Neither, then, in demons nor in us is evil as an evil being, but as failure and absence of the perfection of our proper goods (Οὐκ ἄρα οὔτε ἐν δαίμοσιν οὔτε ἐν ἡμῖν τὸ κακὸν ὡς ὂν κακόν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἔλλειψις καὶ ἐρημία τῆς τῶν οἰκείων ἀγαθῶν τελειότητος.)."[686] "This is evil, in minds, in souls, and in bodies: the weakness and

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[681] *DN* IV, 23, 725B.
[682] *DN* IV, 23, 725B.
[683] *DN* IV, 23, 725B. According to Lampe 1962: 328, such a physical characterization of demons was very common in the early church; in fact, this notion went through two distinct stages: an early stage in which demons were believed to have physical bodies, and a later stage in which they were said not to have physical bodies yet were given to material lusts.
[684] *DN* IV, 18, 716A (ed. Suchla 1990: 162): Πῶς δὲ ὅλως ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ παραχθὲν τὸ δαιμόνιον φῦλον οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγαθοειδὲς ἢ πῶς ἀγαθὸν ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ γεγονὸς ἠλλοιώθη; Καὶ τί τὸ κακῦναν αὐτὸ…
[685] *DN* IV, 23, 725C (ed. Suchla 1990: 172).
[686] *DN* IV, 24, 728A (ed. Suchla 1990: 172).

defect in the condition of their natural virtues (Τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι καὶ νόοις καὶ ψυχαῖς καὶ σώμασι κακὸν ἡ τῆς ἕξεως τῶν οἰκείων ἀγαθῶν ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀπόπτωσις.).”[687] In lacking its “proper goods”, a being lacks its very identity whereby it is and to that extent it fails to be: “Demons do not totally lack a share in the Good, insofar as they exist and live and think, and in short, there is some motion of desire in them. If they are called evil, it is because of the weakness in their activity according to nature (Καὶ οὐ πάντη ἄμοιροι τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, καθ’ ὃ καὶ εἰσὶ καὶ ζῶσι καὶ νοοῦσι καὶ ὅλως ἐστί τις ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐφέσεως κίνησις. Κακοὶ δὲ εἶναι λέγονται διὰ τὸ ἀσθενεῖν περὶ τὴν κατὰ φύσιν ἐνέργειαν.).”[688] The natural activity for all beings is striving for perfection.

Dionysius contrasts the redeemed life and the divided life: One cannot participate in contradictory realities at one and the same time, and whoever enters into communion with the One cannot proceed to live a divided life, especially if he hopes for a real participation in the One. (Ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔνεστι τῶν ἄκρως ἐναντίων ἅμα μετέχειν οὐδὲ τὸν κοινωνίαν τινὰ πρὸς τὸ ἓν ἐσχηκότα μεριστὰς ἔχειν ζωάς, εἰ τῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀντέχεται βεβαίας μεθέξεως,)”[689] Entering into a communion with the One puts an end to the divided life. The fragmented and divided life is a broken life that requires redemption. “For if we are illuminated by contemplation and knowledge of the One, we would be united to a uniform and divine arrangement, we would not permit ourselves to descend to that fragmented lust, from which the material and passionate hostility between equals is formed (Εἰ γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ ἑνὸς θεωρίας καὶ γνώσεως ἐλλαμπόμενοι πρὸς τὴν ἑνοειδῆ καὶ θείαν συναγωγὴν ἑνοποιηθῶμεν, οὐκ ἂν ἐπὶ τὰς μεριστὰς ἀνασχοίμεθα καταπίπτειν ἐπιθυμίας,).”[690]

[687] *DN* IV, 27, 728D (ed. Suchla 1990: 174).
[688] *DN* IV, 23, 725B (ed. Suchla 1990: 171).
[689] *EH* II, 3, 5, 401A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 76).
[690] *EH* III, 3, 8, 437A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 88).

**There is nothing which has totally fallen away from unity**

Evil has, however, very limited application in Dionysius; it exists only as a disease, due rather to a defect than to a capacity.[691] Because the Good is the underlying ontological principle in all, then everything that exists has some level of participation in God. There is no sense of total depravity from God in Dionysius. God, through his compassion for man, lifts up all who are falling. It is this compassion that God shows in sustaining his cosmos and that he reveals in the Incarnation:[692]

> For it is the nature of the Good to produce and preserve, but to corrupt and destroy, to the evil. Then nothing that exists come from the evil, nor can evil exist if it should be evil even to itself. If this is the case, then evil is not wholly evil, but has some portion of the Good due to which it exists whatsoever.[693]

All creation comes from the Beautiful and the Good, and there is nothing that ontologically is totally deprived from some form of participation in the divine: "There is nothing which has entirely fallen away from every kind of unity; for that which is utterly unstable, boundless, baseless, and unlimited, has neither being nor any place among the things that have being (μάλιστα μὲν οὐδὲν ἔστι τῶν ὄντων, ὃ πάσης παντελῶς ἑνώσεως ἀποπέπτωκεν. Τὸ γὰρ πάντη ἄστατον καὶ ἄπειρον καὶ ἀνίδρυτον καὶ ἀόριστον οὔτε ὄν ἐστιν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν)."[694] Therefore evil cannot exist: "if things that have being desire the Beautiful and Good, and accomplish all their acts on account of what seems good, and if all that they intend has the Good as its principle and aim (for nothing looks to the nature of evil to guide it in its actions), what place is left for evil among beings? (Καὶ εἰ τὰ ὄντα τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἐφίεται καὶ πάντα, ὅσα ποιεῖ, διὰ τὸ δοκοῦν ἀγαθὸν ποιεῖ καὶ πᾶς ὁ τῶν ὄντων σκοπὸς ἀρχὴν ἔχει καὶ

[691] *DN* IV, 18–19.
[692] Riordan 2008: 140.
[693] *DN* IV, 19, 716D (ed. Suchla 1990: 163-164): φύσις γὰρ τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ παράγειν καὶ σώζειν, τῷ δὲ κακῷ τὸ φθείρειν καὶ ἀπολλύειν, οὐδέν ἐστι τῶν ὄντων ἐκ τοῦ κακοῦ. Καὶ οὐδὲ αὐτὸ ἔσται τὸ κακόν, εἴπερ καὶ ἑαυτῷ κακὸν εἴη. Καὶ εἰ μὴ τοῦτο, οὐ πάντη κακὸν τὸ κακόν, ἀλλ' ἔχει τινὰ τἀγαθοῦ, καθ' ἣν ὅλως ἔστι, μοῖραν.
[694] *DN* XI, 5, 952D–953A (ed. Suchla 1990: 220).

τέλος τἀγαθόν, οὐδὲν γὰρ εἰς τὴν τοῦ κακοῦ φύσιν ἀποβλέπον ποιεῖ, ἃ ποιεῖ, πῶς ἔσται τὸ κακὸν ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν;)."[695] If all things originate from the Good and the Good is beyond all that is, then nothing is evil, insofar as it is a being, for to be amounts to be good, and even non-being holds its being in the Good. Evil itself is no being; for if it was, it would not be wholly evil.

> The Good, then, will have its seat far above and before that which has being and that which has not, but evil has no place in things that have being and things that have not, and it is farther removed from the Good than even non-being and is, as it were, unsubstantiated.[696]

Hence evil cannot exist in an ontological sense; the fall is the fall towards non-existence because nothing can be essentially evil.

**Evil in the domain of nature is against nature**

Matter too shares in the good and is not to be seen as evil. For, as Dionysius says, "evil in the domain of nature is against nature, a deficiency of what should be there in nature."[697] Dionysius strongly rejects that matter can be understood as evil: "There is no truth in the common assertion that evil is inherent in matter *qua* matter, since matter too has a share in the cosmos, in beauty and form."[698] Matter itself has a share in the divine. For, the divinity is "in" all things. God is the "cause" of all things, and so subject to all names, and hence the whole of reality, is nothing but the differentiated presence of God.[699]

> But evil is not in matter so far as it is matter as they say. For matter, too, has a share in order, beauty and form. And if matter is without these things, if itself has no quality or form, how can it produce anything, since in that case matter, by itself, is impassive? Besides, how can matter be evil? For if it has no being whatsoever, it is neither good nor evil. But if it has a kind of being, then, since all things that have being come from the Good, matter, too, must come from the Good.[700]

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[695] *DN* IV, 19, 716C (ed. Suchla 1990: 163)
[696] *DN* IV, 19, 716D (ed. Suchla 1990: 163-164): Τὸ μὲν οὖν ἀγαθὸν ἔσται καὶ τοῦ ἁπλῶς ὄντος καὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος πολλῷ πρότερον ὑπεριδρυμένον. Τὸ δὲ κακὸν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς μὴ οὖσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος μᾶλλον ἀλλότριον ἀπέχον τἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀνουσιώτερον.
[697] *DN* IV, 23, 725B (ed. Suchla 1990: 171).
[698] *DN* VI 729A.
[699] Perl 2007: 31.
[700] *DN* IV, 28, 729A (ed. Suchla 1990: 174): Ἀλλ' οὐδὲ τὸ πολυθρύλητον· Ἐν ὕλῃ τὸ κακόν, ὥς φασι, καθ' ὃ ὕλη. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὕτη κόσμου καὶ κάλλους καὶ εἴδους ἔχει μετουσίαν. Εἰ δὲ τούτων ἐκτὸς οὖσα ἡ ὕλη καθ'

The fact that matter itself has a share in divinity allows Dionysius to preserve the capacity of the sacraments to be themselves both the highest participation in the divine activity in the Ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the means through which the human person, body and soul, imitates God and therefore fulfils its place in the cosmos.

Evil is not a separate reality in itself; rather, it exists in creatures. In fact, what is often perceived as the destruction of one thing leads to the generation of another, and so evil contributes to the completeness of the whole.[701]

To this true reason will answer that evil qua evil causes no existence or birth, but only, as far as it can, corrupts and destroys the substance of things that have being. But, if anyone says that it is productive of being, and that by the destruction of one thing it gives birth to something else, the true answer is that it does not so because of destruction. As destructive and evil it only destroys and demeans; but it takes upon it birth and essence through the action of the Good. As evil it neither has being nor produces being. But, through the action of the Good, it has being, i.e., a good being and produces good things.[702]

Thus, evil has no being in itself; it is rather the degree of participation in the Good that defines whether something is good or evil. Lesser share in the Good and lack of goodness may be classified as evil, but in itself it has no being nor generative power, nor can it produce being or goodness. If evil has "being" at all, it must receive this "being" from an already existing reality; that is, it is and can be perceived only as a deficiency present in a creature; hence, its being is weak and deviates from the good estate proper to bodies and souls.

**Yet, there is evil in the world**

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ἑαυτὴν ἄποιός ἐστι καὶ ἀνείδεος, πῶς ποιεῖ τι ἡ ὕλη ἡ μηδὲ τὸ πάσχειν δύνασθαι καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἔχουσα; Ἄλλως τε πῶς ἡ ὕλη κακόν; Εἰ μὲν γὰρ οὐδαμῆ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν, οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακόν. Εἰ δέ πως ὄν, τὰ δὲ ὄντα πάντα ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ, καὶ αὐτὴ ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἂν εἴη.

[701] *DN* IV, 19, 193.

[702] *DN* IV, 20, 717B-C (ed. Suchla 1990: 164-165): Ἐρεῖ δὲ πρὸς ταῦτα ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος, ὅτι τὸ κακόν, ᾗ κακόν, οὐδεμίαν οὐσίαν ἢ γένεσιν ποιεῖ, μόνον δὲ κακύνει καὶ φθείρει τὸ ἐφ' αὑτῷ τὴν τῶν ὄντων ὑπόστασιν. Εἰ δὲ γενεσιουργόν τις αὐτὸ εἶναι λέγοι καὶ τῇ τούτου φθορᾷ τῷ ἑτέρῳ διδόναι γένεσιν, ἀποκριτέον ἀληθῶς· Οὐχ ᾗ φθείρει, δίδωσι γένεσιν, ἀλλ' ᾗ μὲν φθορὰ καὶ κακόν, φθείρει καὶ κακύνει μόνον, γένεσις δὲ καὶ οὐσία διὰ τὸ ἀγαθὸν γίγνεται, καὶ ἔσται τὸ κακὸν φθορὰ μὲν δι' ἑαυτό, γενεσιουργὸν δὲ διὰ τὸ ἀγαθὸν καί, ᾗ μὲν κακόν, οὔτε ὂν οὔτε ὄντων ποιητικόν, διὰ δὲ τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὂν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ὂν καὶ ἀγαθῶν ποιητικόν.

In Gen 1: 31 we read that "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good". Yet, there is evil in the world. To explain this Dionysius uses Neoplatonic doctrines whereby evil does not really exist, at least not ontologically, but drains existence from other creatures like parasites.[703] By targeting creatures in their divine order and proper nature, evil drains them of their being and turns them away from their creator. Dionysius' reasoning bears similarities with Proclus' theory on evil, as it is expanded in his treatise *De Malorum Subsistentia* ("On the Existence of Evils"),[704] and seems to adhere to the Neo-platonic principle that no being can be wholly evil, but must possess some goodness, without which it would not be anything at all: "All beings, insofar as they are, are good and from the Good; and insofar as they are deprived of the Good, they are neither good nor beings… But what is in every way deprived of the Good neither was nor is nor will be nor can be in any way whatsoever."[705] Hence, for Dionysius, "evil is not among the things that have being, nor is it among what is not in being. It has a greater nonexistence and otherness from the Good than nonbeing has (Τὸ δὲ κακὸν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν οὔτε ἐν τοῖς μὴ οὖσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος μᾶλλον ἀλλότριον ἀπέχον τἀγαθοῦ καὶ ἀνουσιώτερον.)."[706] Since everything that has being is good, evil cannot exist in itself, and it is not a substance but the opposite, namely the privation of the good. It has no proper reality in itself.

The conviction that all creation stems from the good and must be good is also present in Plato (Republic 379B–C):

> And is not God of course good in reality and always to be spoken of as such?" "Certainly." "But further, no good thing is harmful, is it?" "I think not." "Can what be not harmful harm?" "By no means." "Can that which does not harm do any evil?" "Not that either." "But that which does no evil would not be cause of any evil either?" "How could it?" "Once more, is the good beneficent?" "Yes."

[703] *DN* IV, 30, 732A. See also Schäfer 2006: 139.
[704] See Steel 1997.
[705] *DN* IV, 20, 720B (ed. Suchla 1990: 166).
[706] *DN* IV, 19, 716D (ed. Suchla 1990: 164).

"Is it the cause, then, of welfare?" "Yes." "Then the good is not the cause of all things, but of things that are well it is the cause—of things that are ill it is blameless." "Entirely so."[707]

For Plato and his successors evil exists only with reference to the good, i.e., as privation, lack and absence of the good. Plotinus identifies evil with matter.[708] For him to be is to be intelligible, while matter is no form, it is a privation of being, and therefore non-being that has no reality but images and appearances.[709] In his treatise *De Malorum Subsistentia* Proclus largely follows Plotinus' account on evil. He agrees with Plotinus that there can be no absolute evil: "And since [evil] is twofold, on the one hand only evil, on the other not unmixed with the good, the one in no way is… but the other we order among beings (ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο διττόν, τὸ μὲν μόνως κακόν, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἀμιγὲς πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθόν—τὸ μὲν τοῦ <μηδαμῶς> ὄντος <ἐπέκεινα θήσομεν> ..., τὸ δὲ ἐν τοῖς οὖσι τάξομεν·)".[710] Nothing, therefore, can be completely evil. According to Proclus, evil is found neither in gods, nor in angels, nor in demons, nor in heroes. Evil emerges only when we come to the level of human souls, which "are in potency at one time to ascend, at another to be carried into generation and a mortal nature."[711] Evil in human souls consists in their falling from intellectual contemplation: "When [a soul] is unable… to imitate its presiding [divinity], it becomes devoid of the contemplation of being, but is drawn by other, secondary powers which revolve around the world… This, therefore, is the weakness of the soul, that is, failing from that vision to be borne downwards."[712] For Proclus the cause of evil is lack of power and productive activity: "And as good, [an evil thing] is from the gods, but as evil, from another weak cause; for

[707] Plato, *Rep.* 379b-c: Οὐκοῦν ἀγαθὸς ὅ γε θεὸς τῷ ὄντι τε καὶ λεκτέον οὕτω; Τί μήν; Ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδέν γε τῶν ἀγαθῶν βλαβερόν. ἦ γάρ; Οὔ μοι δοκεῖ. Ἆρ' οὖν ὃ μὴ βλαβερὸν βλάπτει; Οὐδαμῶς. Ὃ δὲ μὴ βλάπτει κακόν τι ποιεῖ; Οὐδὲ τοῦτο. Ὃ δέ γε μηδὲν κακὸν ποιεῖ, οὐδ' ἄν τινος εἴη κακοῦ αἴτιον; Πῶς γάρ; Τί δέ; ὠφέλιμον τὸ ἀγαθόν; Ναί. Αἴτιον ἄρα εὐπραγίας; Ναί. Οὐκ ἄρα πάντων γε αἴτιον τὸ ἀγαθόν, ἀλλὰ τῶν μὲν εὖ ἐχόντων αἴτιον, τῶν δὲ κακῶν ἀναίτιον. Παντελῶς γ', ἔφη.
[708] *Enn* II, 4, 24–25.
[709] *Enn* II, 4, 16, 3–5.
[710] *On the Subsistence of Evils*, 9. 4–6.
[711] *On the Subsistence of Evils*, 20. 7–8.
[712] *On the Subsistence of Evils*, 23. 18–22, 24. 1–2.

every evil is generated through weakness and privation (καὶ ὡς μὲν ἀγαθὸν ἐκ θεῶν, ὡς δὲ κακὸν ἐξ <ἄλλης αἰτίας> ἀσθενοῦς· πᾶν γὰρ κακὸν δι' ἀσθένειαν γεννᾶται καὶ ἔλλειψιν)."[713]

For the Areopagite, who recognizes his tradition founded on the Scriptures and the Apostle Paul, the Neoplatonic good is identified with the person of Christ, and the question of evil is rather related to the faculty of will, than to metaphysical principles. Evil is understood as opposed to God and God's goodness—not as essence, but as a *will* or decision to oppose God. As we have seen above, evil appears when man decides to act against God. Through his own acts, by choosing something that is less good, man fails his true cosmic purpose; he is falling away from good, from God, which is per definition evil. In short, we may assume all things that are created directly by God exist; they may be said to have being. Among them are rational creatures with free will. If these creatures misuse their free will and cause evil, the evil that they cause has an apparent existence or being. In this case, the evil has not a real existence or being. Therefore, it has an illusory existence or being. It is not entirely non-existent, since we may say it exists on a phenomenological level—as it is perceived or understood in the human consciousness; in the mind and heart of the agent—but it is not altogether real either, since its existence in the mind and heart of the agent is a delusion, and, an illusion. Hence evil does not exist. Although it may exist on a phenomenological level in the world, it has no grounding or ontological existence.

When it comes to matter, the Dionysian attitude is that matter has being, and must therefore derive from God, and as such it cannot be evil. For Dionysius matter cannot be understood as evil as in Plotinus, for as he states, it is not true that "evil is inherent, as they say, to matter as such. For, even matter also participates in cosmos, beauty and form (Ἐν ὕλῃ τὸ κακόν, ὥς φασι, καθ' ὃ ὕλη. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὕτη κόσμου καὶ κάλλους καὶ εἴδους ἔχει

[713] *On the Subsistence of Evils*, 42. 8–10.

μετουσίαν)."[714] Thus we may conclude that matter and the human body is understood as part of God's creation in the Dionysian universe, and therefore also necessarily good.

## III. DIONYSIUS' VIEW OF THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN SOUL

### The *ἀναγωγή* of the soul through Prayer

In this section I shall address the significance that Dionysius ascribes to prayer. Dionysius points to prayer as the soul's means of acquiring *θεοσοφία*. It constitutes the very first step of *ἀναγωγή* in his system, and is thus of fundamental significance. *MT* begins with a solemn prayer to God and invocation of the Trinity:

> Trinity, which exceeds all beings, deity and goodness! You, who instruct the Christians in the heavenly wisdom! Lead us up to the highest summit of the mystic scripture, which is beyond knowledge and light, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of God's Word lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence. With the intensity of their darkness, they outshine all brilliance, and they fill our blind minds to overflow with the utterly intangible and invisible fairness of glories which is beyond all beauty. This is my prayer.[715]

It is in the *DN* that Dionysius' basic understanding of prayer is best outlined. There the prayer to the Holy Trinity is expressly addressed before the treatment of God's first name, "the Good."[716]

> Let us begin with an invocation of the Trinity, which surpasses the Good and which is the source of all goodness – the name which reveals the whole of its own good providence. For we must first lift up our minds in prayer unto the source of good, and by drawing nearer to it we should be initiated into the mystery of the good gifts that are rooted in its being. For the Trinity is indeed present to all things, but all things are not present to it. But if we invoke it with holy prayers and a pure mind, and with our souls open to be united with God, then we are also present to it.[717]

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[714] *DN* IV, 28, 729A (ed. Suchla 1990: 174).
[715] *MT* I, 1, 997AB (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 141-142): Τριὰς ὑπερούσιε καὶ ὑπέρθεε καὶ ὑπεράγαθε, τῆς Χριστιανῶν ἔφορε θεοσοφίας, ἴθυνον ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν μυστικῶν λογίων ὑπεράγνωστον καὶ ὑπερφαῆ καὶ ἀκροτάτην κορυφήν· ἔνθα τὰ ἁπλᾶ καὶ ἀπόλυτα καὶ ἄτρεπτα τῆς θεολογίας μυστήρια κατὰ τὸν ὑπέρφωτον ἐγκεκάλυπται τῆς κρυφιομύστου σιγῆς γνόφον, ἐν τῷ σκοτεινοτάτῳ τὸ ὑπερφανέστατον ὑπερλάμποντα καὶ ἐν τῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ τῶν ὑπερκάλων ἀγλαϊῶν ὑπερπληροῦντα τοὺς ἀνομμάτους νόας. Ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα ηὔχθω.
[716] For the meaning of prayer in *CA*, see Völker 1958: 67–70.
[717] *DN* III, 1, 680B (ed. Suchla 1990: 138): ὑπεράγαθον ἐπικαλεσάμενοι τριάδα τὴν ἐκφαντορικὴν τῶν ὅλων ἑαυτῆς ἀγαθωτάτων προνοιῶν. Χρὴ γὰρ ἡμᾶς ταῖς εὐχαῖς πρῶτον ἐπ᾽ αὐτὴν ὡς ἀγαθαρχίαν ἀνάγεσθαι καὶ

According to Dionysius, any undertaking should be started with a prayer.[718] In addition to other "required things," prayer and a perfected mind are essential prerequisites to reach unity with God. Prayer is an invocation of the Holy Trinity, for the Trinity is the source of all good things. The Trinity is present to everything, but not everything is present to it. God is present also for poor human beings, but poor human beings do not make themselves present before God. Man can make himself present before God and prepare for union with Him through prayer. Prayer will help to effect purification and enlightenment, and ultimately the last and highest goal: perfection or unification.

Dionysius understands prayer as a movement upwards to the top. It consists in stretching up towards God's enlightenment. He tells us to imagine a luminous chain (πολύφωτος σειρά) hanging downwards from the heights of heaven to our world below.[719] "We grab hold of it with one hand and then with the other, apparently pulling it down; but in fact, it is already present above and below, so instead of pulling the rope down to us, we are ourselves being pulled upwards to the higher splendors of the luminous rays (καὶ ἀεὶ αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσω χερσὶν ἀμοιβαίαις δραττόμενοι καθέλκειν μὲν αὐτὴν ἐδοκοῦμεν, τῷ ὄντι δὲ οὐ κατήγομεν ἐκείνην ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω παροῦσαν, ἀλλ' αὐτοὶ ἡμεῖς ἀνηγόμεθα πρὸς τὰς ὑψηλοτέρας τῶν πολυφώτων ἀκτίνων μαρμαρυγάς.)"[720] Then he continues: "Or to take another example, we are on a boat and there are cables tied to a rock. It seems as if we were drawing the rock to us, but we are in fact drawing ourselves and our boat towards the rock" (Ἢ ὥσπερ εἰς ναῦν ἐμβεβηκότες καὶ ἀντεχόμενοι τῶν ἔκ τινος πέτρας εἰς ἡμᾶς ἐκτεινομένων πεισμάτων καὶ οἷον ἡμῖν εἰς ἀντίληψιν ἐκδιδομένων οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς τὴν πέτραν, ἀλλ' ἡμᾶς

μᾶλλον αὐτῇ πλησιάζοντας ἐν τούτῳ μυεῖσθαι τὰ πανάγαθα δῶρα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν ἱδρυμένα. Καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ μὲν ἅπασι πάρεστιν, οὐ πάντα δὲ αὐτῇ πάρεστι. Τότε δέ, ὅταν αὐτὴν ἐπικαλούμεθα πανάγνοις μὲν εὐχαῖς, ἀνεπιθολώτῳ δὲ νῷ καὶ τῇ πρὸς θείαν ἕνωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητι, τότε καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτῇ πάρεσμεν.

[718] *DN* III, 1, 680D.

[719] Dionysius seems to coin this term. It is appearing elsewhere only in Euthymius Zigabenus (*Panoplia* 3.140.38) and Gregory Acindynus (*Refutatio Magna* 3.42.30), both directly citing Dionysius' words on the subject.

[720] *DN* III, 1, 680C (ed. Suchla 1990: 138-139).

αὐτοὺς τῷ ἀληθεῖ καὶ τὴν ναῦν ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν προσήγομεν)."[721] The idea of a golden chain (*σειρά*) binding heaven and earth together is not specific to Dionysius; it is a Neo-Platonic term that appears frequently and in different contexts.[722] Already in Homer we encounter a chain from heaven which is impossible for gods and men to pull down, whereas Zeus is able to haul up the whole world.[723] Plato speaks in *Republic* X, 616B of a light column which stretches through the heaven and down to earth. This light is described as resembling the rainbow, but it is clearer and cleaner, and it ties heaven together.[724] Also Proclus writes about a divine chain, *θεῖον σειρά,* ranging from heaven to earth.[725]

It is thus a classical analogy that Dionysius makes use of.[726] Both the analogy of the chain from heaven and the boat with the hawsers illustrate an activity of the soul. With the help of tools such as a chain or a hawser the soul pulls itself up and forward to something that rests in itself, and which cannot be moved through the pulling. God is the solid anchor, be it in the height or the rock, that cannot be pulled down through prayer, so the soul is being pulled up to Him through prayer. The chain is described as "golden" because prayer serves illumination.[727] Through prayer the soul is being illuminated.[728] We may then ask if we are the ones who pull ourselves upwards solely by ourselves. Do we have to perform the steps back to God and by our own efforts? No, says Dionysius. We must indeed work on ourselves and

[721] *DN* III, 1, 680D (ed. Suchla 1990: 139).
[722] Cf. Lévêque 1959; Dillon 1990. See also Wear 2013:145-165.
[723] Homer, *Illiad*, VIII, 18–27: "If you tied a chain of gold to the sky, and all of you, gods and goddesses, took hold, you could not drag Zeus the High Counsellor to earth with all your efforts. But if I determined to pull with a will, I could haul up land and sea then loop the chain round a peak of Olympus, and leave them dangling in space. By that much am I greater than gods and men."
[724] *Republic* X, 616B.
[725] He treats this in his discourse on prayer in the commentary on *Timaeus*, 65A, pp. 150, see Koch 1900: 187. We find similar notions in the Christian literature. Ignatius of Antioch (*Ephesians* 9) talks about the Spirit being a kind of cable or chain that lifts one up to God.
[726] This has been discussed at length by Lévêque 1959.
[727] Koch 1900: 185.
[728] The action of the Divine in Neoplatonism is probably better described as *emanation* rather than *illumination. Illumination* is more a Christian term, since the God of Christianity is more active in its desire to save humanity whilst the Neoplatonic One is fully predisposed with its self-intellection. Oddly this distinction is underexplored: a good gloss is available in Sedgewick's *Western Sufism* (OUP, 2016), 15-29, of all places.

turn to God in prayer, but man's way to God is not man's work alone. The *ἀναγωγὴ* is more a being-lifted in cooperation with God than it is a solo climb. God was there first. Grace was given initially. That is why we must begin with a prayer before everything we do, Dionysius concludes; we will not pull down to ourselves that power, which is both everywhere and yet nowhere, but by divine reminders and invocations we may commend ourselves to it and be joined to it.[729]

**Prayer as active contemplation within the Neoplatonic tradition**

Prayers and invocations of gods before challenging tasks, undertakings, and other efforts are already in evidence in the *Iliad*.[730] For Plato prayer functions as a concrete inquiry to the gods within the framework of a religious practice that seeks to approach the gods in a philosophical manner. Plotinus writes that he wants to call God before he begins his talk: "Not with the sound of words, but as we stretch ourselves with the soul in prayer to it [the One], because in this way we can pray to it for ourselves (οὐ λόγῳ γεγωνῷ, ἀλλὰ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐκτείνασιν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς εὐχὴν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον, εὔχεσθαι τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον δυναμένους μόνους πρὸς μόνον.)."[731] As in Plotinus, prayer in Dionysius is also about stretching out toward the deity, i.e. a self-activation of the soul. It is about letting oneself be more effectively moved and inspired by the divine will.[732] This is an activity of contemplation that goes beyond knowledge and is what Shaw and Mazur have called internal ritual or contemplative *praxis*.[733] There are two key places in *Ennead VI* where Plotinus describes this inner ritual. The first passage is about the soul's movement towards contemplation of the One through rejection of all intelligible symbols. An image is provided of a person entering a beautiful and richly

[729] *DN* III, 1, 680D.
[730] *Iliad*, I, 445–457; *Iliad*, I, 451–3; *Iliad*, VI, 258–9.
[731] Plotinus, *Enn*. V, 1 [10], 6, 9–12.
[732] Von Balthasar 1962: 214.
[733] See Mazur 2003 and Shaw 1999.

adorned house. The attention is being turned from contemplating the exterior beauty of the house to the master of the house, who is worthy of "genuine contemplation": "by the continuity of his contemplation [the visitor] no longer sees a sight, but mingles his seeing with what he contemplates, so that what was seen before has now become sight in him, and he forgets all other objects of contemplation".[734] Having initially received knowledge about the master from objects and ornaments in the house, the visitor now sees the master directly in the contemplation. The second passage in the *Ennead* describes the union of the seer and the seen at the moment of mystical union. It is depicted as an initiate entering into the sanctuary of the god and contemplates him directly as in an ecstatic seeing: "Entering the sanctuary makes contemplation real (…ἀληθινὴν ἂν ποιοῖτο ἐκεῖ γενόμενος τοῦ ἀδύτου τὴν θέαν)."[735] This gives certain connotations to Antique mystery cults and the change from being a mystes to an epoptes, which were grades in the Elusinian Mysteries. The epoptai were more advanced than the mystai. They had the privilege of being "viewers" in the mysteries; they were allowed entrance to the vision of the holy rituals in the Telesterion.[736]

Advancements of contemplation are also to be found in Iamblichus, who distinguishes between three levels of prayer: Gathering (*συναγωγῶν*), merging (*συνδετικῶν*), unifying (*ἕνωσις*).[737] The third level, *henosis*, is according to Iamblichus the "most perfect, and has its mark in ineffable unification".[738] This is interesting; the fact that there exists various levels of prayers that in the end leads to unity with the divine, suggests that Iamblichus in fact considers prayers to have a degree of efficacy. Prayer is for him a way of spiritual

[734] *Ennead* VI.7.35.13–17 (trans. Armstrong).
[735] *Ennead* VI.9.11.29–30 (trans. Armstrong).
[736] Cf. Dowden 1980: 409-427.
[737] See Iamblichus, *De Mysteries* (*DM*), I, 12, 41, 4–8; Wiebke-Marie Stock 2008: 1993.
[738] *DM* V, 26.

advancement which is ultimately attaining divine union. Iamblichus accredits the following function to prayer:

> Extended practice of prayer nurtures our intellect, enlarges very greatly our soul's receptivity to the gods, reveals to men the life of the gods, accustoms their eyes to the brightness of divine light, and gradually brings to perfection the capacity of our faculties for contact with the gods, until it leads us up to the highest level of consciousness (of which we are capable); also, it elevates gently the disposition of our minds, and communicates to us those of the gods, stimulates persuasion and communion and indissoluble friendship, augments divine love, kindles the divine element in the soul, scours away all contrary tendencies within it, casts out from the aethereal and luminous vehicle surrounding the soul everything that tends to generation, brings to perfection good hope and faith concerning the light; and, in a word, it renders those who employ prayers, if we may so express it, the familiar consorts of the gods.[739]

Yet, prayers seem to primarily be linked to rituals in Iamblichus' system. He explains that prayers serve to confer the highest degree of completeness upon sacrifices (Ἐπεὶ δὲ μέρος τῶν θυσιῶν οὐ τὸ σμικρότατόν ἐστι τὸ τῶν εὐχῶν), … as it is by means of them that the whole efficacy of sacrifices is reinforced and brought to perfection (καὶ διὰ τούτων κρατύνεται αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπιτελεῖται τὸ πᾶν ἔργον".[740] So for Iamblichus it is in its ritual context that prayer gets its theurgic function; that is how the gods influence the soul. For him prayer does not affect the gods, but rather those who pray. The gods leave certain divine images and names in the soul, which is not accessible to the human mind. These images and names have a particular effect on the soul and raise it to the divine.[741] This notion of "mental theurgy" in Iamblichus, which could be seen as the blending of the contemplative and the active, has been extensively dealt with by Gregory Shaw, who sees it centered around Pythagorean and mathematical symbols elevating the soul above all conceptions.[742]

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[739] *DM* V, 26: Ἡ δ'αὐταῖς ἐγχρονίζουσα διατριβὴ τρέφει μὲν τὸν ἡμέτερον νοῦν, τὴν δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς ὑποδοχὴν τῶν θεῶν ποιεῖ λίαν εὐρυτέραν, ἀνοίγει δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ τῶν θεῶν, συνήθειαν δὲ παρέχει πρὸς τὰς τοῦ φωτὸς μαρμαρυγάς, κατὰ βραχὺ δὲ τελειοῖ τὰ ἐν ἡμῖν πρὸς τὰς τῶν θεῶν συναφάς, ἕως ἂν ἐπὶ τὸ ἀκρότατον ἡμᾶς ἐπαναγάγῃ, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἡμέτερα τῆς διανοίας ἤθη ἠρέμα ἀνέλκει, τὰ δὲ τῶν θεῶν ἡμῖν ἐκδίδωσι, πειθὼ δὲ καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ φιλίαν ἀδιάλυτον ἐγείρει, τόν τε θεῖον ἔρωτα συναύξει, καὶ τὸ θεῖον τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνάπτει, ἀποκαθαίρει τε πᾶν τὸ ἐναντίον τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ ἀπορρίπτει τοῦ αἰθερώδους καὶ αὐγοειδοῦς πνεύματος περὶ αὐτὴν ὅσον ἐστὶ γενεσιουργόν, ἐλπίδα τε ἀγαθὴν καὶ τὴν περὶ τὸ φῶς πίστιν τελειοῖ, καὶ τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν, ὁμιλητὰς τῶν θεῶν, ἵνα οὕτως εἴπωμεν, τοὺς χρωμένους αὐταῖς ἀπεργάζεται.
[740] *DM* V, 26.
[741] Iamblichus, *DM*, VII, 4, 255,17–256, 3; Stock 2008: 1993.
[742] Shaw 1995. See also Coughlin 2006.

Iamblichus thematizes the divine names both in prayer and ritual. These names refer to the gods, and contemplation over these names helps assist in the process of the return of the soul as Iamblichus explains:

> And moreover, we preserve in their entirety the mystical and arcane images of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as it is possible when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods.[743]

It is through contemplation of the sacred names of the gods that the soul is elevated. Proclus has a similar attitude. He systematizes and integrates prayer as the most important element in his philosophical method. For him an acknowledgement of a certain structure of the divine dimension is thus a starting point for the further five levels in the prayer process,[744] which culminate in transcendence of the self and unity with the gods.[745] The purification of the soul and the process of return to the One is for Proclus at great length a question of philosophy and illumination, although theurgy is also important. Secondly, the idea of activating the divine spark within plays a crucial role in his theory of prayer.[746] As with Iamblichus, Proclus finds that contemplation of the divine names will help us connect with the gods, as "we establish ourselves at the highest level of the models of the names."[747]

In the *DN* Dionysius appears to be drawing on his predecessors in the Neoplatonic tradition. Like Iamblichus Dionysius believes that the divine names are revealed to us, and that by contemplating them one can be lifted to the divine.[748] This happens through prayer and theurgic activity that relies on words:

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[743] *DM* VII. 4: Καὶ ἔτι ἀθρόαν τὴν μυστικὴν καὶ ἀπόρρητον εἰκόνα τῶν θεῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ διαφυλάττομεν, καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν δι' αὐτῶν ἀνάγομεν ἐπὶ τοὺς θεούς, καὶ ἀναχθεῖσαν κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν τοῖς θεοῖς συνάπτομεν.
[744] Knowledge (*gnosis*), appropriation (*oikeiosis*), touch (*synaphe*), approach (*empelasis*), unity (*henosis*), Cf. Beierwaltes 1979: 314ff.
[745] Erler in Kobusch, Mojsisch, and Summerell 2002: 39; Majercik 1989: 42.
[746] For more on prayer in Proclus, see Beierwaltes 2013: 313–329.
[747] *Pl.Th.* 1. 29.
[748] *DN* VII, 1.

That is why we must begin with a prayer before every endeavor, especially in divine matters. Not as though we would pull down to ourselves that power, which is present everywhere and yet nowhere, but that we by these mementos and invocations may commend and unite ourselves with it.[749]

For Dionysius humanity is elevated to divinity through prayers. This "teaching of prayer" in *DN* III can be read as a preparatory course in his philosophy. This does not necessarily mean, however, that it must be exclusively seen as a philosophical method in the same way that prayer was understood and practiced in Neo-Platonism. The *DN* has itself been seen as a work, not only *about* prayer, but rather *as* prayer.[750] This becomes clear in many places throughout the text, especially towards the end where the language becomes more sacramental and he is making his ascent out of the dissimilarities and towards the One, ending in Chapter Ten by proclaiming "Amen".[751]

The assumption that Dionysius was influenced by the Neoplatonic/Proclean theory of prayer[752] has been rejected by Walter Völker, who places Dionysius into a long and widespread Christian prayer tradition, such as we meet in Gregory of Nyssa.[753] Völker sees mystical contemplation and unification in Dionysius' system as presupposing prayer and thus he says with Cayré: "prayer is at the base of Dionysian contemplation."[754] As such he too places Dionysius in the context of the Alexandrians who emphasized the close connection between prayer and gnosis.[755] Origen confers on prayer power to penetrate the divine mysteries.[756] Gregory of Nyssa has the same view, that divine knowledge is given as a gift and as a fulfilment of prayer.[757] And Alexander Golitzin has pointed to Dionysius' phrasing,

[749] *DN* III, 1, 680D (ed. Suchla 1990: 139): Χρὴ γὰρ ἡμᾶς ταῖς εὐχαῖς πρῶτον ἐπ' αὐτὴν ὡς ἀγαθαρχίαν ἀνάγεσθαι καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτῇ πλησιάζοντας ἐν τούτῳ μυεῖσθαι τὰ πανάγαθα δῶρα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν ἱδρυμένα. Καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ μὲν ἅπασι πάρεστιν, οὐ πάντα δὲ αὐτῇ πάρεστι. Τότε δέ, ὅταν αὐτὴν ἐπικαλούμεθα πανάγνοις μὲν εὐχαῖς, ἀνεπιθολώτῳ δὲ νῷ καὶ τῇ πρὸς θείαν ἕνωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητι.
[750] Cf. Coughlin 2006: 169ff.
[751] *DN* X, 3. This is a point also made by Rebecca Coughlin. See Coughlin 2006: 169.
[752] Koch 1900: 30.
[753] Völker 1958: 67–70.
[754] Völker 1958: 68 : «prière… est à la base de la contemplation dionysienne».
[755] Ibid.
[756] *Lucas Hom*., Fragment 49, IX 256, 17f; Völker 1958: 68; Schäfer 2006: 415 See Origen, *On Prayer* VIII, 2.
[757] Gregory of Nyssa, *Orat*. 1, I, 1124B; *On the Lord's Prayer* 1.

"becoming present to God" through prayer and that the marked emphasis on human passivity in the higher reaches of prayer places Dionysius in the tradition of the earlier desert fathers in general, and of Evagrius in particular.[758] I find Golitzin's assessment reasonable as the higher stages of Christian prayer are more passive because of God's active illumination of the intellect. Since Christian and Neoplatonist models of interaction with the divine differ on this key point, it seems rather obvious to me that Dionysius would lean towards the language of his Christian forebears over his Neoplatonic influences. The presence of prayers in Dionysius' texts, the fact that he begins the *MT* with a prayer and even encourages the act of prayer, suggests that we are dealing with a Christian who wrote his work with a genuine Christian intention, using the established philosophical concepts and terminology of his time. Since one thing does not preclude the other, both may be accepted by Dionysius: "real" Christian prayer with philosophical implications.

Although there is no coherent learning about prayer developed in *CA*, we can say that in Dionysius prayer is man's love yearning upwards.[759] Yearning and striving are a fundamental feature of Dionysius' world view. It is not, however, isolated from the lower striving for the higher. To Dionysius the entire cosmos is an orderly, hierarchical salvation institution. The universe is surrounded by God. It is built according to Him and consists in virtue of His permanent presence. Love, whether called by the Greek *eros* or *agape*, comes from God, extends through the whole creation and returns to God.[760] Man is a channel for divine and unifying force that pervades the entire cosmos. He is directed towards God because this is what he was created for. This is his natural way of life, human existence in

[758] Golitzin 2003: 160.
[759] Here we meet an understanding of the love that has been critically scrutinized by Anders Nygren. He distinguishes between *eros* and *agape*. See section on '*anagoge* through love'. Humanity's *eros* for God is also a key topic in the exegesis of the *Song of Songs*: see Origen and Kingsmill 2009: Chapter 7.
[760] See *DN* IV 693A.

accordance with nature. “Nature” means God’s plan or intention for man. Grace was there from the beginning. In his sinful condition man intercepts himself from his true self and cannot act in accordance with God’s plans and the cosmic movement towards the origin. Love’s natural movement towards the origin is disturbed in the absence of good order. When human behaviour is renewed, it implies that man is put in right relationship with several agencies: to God, to himself, to the cosmic order and its movement. Prayer, understood as a love movement, expresses something natural, which is in nature’s own order. God moves through his energies through cosmic building to unite all things with each other and with Himself. The energies are essentially love. Nature is thus aligned with an inherent latent longing for its origin.

Man may like to believe that he lifts himself when he apparently pulls himself upwards in the golden chain, or that when he pulls the heavenly chain down to himself. The truth is, says Dionysius, that man is being pulled up with the chain. The image illustrates two aspects that are present in salvation: both the divine and the human element are active. There is inevitably a human activity taking place, for man is climbing up the chain. But the divine activity is most crucial, because God has hung the chain down and pulls it upwards on the other end.

Part of the essence of the Christology that Dionysius represents, is as we have seen, the idea of *θεανδρικὸς* (God-human) activities. In Christ, God and man are united, Christ is Θεάνθρωπος, Godman. In Christ the divine and human nature move towards each other and cooperate. Man is being divinized and God is humanized in a mutual relationship.[761] This is the theandric dimension that everybody eventually will be brought into. According to *EH* the renewed life is to be lived in church arrangements, in communion with God through the

[761] This has been elaborated further by Maximus Confessor. See *Ambiguum 7*.

mysteries, in fellowship with each other and in peace and harmony with the world order. Prayer in church ensures that the community adheres to the golden chain. God has moved towards man and man moves towards God. In this way the theandric process forwards the goal: divinization, the third and final stage on the way upward. Man will eventually, by grace, become what God is, without merging with the divine essence.

**The *ἀναγωγή* of the soul through love**

The soul is, as all creation, longing for God, says Dionysius, unto that time when God will be "all in all".[762] This longing or *eros* (ἔρως) of all beings for God is the created expression of the divine *eros,* which is the eternal *eros* that permeates all.[763] "All things must desire, must yearn for (*ἐράω*) and must love (ἀγαπάω) the Beautiful and the Good," says Dionysius.[764] Love is, however, not just all things longing for their Cause, but also the Good's and the Beautiful's love for creation: "And we may be so bold as to claim also that the Cause of all things loves all things in a superabundance of its goodness, and that because of his goodness he makes all things, brings all things to perfection, holds all things together, returns all things. And even the divine love is good, of the good, on account of the good (Παῤῥησιάσεται δὲ καὶ τοῦτο εἰπεῖν ὁ ἀληθὴς λόγος, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ πάντων αἴτιος δι' ἀγαθότητος ὑπερβολὴν πάντων ἐρᾷ, πάντα ποιεῖ, πάντα τελειοῖ, πάντα συνέχει, πάντα ἐπιστρέφει, καὶ ἔστι καὶ ὁ θεῖος ἔρως ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθοῦ διὰ τὸ ἀγαθόν)."[765]

Love is both a divine power that creates all the goodness in the world, and the longing of all creation for goodness which it fulfills by uniting creation with its origin. It is

[762] *DN* 912D.
[763] "Love" is presented as one of the divine names in the *DN*. The concept follows the presentation of the divine name "the Good", "Light", "the Beautiful" and is followed by including "Ecstasy" *DN* IV 693A.
[764] *DN* IV, 10.
[765] *DN* IV, 10, 708B (ed. Suchla 1990: 155).

understood both as a descending and an ascending power, deriving from the same, unifying and cohesive force: "To those who have listened rightly to the Holy Scripture, the name of *agape* and *eros* are used, in divine revelation, with the same meaning by the sacred writers (Ἐπὶ τοῖς ὀρθῶς τῶν θείων ἀκροωμένοις ἐπὶ τῆς αὐτῆς δυνάμεως τάττεται πρὸς τῶν ἱερῶν θεολόγων τὸ τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ τοῦ ἔρωτος ὄνομα κατὰ τὰς θείας ἐκφαντορίας. Καὶ ἔστι τοῦτο δυνάμεως ἑνοποιοῦ καὶ συνδετικῆς καὶ διαφερόντως συγκρατικῆς ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ἀγαθῷ)."[766] Love is also characterized by bringing ecstasy at the different levels, so that the one who loves goes beyond himself. The divine ecstasy is expressed in creation itself, where God goes beyond himself and manifests himself in creation in the endless circular movement of *μόνη, πρόοδος* and *ἐπιστροφή*.[767] As Rist suggests, the very idea of God's ecstatic love seems to stem from Dionysius:

> The first person to combine the Neoplatonic ideas about God as Eros with the notion of God's "ecstasy" is Pseudo-Dionysius, and it would seem merely perverse to deny that Dionysius' Christianity is the direct cause of this adaption. Dionysius has in fact adapted Eros to the Christian demand that God love all things, and he is the first person to do so.[768]

The idea of *eros* as divine is found both in Plotinus and Proclus, but an ecstatic *eros* as the first principle cannot be found in the Neoplatonists.[769] The idea is related to Dionysius' understanding of God as both hidden and manifest. God's being as hidden implies distinctions/or manifestations or that which goes beyond itself. God's *eros* "did not allow it to remain without issue. It stirred him to use the superabundance of his powers in the production of the world."[770] Love is thus an underlying force in creation itself. The feature of ecstasy in the relationship between God's being and manifestations is also described as follows: "He is […] beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his

[766] *DN* IV, 12, 709D (ed. Suchla 1990: 158).
[767] *DN* IV, 14, 712C.
[768] Rist 1985: 239.
[769] Rist 1985: 239; cf. also Vasilakis 2020: 142-3, 152-3.
[770] *DN* IV, 10.

transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself."[771]

Dionysius equates the concepts of love *eros* (*ἔρως*) and *agape* (*ἀγάπη*), and justifies this with the fact that both terms are used in the Holy Scriptures, and that they are used with the same meaning**:** "To those listening properly to the divine things the name 'love' (*agape*) is used by the sacred writers in divine revelation with the exact same meaning as the term 'yearning' (*eros*)."[772] He defends the use of Eros: "Let no one imagine that in giving status to the term 'yearning' (*eros*) I am running counter to Scripture. In my opinion, it would be unreasonable and silly to look at words rather than the power of the meaning."[773] And: "let those who slander the name of Eros listen to the Scriptures themselves."[774] "In my opinion the sacred writers regard "yearning" (*eros*) and "love" (*agape*) as having one and the same meaning. They added "real" to the use of "yearning" regarding divine things because of the unseemly nature such a word has for men. The title "real yearning" is praised by us and by the Scriptures themselves as being appropriate to God."[775] Here Dionysius recognizes that there is a worldlier understanding of *eros*. It is, however, the "real eros" that he juxtaposes with *agape*. Dionysius defends his understanding of *eros* against the view of *eros* as "partial, physical, and divided yearning".[776] It is not clear who his critics are, but it seems like Dionysius considers it necessary to defend his juxtaposition of *eros* with *agape*.[777] We may say that the concept of *eros* was transformed by Dionysius from its use in the Platonic sense which is an ascending yearning for love, daemonic mediated between man and the One, to a divine love that goes out of itself in creation and permeates the entire hierarchy both as

[771] *DN* IV, 13.
[772] *DN* IV, 12.
[773] *DN* IV, 11.
[774] *DN* 709A.
[775] *DN* IV, 12.
[776] *DN* IV, 12.
[777] Dionysius gives a characteristic of his possibly critics in *DN* IV, 11: "People like this are concerned with meaningless letters and lines, with syllables and phrases which they do not understand, which do not get as far as the thinking part of their souls."

procession and conversion. Jean Daniélou has noted, however, that Gregory of Nyssa also uses eros in a similar way as Dionysius, and, that it is evident in Origen. These may well have been the sacred teachers to whom Dionysius refers.[778]

In Anders Nygren's influential study from the 1930's concerning the understanding of the difference between *eros* and *agape*, it is only *agape* that is considered the unconditional, selfless and Christian/divine love, whereas *eros* is a self-centered, human, philosophical/Platonic love. Eros is considered as man's way to God, *agape* as God's way to man.[779] Nygren criticizes Dionysius's combination of *eros* and *agape*, and claims that the Dionysian *eros* is a Hellenistic form of self-love, distant from the Christian *agape*. Overall, he regards the Dionysian writings as essentially Neoplatonic, with only a thin Christian veneer. Moreover, they are "false" and an attempt to deceive Christianity,[780] so according to Nygren Dionysius claims *eros* to be more divine than *agape*,[781] and attempts "to eradicate the word Agape from the Christian vocabulary."[782] John Rist criticizes Nygren for misreading Dionysius in asserting that *eros* is more divine than *agape*.[783] He points out that what Dionysius is actually saying is that "some of our theologians thought the name *Eros* to be more divine than the name *Agape*."[784] Dionysius does not commit himself to this opinion, Rist explains; on the contrary after having mentioned the opinion of "some theologians", he repeats that he himself regards the two terms as synonymous.[785]

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[778] For some references on *eros* in Gregory of Nyssa, see Danielou 1997: 45; Shuve 2016: 113-128: Haines-Eitzen 2011.
[779] Nygren 1936: 604.
[780] Ibid. 497f.
[781] Ibid. 592.
[782] Nygren 1936: 600. Nygren goes on to criticize the notion of deification and interprets Dionysius as if he meant *theosis* leads to unification with God "at his own level". (Nygren 1936: 504). His criticism is characterized by wanting to expose a fake, and he sees no transformation of the concept of *eros* in Dionysius, nor any distinction between the nature of God and His manifestations.
[783] Rist 1985.
[784] Ibid.; *DN* 709A.
[785] Rist 1985: 237. For an important response to Rist, see D'Arcy 2007.

Dionysius' concept of love may resemble the Neoplatonic *eros*, understood as a cosmic force and a movement up or down in the hierarchy, and in its characteristics by longing and in that it goes beyond itself (in ecstasy). An important difference, however, is that the Dionysian *eros* is not driven by a deficiency: "The divine longing is Good seeking good for the sake of Good (καὶ ἔστι καὶ ὁ θεῖος ἔρως ἀγαθὸς ἀγαθοῦ διὰ τὸ ἀγαθόν)."[786] His type of *eros* is a divine love, a force with its source beyond being, or as Andrew Louth puts it, "what we have in Denys is really a transformation of the Greek notion of *eros*: for Plato *eros* primarily (but not exclusively) met a need, and the neediness of love remains in the pagan Greek tradition; for Denys eros, yearning love, is an overflow of divine goodness – it needs nothing, it is the source of everything."[787]

It is precisely this love that, for Dionysius, is determinative for and shapes love in devout souls, as well. God is—out of love—drawing all souls back to himself, and the souls, responding to God's love, are drawn out of themselves ecstatically towards their source. They are taken up into the divine erotic attraction to the Divine.[788] It is the beauty (*κάλλος*) and goodness (ἀγαθός) of God that 'calls' (καλέω) intelligent beings (angels) and rational beings (human beings) into a symphonic movement back to God.[789] The Greek word for beauty, *κάλλος*, is from καλέω, to call. Hence, the human soul is called back to its origin through beauty, because beauty is the cause of harmony and splendor in everything, for Dionysius, and it calls all things to itself and gathers everything into itself.[790] At the same time, souls are manifestations of the divine goodness—at least to some degree and potentially in an increasing manner—in the respect that they are continuously being drawn to perfection,

[786] *DN* IV, 11.
[787] Louth 1989: 95.
[788] See Riordan 2008: 196–200.
[789] *DN* 949D.
[790] *DN* 701C.

which means manifestation of the divine beauty and goodness.[791] The *epistrophe* or return thus involves the perfection of each, which for the human soul means divinization.[792]

## The three movements of the soul

The devout soul moves anagogically, in an upward manner, in its acts of loving and knowing. Through abstractions it ascends from the sensible to the intelligible. The move goes through interior acts of purification and negation, to mystical acts of knowing God.[793] As the soul ascends, it is being filled up with God's being and thereby transformed in the very substance at its being.[794] In *DN* 4, 9, Dionysius describes three movements of the soul on its journey towards perfection using a geometrical metaphor—circular, spiral, and linear:[795]

> The soul moves in (1) a circle, that is, it turns into itself away from things without and there is a unified and simplified concentration of its spiritual powers, which gives it a kind of fixed revolution, and, turning from the multiplicity without, first to itself, and then when it has reached this unified condition, it joins to those powers which are themselves uniquely unified. From there the soul is brought to the Beautiful and the Good, which is beyond all things, and is one and the same, without beginning or end. And the soul moves in (2) a spiral whenever it is illuminated, according to its capacity, with truths of divine knowledge, not in the special unity of its being but by the process of its discursive reason, and by mingled and changeable activities.[796] And it moves (3) straight forward, when, not entering into itself, being moved by its spiritual unity (for this, as I said, is the circular movement), but rather it proceeds to the things around itself, and from the things of the outward world, as from a rich abundance of multiplied symbols, it is being goaded unto the simple unity of contemplative acts.[797]

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[791] Cf. Riordan 2008: 199.
[792] Ibid.
[793] Ibid. 200.
[794] Ibid.
[795] *DN* 4, 9, 705AB. R. Roques traces these motions to the commentary of Hermias on the *Phaedrus* (see Roques 1955: 203, n. 7). De Gandillac notes the same derivation. See De Gandillac 1943: 38. In addition, Pera gives a detailed account of the origin and development of the three types of motion in Greek philosophy. See Pera 1950: 123–27.
[796] It seems like Dionysius could here be referring to something deeper than just discursive reasoning. As if he meant that certain theological dogmas could be advanced, i.e. constantly renewed and verified by spiritual experience and intuition.
[797] *DN* IV, 9, 705AB (ed. Suchla 1990: 153): Ψυχῆς δὲ κίνησίς ἐστι κυκλικὴ μὲν ἡ εἰς ἑαυτὴν εἴσοδος ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξω καὶ τῶν νοερῶν αὐτῆς δυνάμεων ἡ ἑνοειδὴς συνέλιξις ὥσπερ ἔν τινι κύκλῳ τὸ ἀπλανὲς αὐτῇ δωρουμένη καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν τῶν ἔξωθεν αὐτὴν ἐπιστρέφουσα καὶ συνάγουσα πρῶτον εἰς ἑαυτήν, εἶτα ὡς ἑνοειδῆ γενομένην ἑνοῦσα ταῖς ἑνιαίως ἡνωμέναις δυνάμεσι καὶ οὕτως ἐπὶ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν χειραγωγοῦσα τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ ἓν καὶ ταὐτὸν καὶ ἄναρχον καὶ ἀτελεύτητον. Ἑλικοειδῶς δὲ ψυχὴ κινεῖται, καθ' ὅσον οἰκείως ἑαυτῇ τὰς θείας ἐλλάμπεται γνώσεις, οὐ νοερῶς καὶ ἑνιαίως, ἀλλὰ λογικῶς καὶ διεξοδικῶς καὶ οἷον συμμίκτοις καὶ μεταβατικαῖς ἐνεργείαις. Τὴν κατ' εὐθεῖαν δέ, ὅταν οὐκ εἰς ἑαυτὴν εἰσιοῦσα καὶ ἑνικῇ νοερότητι κινουμένη,

These three movements of the soul are best understood as activities which affect man's way to unity. The image of a downward procession and an uplifting ascent is closely related to the "procession and return" discussed in Chapter One.

1) **The circular movement** concerns the soul's unity and its self-constituting nature in relation to the One. When the soul withdraws from external things and concentrates its knowing powers on the One, it moves in a circle. This can be seen as the soul's entrance into itself and is in essence a description of the process of self-consciousness. The soul turns inwards, away from the external and material. By an inner concentration of its intellectual powers and, by "circling in upon its own intelligent unity", the soul enters an immediate vision, to an assimilating knowledge and understanding of the created and uncreated intelligible realities. The term Dionysius uses for this is the noun συνέλιξις, which derives from the verb συνελίσσω, which means to "roll up", "roll together". The intellect is returning upon itself and beholding itself. What is then this self upon which the intellect returns, which the intellect is rolled up with? It is me as the image of God.

2) **The spiral movement** describes the soul progressing in contemplation through propositional thinking. When the soul discovers divine truth through discursive reasoning, it moves in a spiral. This can be seen as the movement of the intellect, which is both looking outward and centered on the unity of the soul, whereby the soul receives divine enlightenment. The spiral motion is between its linear and circular movements, and functions as a progression which combines the material and immaterial, the perceptible and conceptual.

τοῦτο γάρ, ὡς ἔφην, ἐστὶ τὸ κατὰ κύκλον, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰ περὶ ἑαυτὴν προϊοῦσα καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν ὥσπερ ἀπό τινων συμβόλων πεποικιλμένων καὶ πεπληθυσμένων ἐπὶ τὰς ἁπλᾶς καὶ ἡνωμένας ἀνάγεται θεωρίας.

The soul is advancing in increased assimilation to, and unification with, the intelligible realities.

3) **The linear movement** first proceeds towards multiplicity and is then by way of the multiple raised up from the many to unity. When the soul looks upon the outer world and is drawn back to simple contemplations, it moves in a straight line. This can be seen as the soul ascending in contemplation from the sensible to the intelligible by what is external and material, perceptible and symbolic, all through its power of perception.

We find similar ideas in Plotinus, *Ennead VI*:

> Self-knowledge reveals to the soul that her natural motion is not in a straight line, unless it is deflected. On the contrary, her natural motion is like a circular motion around some interior object, around a centre. The centre is that from which proceeds that which is around it . . . That is the secret of their divinity. For divinity consists in being attached to the centre. Anyone who withdraws much from it becomes an ordinary man or an animal.
>
> Is the "centre" of the soul then the principle we are seeking? No, we must look for some other principle towards which all "centres" converge and to which, only by analogy of the visible circle, the word "centre" is applied . . . We are, by our own centre, attaching ourselves to the "centre" of all things; and so, we rest, just as we make the centres of the great circles coincide with that of the sphere that surrounds them. If these circles were corporeal, not "circles" described by the soul, the centre and the circumference would have to occupy certain places. But since the souls are of the order of intelligible beings and the One is still above Intelligence; we shall have to assert that the union of the thinking being with its object proceeds by different means. The thinking being is in the presence of its object by virtue of its similarity and identity, and it is united with its kindred without anything to separate them.[798]

As in Plotinus, the natural motion of the soul for Dionysius is a circular movement inwards. The soul is returning to its center within, for divinization implies being attached to your own center. Through this inner center, the soul is with its intellect attaching itself to the "center"

[798] Ennead VI.9.8 lines 1-29.: Εἴ τις οὖν ψυχὴ οἶδεν ἑαυτὴν τὸν ἄλλον χρόνον, καὶ οἶδεν ὅτι ἡ κίνησις αὐτῆς οὐκ εὐθεῖα, ἀλλ' ἢ ὅταν κλάσιν λάβῃ, ἡ δὲ κατὰ φύσιν κίνησις οἵα ἡ ἐν κύκλῳ περί τι οὐκ ἔξω, ἀλλὰ περὶ κέντρον, τὸ δὲ κέντρον ἀφ' οὗ ὁ κύκλος, κινήσεται περὶ τοῦτο, ἀφ' οὗ ἐστι, καὶ τούτου ἀναρτήσεται συμφέρουσα ἑαυτὴν πρὸς τὸ αὐτό, πρὸς ὃ ἐχρῆν μὲν πάσας, φέρονται δὲ αἱ θεῶν ἀεί· πρὸς ὃ φερόμεναι θεοί εἰσι. Θεὸς γὰρ τὸ ἐκείνῳ συνημμένον, τὸ δὲ πόρρω ἀφιστάμενον ἄνθρωπος ὁ πολὺς καὶ θηρίον. Τὸ οὖν τῆς ψυχῆς οἷον κέντρον τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ ζητούμενον; Ἢ ἄλλο τι δεῖ νομίσαι, εἰς ὃ πάντα οἷον κέντρα συμπίπτει;... τούτῳ συνάπτομεν κατὰ τὸ ἑαυτῶν κέντρον τῷ οἷον πάντων κέντρῳ, καθάπερ τῶν μεγίστων κύκλων τὰ κέντρα τῷ τῆς σφαίρας τῆς περιεχούσης κέντρῳ, ἀναπαυόμενοι. Εἰ μὲν οὖν σωματικοὶ ἦσαν, οὐ ψυχικοὶ κύκλοι, τοπικῶς ἂν τῷ κέντρῳ συνῆπτον καί που κειμένου τοῦ κέντρου περὶ αὐτὸ ἂν ἦσαν· ἐπεὶ δὲ αὐταί τε αἱ ψυχαὶ νοηταί, ὑπὲρ νοῦν τε ἐκεῖνο, δυνάμεσιν ἄλλαις, ᾗ πέφυκε τὸ νοοῦν πρὸς τὸ κατανοούμενον συνάπτειν, οἰητέον τὴν συναφὴν γίνεσθαι καὶ πλεόνως τὸ νοοῦν παρεῖναι ὁμοιότητι καὶ ταὐτότητι καὶ συνάπτειν τῷ συγγενεῖ οὐδενὸς διείργοντος.

of all things, which means being united to the divine angelic powers inside, who are guiding the soul to the highest principle above all, God. Dionysius has often been criticized for not having a concept of interiority and has as such been contrasted with Plotinus and Augustine.[799] His notion of the soul's three movements and its inner turn does, however, suggest that he has an interest in "inwardness". Even if he does not describe the soul and its acts explicitly in many places, he does mention it in *DN* IV, 9, 705AB as we saw above.

The earliest metaphysic of inwardness, or "the inward turn," arises, as Philip Carry notes, within the Platonist tradition, where it is elaborated in detail by Plotinus, who inherits both Platonist concepts about the intelligible world and Stoic concepts about turning to the self or soul.[800] Plotinus himself says we must turn inward to find God because the higher part of the soul, continually contemplating, is identical to the divine Mind. Hence turning into the soul's interior is turning to God, and self-knowledge yields knowledge of all that is divine, eternal, and ultimate.[801] When the soul turns inward, therefore, it gazes not at a private space, but at the one intelligible world that is common to all; and likewise when the soul is united to the core and the centre of its own being, it is united to the one core and centre of all things.[802] This is not the place to elaborate further on Plotinus' notion of inwardness, but we shall notice that the intelligible world of Plotinus's divine Mind—which the devout soul that turns inwards is united to—is understood as a created realm in Dionysius, i.e. below the level of God. What meets the soul that turns inwards is a celestial realm of intelligences.[803] So when

[799] See, for example, Cary 2000: 107.
[800] Cary 2000: 31. Cary adds that "it is likely that the 'inward turn' originated in middle Platonism before Plotinus, although this depends on dating of the originals of various treatises from Nag Hammadi showing significant Platonist influence, where something like an inward turn seems clearly present". See footnote 8. He also notes that Plotinus is aware of the Stoic tradition as seen for example in Ennead 1,4, which contains a critique of Stoicism as well as a great deal of the language of inwardness. See fn. 9. Charles Taylor (wrongly) argues that interiority proper originated in Augustine (Taylor 1989: 115-142).
[801] Taylor 1989: 115-142.
[802] Ibid.
[803] Ibid. 106.

Dionysius speaks of "the intelligible world", he is referring to the incorporeal world of angels or created intelligences, not the world inside the Mind of God, or the Nous, as in Plotinus.[804]

For Dionysius the soul's activities are essentially linked with knowledge**.** There is no difference for Dionysius between moving and knowing. In effect movement is knowledge and knowledge is movement. In describing the three movements which are proper to the soul, Dionysius connects each of these movements to a mode of knowing. The three movements of the soul reflect the faculties of the soul's cognitive powers, ranging from perception to reason and intelligence, and the various ways in which the soul can arrive at divine knowledge.[805] Maximus Confessor, who refers to *DN* 4 and uses this as a background for his own theology, applies the three movements of the soul to human knowing: *νοῦς, λόγος* and *αἴσθησις*.[806] These three motions represent different roles: through nous "the soul is moved unknowably about God". Through logos, the soul "posits in itself, through the activity of science, all the natural logoi". Through aesthesis, the soul "is affected by what is outside It".[807]

The three moments within the soul are imitations of the three movements which Dionysius attributes to God: the linear, the spiral, and the circular. For although He is without motion (*ἀκίνητος*), God has set creation in motion:

> Our reason must nevertheless adapt itself to the immovable God and attribute the movements to him as it suits him. We must understand the straight movement to mean the directness of aim and unswerving procession of his energies, and the outspring of all things from him. The spiral movement we must understand as the combination of a persistent procession and a fruitful stillness. And the circular movement we must understand as his sameness, wherein he holds together the intermediate orders as well as those at either extremity, as to embrace all things so they are one, an act whereby the things that have proceeded from him may return to him again.[808]

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[804] Ibid. 107.
[805] See *DN* 153, 10; 154, 6 (705AB). Cf. Gersh 1978: 72–76, 185–186 (n.266), 251–253, 270–271; Golitzin 1994: 95–97, 106; Gardeil in Horn 1924: 83–84 and 1925: 321–401; Hugueny1924: 327–331; Bernard 1978: 39–69.
[806] *PG* 91, 1112D. Tollefsen 'Gregory Palamas and Dionysius', in Edwards, Pallis, and Steiris (eds) 2022: 288-297.
[807] Ibid.
[808] *DN* IX, 9, 916CD (ed. Suchla 1990: 213): Ἀλλὰ καὶ κινήσεις θεοῦ τοῦ ἀκινήτου θεοπρεπῶς τῷ λόγῳ συγχωρητέον ὑμνῆσαι. Καὶ τὸ μὲν εὐθὺ τὸ ἀκλινὲς νοητέον καὶ τὴν ἀπαρέγκλιτον πρόοδον τῶν ἐνεργειῶν καὶ

The first movement (straight) is from God, the source of all, and shows that God's power is constant and unswerving. God is the source of all the soul's knowledge and of all that the soul can love, and this first movement from God can be seen as directed toward the soul;[809] the spiral movement refers to the continuous outpouring of his providences and the stability of His productive power; the circular movement has to do with his sameness and the drawing power which compels the return of all things to himself.

> The divine minds [angels] are also spoken of as moving: (1) in a circular manner when they are united to the eternal and endless illuminations of the Beautiful and Good; (2) but straight forward when they advance to the providential guidance of those below them, by accomplishing all things directly; and then (3) with a spiral motion, because even while providentially guiding those below them, they remain unchangeably in their self-identity [the true self-identity which is rooted in God], ceaselessly turning around the Beautiful and Good which is the source of all identity.[810]

The other passage where Dionysius presents the dynamics of God follows upon his description of the three movements of the divine intellects.

> These three movements, and the movements that we perceive in the material world, and the permanence and abiding of each kind, far anterior to these, have their efficient, formal and final cause in the Beautiful and Good, which itself is beyond all rest and motion… All that *is* comes from the Beautiful and the Good, exist in it and turns towards it. All that exists gaze at the Beautiful and the Good, and they are moved by it… "For as the Holy Scripture says: from Him, though him and to Him are all things".[811]

God's movements, caused by Himself, thus permeate the entire cosmos. Even sensible things move in this threefold way, but Dionysius gives no explanation of these motions.[812] The human soul reaches its proper place in the cosmos by imitating divine activity insofar as it is

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τὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τῶν ὅλων γένεσιν, τὸ δὲ ἑλικοειδὲς τὴν σταθερὰν πρόοδον καὶ τὴν γόνιμον στάσιν, τὸ δὲ κατὰ κύκλον τὸ ταὐτὸν καὶ τὸ τὰ μέσα καὶ ἄκρα, περιέχοντα καὶ περιεχόμενα συνέχειν καὶ τὴν εἰς αὐτὸν τῶν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ προεληλυθότων ἐπιστροφήν.

[809] Cf. Riordan 2008: 203.

[810] *DN* IV, 8, 704D (ed. Suchla 1990: 153): Καὶ κινεῖσθαι μὲν οἱ θεῖοι λέγονται νόες κυκλικῶς μὲν ἑνούμενοι ταῖς ἀνάρχοις καὶ ἀτελευτήτοις ἐλλάμψεσι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ, κατ'εὐθεῖαν δέ, ὁπόταν προΐασιν εἰς τὴν τῶν ὑφειμένων πρόνοιαν εὐθείᾳ τὰ πάντα περαίνοντες, ἑλικοειδῶς δέ, ὅτι καὶ προνοοῦντες τῶν καταδεεστέρων ἀνεκφοιτήτως μένουσιν ἐν ταὐτότητι περὶ τὸ τῆς ταὐτότητος αἴτιον καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἀκαταλήκτως περιχορεύοντες

[811] *DN* IV, 10, 705BC (ed. Suchla 1990: 153-154): Καὶ πάντα, ὅσα ἔστι καὶ γίνεται, διὰ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἔστι καὶ γίνεται. Καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸ πάντα ὁρᾷ καὶ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ κινεῖται καὶ συνέχεται. Καὶ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ δι' αὐτὸ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ πᾶσα ἀρχὴ παραδειγματική, τελική, ποιητική, εἰδική, στοιχειώδης καὶ ἁπλῶς πᾶσα ἀρχή, πᾶσα συνοχή, πᾶν πέρας. Ἵνα συλλαβὼν εἴπω· Πάντα τὰ ὄντα ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ, καὶ πάντα τὰ οὐκ ὄντα ὑπερουσίως ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ἀγαθῷ, καὶ ἔστι πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ πέρας ὑπεράρχιον καὶ ὑπερτελές, ὅτι «Ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ» καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ «καὶ εἰς αὐτὸ τὰ πάντα», ὥς φησιν ὁ ἱερὸς λόγος.

[812] *DN* IV, 10, 151.

capable. This activity consists in both consistent unity as well as in procession and return to itself. By uniting itself with the assisting angels, and by engaging in discursive reasoning and meditation, the soul ascends to simpler acts of knowing God.[813] The soul does indeed rely upon her bodily senses as well, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, ultimately the sacraments are the manifestations of the divine activities, which the human is called to imitate. In its imitation the soul also seeks its own self-unity.

## EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE CONVERSION

In this section, I shall examine the epistemological aspects of the conversion of the soul. I begin by surveying *theosis* as knowledge and sense perception, before I go on to highlight the complexity of the hierarchical activities—purification, illumination, and perfection—which constitute the core of the deification process, and which are essentially epistemological in nature (cf. *CH* VII, 3). I further elaborate on the meaning of the expressed goal of the hierarchy as "seeing and understanding" of the sacred truth (*EH* I, 3).

### *Αναγωγή* of the soul through knowledge

The Areopagitica, read as a whole, presents us to two ways that lead to *theosis*: 1) one is an epistemological process of individual growth in divine knowledge, culminating in a mystical understanding of God; 2) the other is by means of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The account of both *θεωρία* (contemplation) and *θεουργία* (theurgy) as equally valid paths to deification, acknowledges the theological, contemplative method of the mind (or the cataphatic and apophatic way that eventually becomes wordless in the moment of encounter with the One), as a supplement to the sacramental liturgy (*theourgia*), which is the communal experience

[813] See Riordan 2008: 203–4.

that points to the concealed reality of God through celebrated symbols. Surprisingly enough the correlation between these two ways in Dionysian discourse has not been examined to a large extent, but as Jules Gross emphasizes, "the two Dionysian ways end at the same goal",[814] which is union with God. Dionysius' teaching on deification, although centered on the work of Christ and the efficacy of the sacraments, is inseparable from his Neoplatonic ontology and ethical theory. The significance of the human intellect for deification in Dionysius might, however, have been downplayed a little amongst Dionysius scholars such as Alexander Golitzin, who claims that "Dionysius does not believe in the autonomous human intellect. The latter is neither capable of, nor free, to approach the Godhead on its own".[815] Dionysius, for his part, says that it is important to ascend from the (obscure) images to the divine Cause of everything, rising with eyes that see beyond the cosmos to contemplate all things.[816] What is meant here is an ascent of the thinking.[817] Man is, according to Dionysius, caused by the divine Cause and as such created in the image of the Cause.[818] Return to God thus means for man at the same time to embark upon an ascent to the superior Cause of his Self. Thinking exceeds itself when the effected thinking is being unified with God, who is its Cause.

Knowledge of "sacred truth" constitutes an important part of the process of deification for Dionysius, but, as Filip Ivanovic notes, intellect should not be understood in the contemporary sense of the word, but rather as a summation of all lesser functions. This is because Dionysius argues that we do not know only through our "noetic" function, but also

[814] Gross 2002: 246.
[815] Golitzin 2000: 183.
[816] *DN* V, 7, 821B.
[817] *DN* I, 5.
[818] *DN* I, 5.

through our senses. We attain divine knowledge from the senses during the process in which the body and the soul are deified.[819]

> Among the profane, there are some who illogically think that our bodies go to a dissolution of being. Others believe that the union between body and soul will be broken once for all, since they see it as unfitting for souls to be trammeled with a body in the divine life and blessed lots. Because of their lack of understanding of the divine things, these people do not consider the fact that our Godlike life in Christ has already begun… None of the sacred men, however, will ever fall into such errors, for they know that when they come to the goal of this present life, they will, with their whole being, inherit the tranquility that makes them Christ-like.[820]

The unification also presupposes, for Dionysius, a freely chosen absence of sin.[821] The free man seeks to return to God. The best method for this is, according to Dionysius, to turn away from the outer and to turn inwards. In this way, man releases himself from everything that can be seen and what sees, and plunges into the true mystical darkness of ignorance, through which he closes his eyes to all concepts.[822] The abstraction and ascent of thinking is according to Dionysius a process of intuition,[823] which is being enlightened,[824] and is ineffable.[825] Dionysius calls this intuitive ascent of the thinking as ἔκστασις.[826]

As Ivanovic stresses, knowledge is indeed a highly important factor for deification for Dionysius, but it is not the only one: it has to be accompanied by a perfection of life and love.[827] Withing the context of the Church, this implies that besides knowledge the hierarchy administers the sacraments, which have a dual activity, acting on the soul spiritually and on

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[819] Ivanovic 2011: 50.
[820] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553CD (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 121): Τῶν δὲ ἀνιέρων οἱ μὲν εἰς ἀνυπαρξίαν ἀλόγως οἴονται χωρεῖν, οἱ δὲ τὴν σωματικὴν εἰσάπαξ ἀπορρήγνυσθαι τῶν οἰκείων ψυχῶν συζυγίαν ὡς ἀνάρμοστον αὐταῖς ἐν θεοειδεῖ ζωῇ καὶ μακαρίαις λήξεσιν οὐκ ἐννοήσαντες οὐδὲ ἱκανῶς ἐν ἐπιστήμῃ θείᾳ μυηθέντες ἀρχθεῖσαν ἤδη τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐν Χριστῷ θεοειδεστάτην ζωήν. (Ἄλλοι δὲ σωμάτων ἄλλων ἀπονέμουσι ταῖς ψυχαῖς συζυγίας ἀδικοῦντες τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ὡς οἶμαι τὰ συμπονήσαντα ταῖς θείαις ψυχαῖς καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀντιδόσεων οὐκ εὐαγῶς ἀποστεροῦντες τὰ πρὸς τὸ πέρας ἐλθόντα τῶν θειοτάτων δρόμων. Ἄλλοι δὲ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐπὶ προσύλους ἐννοίας ἀποκλιθέντες εἰρήκασιν ὁμοειδῆ τοῦ τῇδε βίου τὴν τοῖς ὁσίοις ἐπηγγελμένην ἁγιωτάτην καὶ μακαριστὴν λῆξιν καὶ τροφὰς οἰκείας ἀλλοιωτῷ βίῳ τοῖς ἰσαγγέλοις ἀθεμίτως ἀπέρριψαν). Ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀποπεσεῖταί τίς ποτε τῶν ἱερωτάτων ἀνδρῶν εἰς τὰς τοιάσδε πλανήσεις, ἀλλ' ὅλους αὐτοὺς ἀπολήψεσθαι τὴν Χριστοειδῆ λῆξιν εἰδότες.
[821] *EH* II, 6; III,11.
[822] *MT* I, 3.
[823] *DN* I, 5.
[824] *DN* II, 9, 1F.
[825] *DN* II, 9.
[826] *DN* VII, 1; VII, 3.
[827] Ivanovic 2011: 55.

the body physically—two activities that are of equal importance to Dionysius.[828] As we shall see in the next chapter, there is a place for efficacy in Dionysian sacramental theology.[829]

## Knowledge through sense perception and spiritual perception

Dionysius argues that we do not only know through our "noetic" function, but also through senses, for "also sense-perceptions themselves are echoes of wisdom":[830]

> And human souls possess reason, whereby they turn with a discursive rotation around the truth of things, and, through the divided and manifold activities of their complex nature, they are inferior to the unified intelligences. Yet, they too, through the concentration of their manifold variety toward the one, are deemed worthy, so far as their nature allows, even of conceptions equal to the angels. Indeed, even our sense-perceptions themselves may be rightly described as an echo of that wisdom; and even demonic intelligence, *qua* intelligence, comes from it.[831]

For Dionysius, coming to knowledge of the Divine thus includes using the 'senses', of which the prime example is the function that he ascribes to the sacraments in activating spiritual perception. Also, in describing the mystical union, his use of perceptual analogies, especially those related to vision, is prevalent.[832] "Spiritual senses" may be understood as particular sensory modalities (vision, audition, olfaction, touch, or taste) used by reference to spirit (e.g. "eyes of the spirit", "spiritual touch", "ears of the heart", "eyes of the soul", etc.).[833] Since the time of Plato it has become commonplace in philosophy to use sensation (*αἴσθησις*) language to describe mental activity (*νόησις*).[834] Paul L. Gavrilyuk notes that Christian authors of all

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[828] Ibid. 54.
[829] Cf. Louth 1986: 438.
[830] *DN* VII, 2, 868BC; for spiritual sense in Dionysius, see also Gavrilyuk 2011: 86–103.
[831] *DN* VII, 2, 868BC (ed. Suchla 1990: 195): Διὰ τὴν θείαν σοφίαν καὶ ψυχαὶ τὸ λογικὸν ἔχουσι διεξοδικῶς μὲν καὶ κύκλῳ περὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων ἀλήθειαν περιπορευόμεναι καὶ τῷ μεριστῷ καὶ παντοδαπῷ τῆς ποικιλίας ἀπολειπόμεναι τῶν ἑνιαίων νοῶν, τῇ δὲ τῶν πολλῶν εἰς τὸ ἓν συνελίξει καὶ τῶν ἰσαγγέλων νοήσεων, ἐφ' ὅσον ψυχαῖς οἰκεῖον καὶ ἐφικτόν, ἀξιούμεναι. Ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις αὐτὰς οὐκ ἄν τις ἁμάρτοι σκοποῦ τῆς σοφίας ἀπήχημα φήσας. Καίτοι καὶ ὁ δαιμόνιος νοῦς, ᾗ νοῦς, ἐξ αὐτῆς ἐστι.
[832] See *MT* where Dionysius describes the process of the divine ascent, where one first relinquishes the physical senses, then the intellect and, finally, all perceptions, including non-physical ones. All steps are equally important, as they are successive stages leading to the same goal. Physical senses hence serve as an inescapable goad to spiritual perceptions.
[833] Gavrilyuk 2011: 2.
[834] See for example, Plato, *Resp*. VI, 508; Plotinus, *Enn*.V, 3.

ages have used sensory language to express human encounters with the divine. Examples of Biblical passages include: "taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps 34), "hear the word of the Lord" (Isa I:10; Hos 4: I), and "the pure in heart will see God" (Mt 5: 8). Patristic authors, such as Origen, for instance, would refer to this perceptual capacity as a "divine sense" (*αἴσθησις θεία*) or a "sense of divinity" (*sensus divinitatis*).[835] In his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus writes: "When a man's senses are perfectly united to God, then what God has said is somehow mysteriously clarified. But where there is no union of this kind, then it is extremely difficult to speak about God (Ὁ Θεῷ τελείως τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἑνώσας τοὺς λόγους αὐτοῦ μυσταγωγεῖται ὑπ' αὐτοῦ· τούτων γὰρ μὴ συναφθέντων χαλεπὸν περὶ Θεοῦ διαλέγεσθαι)."[836]

The Areopagite's account of non-physical perception has been given little attention in scholarship, with some exceptions in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Vladimir Lossky, who both observe that Dionysius has a concept of spiritual senses, but they do not say much more.[837] Paul L. Gavrilyuk follows up this topic, and examines the subject more thoroughly in a recent publication.[838] Focusing on the Christian tradition of the "spiritual senses", he discusses how these senses relate to the physical senses and the body, and analyzes their relationship to mind, heart, emotions, will, desire and judgment, and indicates the epistemological and spiritual import of these understandings. Questions that are asked are whether it is possible to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste God, and whether spiritual perceptions operate at any level of ascent towards God. Gavrilyuk states that Dionysius drew, from the sphere of intellection, terms such as "the eyes of the mind", "noetic vision", and "divine vision" to designate a nonphysical perception, that serves as an important stage of vision, but that must be

[835] Origen, *In Cant*, I, 4; *Contra Celsum*, I, 48; VII, 34; cf. Gavrilyuk 2011: 2.
[836] John Climacus in (trans.) Luibhéid and Russel 1982: 288.
[837] Balthasar 2012: 144–210; Lossky 1973: 103; see also Gavrilyuk 2011: 86.
[838] Gavrilyk 2011: 86–103.

abandoned at the end. The analogy of all the five senses is used by Dionysius to goad the worshipper and evoke the immediate relation to God. Hence, Dionysius gives spiritual significance to various perceptual modalities, and noetic vision is, if not the main, then at least the highest modality of spiritual perception. It is through sight that the highest rank of angels has the most immediate access to God.[839] The privileging of noetic vision as the primary modality of spiritual perception is typical of Platonism. Gavrilyuk notes that "this capacity of the highest rank is not granted to the lower angels and humans, who contemplate God indirectly as mediated by higher angels, as well as through God's energies in creation, in perceptual and mental symbols, in the sacramental signs and in visions".[840] However, the field of spiritual perception is, as Gavrilyuk notes, a graded continuum: it is a "continuum, as opposed to a set of discrete faculties distinct from physical perception, because one's cognitive capacities are gradually 'stretched' and transformed as one draws closer and closer to God".[841] He states, "Unlike Origen, Dionysius does not develop a sustained account of the five spiritual senses. The fact that the mystical ascent is described as progressive unification and simplification speaks against the idea of the division of non-physical perception into the five distinct modalities, analogous to the five physical senses."[842]

The mystical ascent is to be understood as a progressive continuum, in which the sacraments are significant. Through the sacraments, one's spiritual perception is activated, it is purified by participating in the sacramental life of the church and energised to draw closer to God.[843] So what role does spiritual perception play for the divine ascent, in the mystical union with God? Gavrilyuk suggests that all cognitive powers, including non-physical

[839] *CH* VI, 2, 200D–201A.
[840] Gavrilyuk 2011: 99.
[841] Ibid.
[842] Ibid.
[843] Ibid. 101.

perception, are folded.[844] To the question whether visions are purely figurative, he suggests that for Dionysius spiritual perception is a changing set of faculties that are tied together and gradually extended.[845] For Dionysius the sensible participate in the reality of the intelligible, and it thus has a function of triggering the recollection of the intelligible. Given these metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, the analogical understanding of *noesis* in terms of *aesthesis* becomes natural. Since the Greek language from the time of Plato contained a broad spectrum of expressions for various modalities of mental activity, using analogies drawn from sense-perception, the terminology at Dionysius' disposal was well suited to convey the slightest nuances of his thought[846].

### *Αναγωγή* of the soul through unknowing

*Theosis* is the fulfillment of the divine ascent in Dionysius' system. In the vision of God, the soul becomes inexplicably united with its true lover. To understand the process that leads to a vision of God, a few key words and passages must be examined. "Unknowing" or "Agnosia" is an indispensable prerequisite for unity with God. Dionysius explains that God can be known through knowledge and through unknowing, but as he stresses, the most precious knowledge of God is not mere theory, it relies on experience: "the most divine knowledge of God, is received through unknowing. It is obtained in the union which transcends the mind when the mind, turning away from all things and even leaving itself behind, is united with the super-luminous rays, and is from them and in them illuminated by the unsearchable depth of wisdom (Καὶ ἔστιν αὖθις ἡ θειοτάτη θεοῦ γνῶσις ἡ δι' ἀγνωσίας γινωσκομένη κατὰ τὴν ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἕνωσιν, ὅταν ὁ νοῦς τῶν ὄντων πάντων ἀποστάς, ἔπειτα καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀφεὶς ἑνωθῇ ταῖς ὑπερφαέσιν ἀκτῖσιν ἐκεῖθεν καὶ ἐκεῖ τῷ ἀνεξερευνήτῳ βάθει τῆς σοφίας

[844] Ibid.
[845] Ibid. 102.
[846] See Chidester 1992; Harrison 2014: 29-30.

καταλαμπόμενος.).”[847] Agnosia thus means to stand back from all being; to be liberated from common perceptions. The soul must be stripped of all attachments, totally isolated, whence it can distance itself from the world of beings. Thus cleansed, as was Moses on his ascent up the mountain, the soul is free to plunge into the divine darkness where the all-complete and single Cause of all is.

The notion of detachment is crucial to Dionysius’ method, because, for him, knowledge is limited by the ontological condition of sensible things. Hence, God is the divinity “beyond every being”, and “apart from every knowledge (ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν)”.[848] Upon entering the divine darkness, the soul reaches its final stages of contemplation. The soul can never know God in His essence: “He remains infinitely beyond our capacity to know Him that intimately; but the soul is admitted into his visible abode.”[849] At this stage “it is no more a question of knowledge but of union”, Dionysius says.[850] The term he uses to describe it is ecstasy: “By the irrepressible and absolving *ecstasy* of yourself and of all, absolved from all, and going away from all, you will be purely raised up to the rays of the divine darkness beyond being (καὶ ἀπολύτῳ καθαρῶς ἐκστάσει πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θείου σκότους ἀκτῖνα, πάντα ἀφελὼν καὶ ἐκ πάντων ἀπολυθείς, ἀναχθήσῃ).”[851] The soul has penetrated “to the furthermost extreme of the divine ascent”.[852]

Dionysius writes, “For the more that we ascend upwards, the more our language becomes restricted to the intellectual conceptions we are capable of, so that when plunging into that darkness which is beyond the intellect, we shall find ourselves reduced not merely to

[847] *DN* VII, 3, 872AB (ed. Suchla 1990: 198).
[848] *MT* I, 997A.
[849] *MT* II, 1025B.
[850] *MT* II, 1025A.
[851] *He ekstasis* is derived from the verb *eksistemi* which means to “put out of its place, change, alter”. Dionysius uses the term to refer to God’s initial condescension as incarnated being and as presence in all being, as well as man’s return to God.
[852] *MT* IV, 1040D.

brevity to speech, but even to absolute dumbness of both speech and thought (Ἐπείπερ ὅσῳ πρὸς τὸ ἄναντες ἀνανεύομεν, τοσοῦτον οἱ λόγοι ταῖς συνόψεσι τῶν νοητῶν περιστέλλονται· καθάπερ καὶ νῦν εἰς τὸν ὑπὲρ νοῦν εἰσδύνοντες γνόφον οὐ βραχυλογίαν, ἀλλ' ἀλογίαν παντελῆ καὶ ἀνοησίαν εὑρήσομεν):"[853]

Leave behind the senses and the activities of the intellect, everything that can be sensed and perceived by the intellect, everything that does not exist and everything that exists. You shall, as far as is possible without the intellect, ascend and unite with him who is beyond all existence and all knowledge. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and all things, you shall in pureness cast all things aside, be released from everything, and then rise up to the transcendent ray of the divine darkness.[854]

Only then, through purification, as in the case of Moses, is it possible to plunge into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the tangible and invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.[855]

The way of the unknowing is like diving into the transcendent reality of the Thearchy, to use Dionysius' own expression.[856] It is the highest point both of gnoseological development, and deifying unification. What could not be known could be experienced. Unknowing and unseeing God is the true experience of knowing and seeing what could not be known or seen.[857] The apophatic way of knowing God through unknowing undoubtedly constitutes the climax of Dionysius' epistemology. However, it is rather the elite achievement of a few, while the whole process of knowledge is more widely available to a larger audience.

[853] *MT* III, 1033BC (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 146-147).
[854] *MT* I, 1, 997B–1000 (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 142): καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀπόλειπε καὶ τὰς νοερὰς ἐνεργείας καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ νοητὰ καὶ πάντα οὐκ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἕνωσιν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι τοῦ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν· τῇ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ πάντων ἀσχέτῳ καὶ ἀπολύτῳ καθαρῶς ἐκστάσει πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θείου σκότους ἀκτῖνα, πάντα ἀφελὼν καὶ ἐκ πάντων ἀπολυθείς, ἀναχθήσῃ.
[855] *MT* I, 3, 1001A.
[856] *MT* II, 1025A.
[857] Ibid.

Dionysius assigns the gnosiological aspect of deification as one of the hierarchical goals: "And the common goal of the hierarchy is the seeing and understanding of sacred truth (Ἀπάσῃ δὲ τοῦτο κοινὸν ἱεραρχίᾳ τὸ πέρας·...ἡ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀληθείας ὅρασίς τε καὶ ἐπιστήμη.)."[858] By virtue of being a rational creature man also has these hierarchical qualities in himself. It is this *seeing and understanding of sacred truth* that makes man more and more united with God since it is God, himself, man is trying to see and understand. The reality of God becomes the reality of man, and man becomes deified. The apophatic way is the next stage, when our words are completely straightened into speechlessness. This negating way is, as Andrew Louth notes, only embarked on by a soul that has purified itself and has already ascended to the level of natural contemplation, which is a contemplation of the world in God.[859] The soul then negates all it knows and moves further. Importantly, as Louth remarks, Dionysius is not exalting some sort of "pure thought" over involvement in the world of senses. Rather he may, says Louth, think of "withdrawal from the inevitable fragmentariness of our involvement in the world of the senses to a more collected, unified state".[860] According to Dionysius, this is what it means to really see and to know:

> For this is true sight and knowledge: to praise him that transcends all things in a transcendent manner by disregarding all that exists, just as those who create a lifelike statue cut away everything that obstructs the clear view of the latent image, and only when they have removed this do they reveal the hidden statue itself in its hidden beauty.[861]

As a reflection of God, the order of the hierarchies and the cataphatic theology is the manifestation of God and His activity in, and through, and to the cosmos. God's activity is a movement *outwards*, directed towards the divinization, or perfection, of all creation. Because of this purpose, the structure of all hierarchy and manifestations of God in the cosmos,

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[858] *EH* I, 3, 376A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 66).
[859] Louth 1981: 174.
[860] Ibid.
[861] *MT* II, 1025 B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 145): τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι τὸ ὄντως ἰδεῖν καὶ γνῶναι —καὶ τὸν ὑπερούσιον ὑπερουσίως ὑμνῆσαι διὰ τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων ἀφαιρέσεως, ὥσπερ οἱ αὐτοφυὲς ἄγαλμα ποιοῦντες ἐξαιροῦντες πάντα τὰ ἐπιπροσθοῦντα τῇ καθαρᾷ τοῦ κρυφίου θέᾳ κωλύματα καὶ αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ τῇ ἀφαιρέσει μόνῃ τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀναφαίνοντες κάλλος.

reveals the nature of the human soul towards whose perfection it is directed. The apophatic theology is concerned with the soul's movement *inwards* to God.[862] This movement implies that the soul is being as closely united as possible with the divine energy. The more deeply the soul is in God, the more clearly and perfectly can it manifest the glory of God, says Dionysius, for "everything and any part of anything participates in the One, and on the existence of the One everything depends for its existence".[863] This understanding of the immanence of God in creation is part of Dionysius' doctrine, just as much as his apophatic understanding of God as essentially unknowable and transcendent. They are, as Louth notes, two sides of the same coin,[864] for "God is known in all things, and apart from all things".[865]

The apophatic attitude in Dionysius relies on Neoplatonic inspiration, as well as on Gregory of Nyssa.[866] The ascending movement towards higher and higher attributes does not mean, as Lars Thunberg notes, that they are privations. They are rather to be understood as gradual transcendence, which means they are not a non-affirmation, but a super-affirmation.[867] Thus the *via negativa* is also real knowledge and contemplation as it provides a means by which we comprehend what God is not, and in this way also, in a superaffirmative sense, what He is.[868] The way of negation is the way of supreme affirmation. This antithetical dialectic between positive expressions and negative predications is highly affirmative.[869]

[862] Louth 1981: 177.
[863] *DN* XIII, 2, 977C.
[864] Louth 1981: 178.
[865] *DN* VII, 3, 872A.
[866] Völker 1958: 143. But see also Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 9,23 and Nazianzen, *Oration* 21.
[867] Thunberg 1995: 409.
[868] Ibid.
[869] Lossky 1976: 28.

**Purification, illumination and perfection**

To arrive at union with God, who transcends all beings and all knowledge, one must, according to Dionysius, undergo a three-fold activity of *purification*, *illumination*, and *perfection*.[870] The interpretation of symbols is of vital importance in this process. Interpretation of the symbols corresponds to the three stages of ascension: 1) cleansing in the sense that one must free oneself from the material aspect of the symbols; 2) contemplation in the sense that one can understand the symbols' content; and 3) perfection in the sense that one must rise above the symbols' content and ascend to a higher level.[871] Each of these stages is related to the epistemological structure Dionysius describes in *CH* VII, 3:

> To sum up, I think I could say with good reason that receiving knowledge of the Godhead means purification, illumination and perfection. Namely, those who receive are purified, so to speak, from ignorance through the knowledge they receive according to their order of the most perfect ordinations. Enlightened by the divine knowledge itself - which also purifies that which was not before considered but is now revealed by the highest enlightenment - they are completed by the light itself in the natural insight of the highest ordinations.[872]

Dionysius describes the same three stages in *MT* I, 3 using the analogy of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai.[873] The reference is to the exploitation of the darkness imagery in LXX Exodus 20:21: "Moses went into the darkness (γνόφος) where God was". Dionysius' use of this analogy consists of three stages: purification, contemplation and union. This is all outlined in one paragraph in *MT*, his short treatise on apophatic theology.[874] Although he does not explicitly mention the terms, they are the same stages described here: Moses is first encouraged to cleanse himself, then to separate himself from what is not clean. After

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[870] On this tripartition in Dionysius, see: *CH* III, 2; *CH* VII, 3; *CH* X, 1.
[871] Cf. *CH* III; *EH* V, 6.
[872] *CH* VII, 3, 209D (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 30-31): Συνελὼν δὲ καὶ τοῦτο φαίην ἂν οὐκ ἀπεικότως ὅτι καὶ κάθαρσίς ἐστι καὶ φωτισμὸς καὶ τελείωσις ἡ τῆς θεαρχικῆς ἐπιστήμης μετάληψις, ἀγνοίας μὲν οἷον ἀποκαθαίρουσα τῇ κατὰ τάξιν ἐνδιδομένῃ γνώσει τῶν τελεωτέρων μυήσεων, φωτίζουσα δὲ αὐτῇ τῇ θείᾳ γνώσει δι' ἧς καὶ καθαίρει τὴν οὐ πρότερον ἐποπτεύσασαν ὅσα νῦν ἐκφαίνεται διὰ τῆς ὑψηλοτέρας ἐλλάμψεως, καὶ τελειοῦσα πάλιν αὐτῷ τῷ φωτὶ τῇ καθ' ἕξιν ἐπιστήμῃ τῶν φανοτάτων μυήσεων.
[873] It is interesting that in the Bible there are often revelations taking place on mountains: Moses receives the Ten Commandments of God up on Mount Sinai (Gen. 2: 34), the prophet Elijah meets God on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19), it was also at Horeb that Moses met God in the burning bush (Ex. 2 3.1) and Jesus gives his central vision and revelation in the Sermon of the Mount on a mountain (Matthew 5–7).
[874] *MT* I, 3.

completing his purification, he hears heavenly timpani and sees light. Then he is isolated from diversity and moves up to the divine heights, where he does not see God, but the place where God is, and then separates himself completely from (or is being redeemed from) what is visible and what can be seen, and plunges into the darkness of ignorance,[875] where he reaches union with the unknown God who is beyond knowledge and being.[876] Here we see the following order presented: Purification – Separation – Sensations or Information – Separation and Sight of the place of God – full Liberation and Unification. Moses (or man) thus arrives at purified *theoria* by the abandonment of the sensible and the intelligible that he surpasses. He leaves behind all sensory perceptions and reaches the silence of unknowing in which the Cause of all things dwells.

The three stages of *purification, illumination*, and *perfection* that are implicit in Moses' ascension are God's activities and have, according to Paul Rorem, the following purposes:

> God does these things by means of the hierarchies, and they correspondingly perform their purification, illumination, and perfection in imitation of the divine, indeed as an extension of the divine activity.[877]

These divine activities contain an important epistemological element, since, as Dionysius says, these "are all three the reception of an understanding of the Godhead."[878] These activities can thus to be understood as three different levels of divine knowledge or understanding, and thus represent three steps or levels in the process of deification.

[875] This vision may be seen as the forerunner of the later famous English magnum opus *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work of Christian mysticism written in Middle English in the latter half of the 14th century. The text is a spiritual guide on contemplative prayer in the late Middle Ages. The underlying message of this work suggests that the way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing", at which point one may begin to glimpse the nature of God.
[876] Cf. *MT* I, 3.
[877] Rorem 1993: 58.
[878] *CH* VII, 3, 209C.

**The three stages of spiritual life in Dionysius' predecessors**

The triad of purification, illumination and perfection, which in Dionysius conveys the major scheme for the process of *theosis* and may be seen as the crowning example of Dionysius' thought, is found in several of the Fathers before Dionysius, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus. Its origins, however, can be sought partly in traditions associated with the pagan mystery religions: they required ritual purification as preparation for initiation, and illumination and union could be said to be the fruit of such initiation.[879] Someone undergoing initiation was named a *mystes*.[880] Plato uses similar language in the philosophical preparation, which entails purification and illumination in order to achieve union with the objects of true knowledge.[881]

Christians too developed triadic structures of initiation. A three-fold spiritual development was widely presupposed among early Christian writers. Clement distinguishes between three stages of the theological vision: *ἠθικός* (ethical), *ἱερουγικός* ('hierurgical'), which corresponds to the 'natural contemplation', and *θεολογικός* ('theological'), which corresponds to vision (or *epopteia*).[882] Origen seems to be the first who made this triadic structure explicit.[883] In the Prologue to the *Commentary* he differentiates between the three stages of *ethicum*, *physicum*, and *enoptice,* which he links respectively to the *Book of*

[879] Towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, it was becoming more popular in German scholarship to connect the origins of Christianity with heavy influence from the mystery cults, if not labeling Christianity itself as a mystery cult. This trend was partly the result of the increasing growth of critical historical analysis of Christianity's history, as exemplified by David Strauss's Das Leben Jesu (1835–36) and the secularizing trend among scholars that sought to derive Christianity from its pagan surroundings. See Burkert 1987; Bremmer 2014; Johnson 2009; Bowden 2010.

[880] An example of the interaction between Christianity and mystery religions is Christianity's own initiation ritual, baptism. In the beginning in the fourth century, Christians began to refer to the sacrament of baptism with the word mysterion, the Greek term that was also used for a mystery rite. In this case, the word meant that Christians did not discuss their most important rites with non-Christians who might misunderstand or disrespect them. Their rites thus acquired some of the aura of secrecy that surrounded the mystery cults. Bowden 2010: 208–210; Bremmer 2014: 161–163.

[881] Cf. Plat. Rep. 377a; Plat. Phaedrus 114d. See Annas 1982, 121-122; Bernstein 1993, 56; Partenie 2018 provides a useful overview of Platonic myth in geneal and summarizes recent views in scholarship on its function.

[882] Clement 1951: 176ff.

[883] Thunberg 1995: 333.

*Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *the Song of Songs.*[884] These are the three stages that the soul must go through progressively: first, formation of the virtues (*ethike*), then, natural contemplation, which means adopting a right attitude to natural things (*physike*), finally ascending to contemplation of God (*enoptike*). Origen is partial to the idea that there are *logoi*, principles, implanted in the created realm that can help man to a conception of God's eternal wisdom:

> If anyone is capable of conceiving by thought an incorporeal existence, formed by all sorts of ideas, which embraces the principles of the universe, an existence living and, as it were, animated, he will know the Wisdom of God who is above every creature and who truly says of himself: God created me as the beginning of his ways for his works.[885]

The aim is to free the soul from the body. Only then can the last stage of *enoptike* or enoptics, contemplation of God, be made possible. It seems like for Origen this is an experience that will happen only after death, when the soul (*psyche*) has been released from the body and has become mind (*nous*), in a way that enables it to contemplate the intelligible realm of the Platonic Forms:[886]

> And so the rational being, growing at each successive stage, not as it grew when in this life in the flesh or body and in the soul, but increasing in mind and intelligence, advances as a mind already perfect to perfect knowledge, no longer hindered by its former carnal senses, but developing in intellectual power, ever approaching the pure and gazing 'face to face', if I may so speak, on the causes of things.[887]

For Origen, the highest realm is spiritual and non-sensible. As nous, the spiritual being can contemplate this world of the Forms and realize its kinship with this ream. This presupposes that the souls ascend from the entrapment in the bodies.[888]

Origen in his turn would influence later Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus who had similar threefold approaches.[889] Gregory introduces a parallelism

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[884] In particular see Origen, *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 3. *Enoptics*, which means roughly metaphysics, is only one possible rendering: *epoptics* is also likely (an *epoptes* was an initiate in a mystery cult, specifically that of the Eleusinian Mysteries). For discussions of epoptics vs enoptics in the prologue, see Edwards 2002: 140; Tzamalikos 2007: 359–60; Riedwig1986: 5–6.
[885] *Commentary on John* I. xxxiv: GCS 1899: 43.
[886] *Commentary on John* II. 4: GCS 1899: 140; II. Xi. 7: GCS 1899: 191f.
[887] *Commentary on John* II. Xi. 7: GCS 1899: 191f.
[888] De Principiis I.v and II.viii
[889] Cf. Louth 1981: 58-60; 84-7; 102f.

of the three ways, each of which includes a practical as well as a theoretical aspect that are kept together and accorded a simultaneous importance:[890] purification ('light'); contemplation ('cloud'); and union ('darkness')."[891] According to Jean Daniélou, the third stage of union in Gregory is represented by charity (*agape*) and is predominated by the practical aspect,[892] which implies a focus on the efforts and virtues of man, as in baptismal and ascetic purification. In this way the "spiritual senses" are acquired, which allow the perception of the divine, which is beyond creation.

The reference is the Exodus narrative of Moses' experience on Mount Sinai, which according to Denys Turner is one of the two foundational stories that late antique attempts at mystical theology relied upon.[893] Gregory summarizes the events of Moses' life and refers back to them as the bases for spiritual lessons.[894] In *The Life of Moses* the prophet's experience on Mount Sinai becomes a symbol of the spiritual journey of the soul to God. Gregory calls attention to those features of Moses' life which may be considered a contemplation, where Moses withdraws from active involvement in the affairs of men.[895] Ascetism is emphasized; Gregory refers to it as a "greater philosophy" than the learning of the Egyptians (cf. pagan philosophy).[896] He describes how Moses instructed the people to undergo a process of purification and "to keep themselves from defilements of all kinds which pertain to both soul and body and to purify themselves by certain lustrations".[897]

We find a similar narrative in Dionysius, who begins *MT* with Moses being commanded to submit to purification and depart from those who have not undergone it.[898]

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[890] See *De vit. Moys.* 2.200; Thunberg 1995: 334.
[891] Daniélou 1944: 19f.
[892] Daniélou 1944: 22.
[893] Turner 1995: 11-18. The other main narrative is Plato's allegory of the cave in book 7 of The Republic.
[894] See *De vit. Moys.* 2; 3.
[895] Malherbe and Ferguson 1978: 10.
[896] Ibid.
[897] *De vit. Moys.* 1.42.
[898] *MT* I, 3.

The common reference for both Dionysius and Gregory is Exodus 19, where God tells Moses to consecrate and purify the people, and to set limits preventing them from trespassing onto the mountain. In *MT*, once Moses has been purified, he has the divine revelations of hearing the heavenly timpani and seeing the many lights.[899] Both Gregory and Dionysius call the third and final stage of human development, union, darkness.[900] When the soul has been purified, something which also includes the mind being freed from all notions of divinity, it can reach the higher sphere where it waives all understanding and is united with God who is completely unrecognizable.[901] Both Dionysius and Gregory stressed the incomprehensibility of God, and man's inadequacy to capture anything of the divine essence.

A three-fold spiritual development, on the base of a more general distinction between "practical" and "gnostic" activities seem to have been presupposed among Christian writers as early as in Clement of Alexandria.[902] The first level entails struggle against the passions and acquisition of the virtues, then contemplation via gnosis and finally a true culmination of gnosis in a vision of God.[903] Evagrius Ponticus, who builds on the foundation laid by Origen, develops these ideas considerably.[904] He delineates the triad *praktike (πρακτική), gnosis (γνῶσις), theologia (θεολογία)*. The first stage of *praktike* or *vita practica* is a spiritual path that cleanses the part of the soul which is the seat of passions. It consists of keeping the commandments and developing practical virtues. The goal is to purify the soul from passions, so that it may turn its attention to contemplation to the divine.[905] In principle, this can be seen as a stage of preparation.

[899] Ibid.
[900] *De vit. Moys.* 1.42; *DN* 592C-D8; 708D9.
[901] *MT* I.
[902] Thunberg 1995: 333.
[903] Cf. Völker 1958: 120; Thunberg 1995: 333.
[904] *Liber gnost*. 151; Thunberg 1995: 337.
[905] *Liber gnost*. 151; Thunberg 1995: 337.

The second stage, *gnosis*, is the contemplation of nature and Scripture that leads to increased knowledge of God. As Thunberg notes, the importance attributed to contemplation is primarily of a Platonic inspiration.[906] Plato saw the world of ideas as the object of contemplation and the *nous* as its human organ.[907] Man's capacity for contemplation, that seems predominant in all early Christian theology, plays a particularly important role to Evagrius who draws a distinction between a higher and a lower form of contemplation, the first type being concerned with the Holy Trinity and the second with the created world.[908] Within these two levels, there is an additional scale of various levels of contemplations, through which the mind has to advance. During this process the mind is being purified and detached from bodily and sensual connections, and turned towards higher forms of contemplations in the intelligible realm.[909] Though the contemplation of the intelligible is higher than that of corporeal nature, both take place in the second stage of the spiritual development, "natural contemplation".[910] It is only the third stage, *theologia,* which is undifferentiated.[911] This highest level of knowledge, which is a contemplation of the knowledge of the holy Trinity, requires a naked mind, stripped of all sensual impulses, and of all notions and conceptions of the divine.[912] This ascend of the mind connotes to Evagrius, who sees it in the perspective of his Origenist understanding of creation and fall, a return to the original existence.[913]

The triad *praktike*, *gnosis*, *theologia* is, according to I. Hausherr, equivalent to Dionysius' three stages of purification, illumination and perfection.[914] For Dionysius, as in

[906] Thunberg 1995: 343.
[907] Ibid.
[908] *Cent. Gnost.* 3. 41; PO 28, p. 115 and *Ep.* 58; Thunberg 1995: 343. As for the lower contemplation, Evagrius also differentiates between four forms of it, which is also known as his five types of knowledge (*theoriai*).
[909] *Cent. Gnost.* 2. 88; Thunberg 1995: 345.
[910] *Cent. Gnost.* 1. 74.
[911] Hausherr 1935: 124.
[912] *Cent. Gnost.* 3. 19 and 21.
[913] Thunberg 1995: 346.
[914] Ibid.

the wider tradition to which he belongs, purification is regarded as a prerequisite for true knowledge. It means a conquest of passions. But not only that, purification in Dionysius implies an acquisition of positive virtues as well, such as expression of love and imitation of Christ.[915] Purification, however, is not restricted only to ascetical practice in Dionysius, it also a way to remove ignorance by knowledge/illumination so that one can be lifted up in the contemplative sense.[916] The fundamental concern is spiritual knowledge in various degrees. Such an understanding also justifies speaking of purification in the celestial hierarchy.[917] This idea has earlier been explored in depth in Plotinus who in *Ennead* III, 6, 5 explains the meaning by referring to a pure soul being cleansed. The meaning is that "the soul turns upward in the opposite direction to the lower". In this way, perfection in Dionysius could be understood as a continuation and completion of the illumination, until one possesses "a perfect understanding of the holy things",[918] for "participation in the divine knowledge (*θεαρχικὴ ἐπιστήμη*) is nothing but purification, illumination and perfection (κάθαρσίς ἐστι καὶ φωτισμὸς καὶ τελείωσις)", says Dionysius.[919] Therefore, "purification" can also be understood as an activity whereby one removes oneself from ignorance and achieves "illumination" which in its highest and most perfect form involves "union" or "perfection".

In the process of purification, man surely needs use of his rational faculty. Rational discernment is crucial in his fight against passions, so virtues can thus be seen as closely related to knowledge in Dionysius. For it is knowledge of God obtained through the senses that allows man to circle around the truth, says Dionysius.[920] In sin man has become misdirected and the "native capacity of illumination" has been lost, so man lives in ignorance.

[915] *EH* III, 3.3.12.
[916] *EH* 6, 537A–B; *CH* VII, 3, 209C.
[917] Cf. Koch 1900: 177.
[918] *EH* 168A.
[919] *CH* VII 3, 209C.
[920] *DN* VII, 2, 868C (I, 195).

The soul that lives in sin and ruled by passions cannot perceive reality rightly. With its rationality distorted, the soul's capacity to see and experience the Truth became blurred. This led to a confusion of identity that ended in incapacity to perfect the natural and good part of human nature. Dionysius argues that by God's "unifying power we are unified and our divisive diversity is brought together – into a divine oneness – we are drawn together into unity imitative of the divine".[921] Purification, illumination, and perfection are, thus, operations that we experience and, as Louth has noted, we do not achieve this movement towards God solely on account of our own effort, but are also dependent on God's gracious movement towards us.[922] Unity emerges when man has arrived at an "undiluted yearning for God," which will transform man from the variability of the passions.[923] The image of God, that has been corrupted within man, is being renewed and reformed, and man is being perfected.

**Perfection and Union**

Dionysius' three stages: purification, contemplation, and union, correspond to the spiritual ascent from purification to illumination and perfection discussed in the hierarchical treatises.[924] But how are we to understand the relationship between perfection (τελείωσις) and unity in the hierarchy and the mystical union (*ἕνωσις*) in *MT*? To clarify this, we must read *CH and EH* considering Moses' ascent to mystical union as it is construed in *MT*. In *CH* III Dionysius writes that the goal of the hierarchy is to become one with God,[925] and in the first chapter of *MT*, he writes that the ultimate goal for all is *ἕνωσις*, or union with the divine

[921] *DN* I, 4, 589 D (I, 112).
[922] Louth 1983: 40.
[923] *EH* III, 3, 7, 436C (II, 87); *EH* III, 3, 7, 436A (II, 86).
[924] Rorem 1993: 190.
[925] *CH* III 2, 165A.

darkness.[926] There is thus some connection between the last step of the triadic way, perfection, and Moses' union with God as described in *MT*.

Moses, in Dionysius' narrative, progresses from purification to contemplation or illumination, and then on to perfection or union. The "purification" of Moses was already understood as a reference to the liturgy and the hierarch by Philo and Gregory of Nyssa.[927] It was the liturgical cleansing in the liturgy and the priestly mediation between God and human beings which was the focus of their attention.[928] Presumably, under their influence, Dionysius puts forward a subtle parallel between Moses in *MT* and the bishop in *EH*. Before ascending the mountain Moses is purified (*apokatharthendi*), echoing the clerical leader (hierarch) who, as part of the ritual, washes his hands (*apokatharsin*) in the eucharist liturgy during the transition from the liturgy of the word to the celebration of the Eucharist.[929] Moses is then separated (*aphorizetai*) from the crowd, and alone he proceeds to the summit, where he is poised to contemplate not the invisible God, but to the place "where he dwells" (*topon*). The liturgical counterpart Dionysius gives in his interpretation of the liturgical rites in *EH*. He explains that the beautiful images at the entrance of the sanctuary propose a contemplation suitable for the crowd, whereas the clerics are to behold the light and the intellectual visions within the sanctuary.[930] Then, at the top of mount Sinai, Moses breaks free from all that can see and be seen, and he plunges into the mysterious darkness of unknowing.[931] Dionysius does not present Moses as turning to illuminate others about what he has learned, but by the text itself (*MT*) Moses becomes a teacher who initiates the reader. The reference is, as we saw

[926] Ysabel de Andia examines the concept of *henosis* in *CA* in her extensive work *Henosis. L'union à dieu chez Denys L'Aréopagite*. Andia 1996: 421.
[927] Rorem 1993: 190.
[928] Ibid.
[929] Rorem 2015: 17.
[930] *EH* III, 3, 2, 428C.
[931] *MT* I, 1, 1001 A.

above, to Exodus 19, where God tells Moses to consecrate and purify the people, and to set limits preventing them from trespassing onto the mountain.

We see that although the *MT* nowhere mentions the hierarchies, the union described in *MT* can be seen as a liturgical reality, as if Dionysius assumes that his readers would pick up on the liturgical allusions. In *EH* he certainly presupposes the readers knowledge about the rites described. Here he describes the veiled symbols in the liturgy and in Scripture as mediating a share of illumination and knowledge about God, which in turn elevates us to God. We find the same topic addressed in the *MT*; as one passes beyond all sensible and intelligible symbols and concepts, one comes into the presence of God.[932] This presence is revealed when one has passed beyond ones' powers to perceive and understand.

If God is present in the hierarchy as mediated light and revelation, as we saw in chapter one where we were discussion Dionysius' notion of hierarchy and its Neoplatonic background, then we can become illuminated by attention to the intelligible beings higher than us[933]. If we are created directly by God, then we can, as Louth points out, become united to God by responding immediately to this act of creation.[934] This response to God is not to ascend the hierarchy, but to conform oneself to God.[935]As for perfection in the hierarchy Louth proposes to use the word *inwards* rather than *upwards*. This is to clarify that perfection does not have to do with an ascent to *ἕνωσις*, but rather with the individual's way into God.[936] Τελείωσις or perfection in Dionysius' hierarchical system is not to be understood as a static condition or an end station. There is no question of the goal of contemplation as in *MT*.[937] Perfection within the hierarchy is rather an activity that is constantly in progress where the

[932] *MT* I, 3, 1000C.
[933] Louth 1989: 106.
[934] Louth 1989: 106.
[935] Louth 1989: 107.
[936] Louth 1981: 177.
[937] Ruh 1990: 63.

goal is to become a perfect image of God, and thus to be able to convey knowledge down the hierarchy.[938] This reflects the hierarchy's purpose, which is to communicate knowledge and light. There is always activity in the hierarchy. The process never reaches an end: "Nothing is free of the need for perfection," says Dionysius.[939]

God is present in the world through his divine powers, yet he is greater and goes beyond his own presence: the intelligible orders go beyond the sensible realities; Moses goes beyond the realm of God's powers and plunges into the realm in darkness, which signifies God's absolute transcendence, beyond all affirmations and negations.[940] Like Moses, we ascend by negations, and we may attain a vison of God only when we transcend all negations (*apophaseis*).[941] This ascent ultimately involves mystical theology, which means leaving behind all things, so that one can be drawn up to God and ecstatically out of oneself.[942] Ultimately, the mystical union is different from the perfection of the hierarchy in that it exceeds it and completes it. The union occurs through ecstasy since union with the hidden deity is transcendent.[943] Kurt Ruh explains it as such: "Von dieser Einigung in der Hierarchie unterscheidet sich die Henosis der Mth [*MT*], die man die mystische nennen darf. Sie vollzieht sich plötzlich, entreiβt den Gläubigen aller menschlichen Bedingungen, ist ein transintellektueller Akt."[944] The union, thus, happens suddenly and it goes beyond what the intellect can grasp. Louth has described it as an "act of loving surrender … where God goes out of himself in love in establishing the creature's being, and the creature goes out of itself in love in union with its Creator."[945] Furthermore, "this act of mutual ecstasy bypasses the

[938] *CH* III.2, 165A.
[939] *CH* X, 3 273C.
[940] *MT* I, 3, 1000C.
[941] *MT* II, 1025 AB.
[942] Cf. Louth 1989: 108.
[943] See *MT* 144, 15, 1001A; MT 142, 10, 1000A.
[944] Ruh 1987: 40.
[945] Louth 1989: 108.

system of hierarchy: just as God bypasses the hierarchies in creation, so the creature bypasses the hierarchies in realizing its immediate relationship to God in ecstatic love."[946]

To sum up, the mystical union as described in *MT* transcends and completes the hierarchical goal. It happens virtually in another "sphere," or on a different level. We can say that the union of *MT* represents the peak of Dionysius' authorship in that it culminates in the mystical union with the deity. It can be summed up as such:

> For Dionysius, mystical theology is an austere, intellectual ascent to union with God, and because divinity is essentially unknowable, this union occurs in the cloud and darkness of unknowing. This assimilation to God also completes the task of hierarchy. It is the perfection that the intellect seeks in symbols, sacraments, and intelligible names. Yet mystical theology accomplishes this ecstatically, by going out from intellect and hierarchy to their hidden sources in the divine nature itself. In this way mystical theology completes the return to the God "beyond being."[947]

If the mystical union happens ecstatically beyond the hierarchies, we may ask what is then the point of the hierarchies? Dionysius answer is: to be a theophany of God, displaying his glory, and to call back creatures to their Creator.[948] The liturgical acts represent a calling to creatures to open themselves to the divine love so that they can become transformed and deified.[949] To become united with God and become part of his divinity, means to let go of all noetic activity and let his spiritual light flow through the mind.[950] The last chapters of *MT* describe this way as a negation of all sensible and intelligible names for God, where even negations must be negated since God is beyond everything, affirmations as well as negations.[951]

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[946] Ibid.
[947] Ducklow 1987: 357.
[948] Louth 1989: 108.
[949] Ibid.
[950] De Andia 1996: 418.
[951] But see Knepper 2013. In his study *Negating Negation: Against the Apophatic Abandonment of the Dionysian Corpus* Knepper dismisses the assumption that Dionysian metaphysics is fundamentally apophatic. Instead, he focuses at the positive dimensions of divine names in particular, and at the Dionysian cosmos, as a whole. According to Knepper the Dionysian God is ineffable only in certain respects. He rejects both traditional

God is not perceivable for us humans with our normal categories, i.e., the *conditio humana*. He is beyond Being, Divinity, and Goodness, as we understand these concepts by human standards. To emphasize the divine transcendent nature, Dionysius uses the prefix *hyper*. No fewer than ten *hyper*- constructions are to be found in *MT*. The Trinity is described as *hyper*-essential, *hyper*-divine and *hyper*-good. The terms we encounter here are not random terms. Plato already refers to the idea of the Good as being *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*.[952] Origen and Plotinus add that the highest principle is also above thought. Plotinus identifies the Good, which for him is identical with the One,[953] with God.[954] Dionysius refers to God as *ὑπερούσιος*, but also as *ὑπεράγαθος*, and even as *ὑπέρθεος*. This is an expression of the Holy Trinity, rewritten by Dionysius. The paradox of a hyper-divine divine Trinity emphasizes God's absolute transcendence at its strongest. Emphasizing God's divine transcendent nature, however, and letting go of idols we have made of him, and all noetic activity, does not involve some form of mindfulness technique for Dionysius. Instead, he invites his reader to imitate the angels in quiet adoration before the divine mystery.[955]

For Dionysius the goal of the hierarchy is a union (*henosis*) which is relational as it is a union with the ineffable, yet, personal God. Furthermore, we recall from chapter one that the role Dionysius ascribes the hierarchy is "to assimilate God as far as possible."[956] This means bringing the lower orders to the greatest possible equality and assimilation with the deity, so that each level will realize their potential. The order that is at the top of the hierarchy and the closest to God has the greatest similarity with God. This similarity is conveyed down the ranks. The hierarchy's function is thus dissemination rather than ascent. We are talking

views of Dionysius and contemporary views of ineffability, arguing that Dionysius did not defend absolute ineffability, because nobody can.
[952] *Rep*. 509b.
[953] *Enn.* II, 9.
[954] *Enn.* VI, 9.
[955] De Andia 1996: 394-397.
[956] *CH* III, 2, 165A.

about a movement that goes from God and that has deification as the goal. Louth clarifies this:

> His [Dionysius'] hierarchies are static: they are not ladders up which one climbs, so that finally by reaching the rank of seraphim (or bishop, or monk) one attains union with God. The hierarchies seem to mediate union with God and deification by their *existence*, not by their finally being folded up as one reaches the top. The hierarchies are glittering displays of the divine glory, a magnificent *theophany*, and by responding to that theophany we are assimilated to God and deified.[957]

To sum up, Dionysius presents us in a threefold way: 1) the first step, purification, implies freeing oneself from all the images of the deity. This stage is apophatic because it negates all affirmations and anthropomorphic representations. 2) The second step, contemplation, i.e., gnosis and love in its highest form; an illumination so strong that it is dark, and therefore called the divine darkness. 3) The final stage is union with God through *agnosia*. This union implies ecstasy where one goes out of itself and into union with the divine.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on Dionysius' account of the human body and soul, a relation that is a central problem in the Platonic tradition. Like the Platonists and Neoplatonists, Dionysius is concerned with the purification and ascent of the soul. This is a process which for both traditions culminate in union with the transcendent deity; a union that is both beyond all knowledge and that also transcends the bodily realm – however, for Dionysius, the descriptions of body-soul union, and every attempt to help the soul to ascend, depend on *hulaia cheiragogia*, i.e., material help.[958] This is a process that is also integrated into the

[957] Louth 1989: 105f.
[958] This point has also been stressed by Wiebke-Marie Stock in Stock: 2008.

liturgical life of the church, involving both body and soul, and operating on the soul through the body.

In a genuinely distinctive way Dionysius can combine and transform thinking from Christian and pagan philosophy, something which becomes particularly evident in the question of the status and function of the body. Dionysius upholds the totality of the resurrection and asserts that the body that pursues a divine life on earth comes to share the rewards of the resurrection and immortality together with the soul. For Dionysius, the human is a composite whole, consisting of body and soul. Consequently, like the soul, the body shall also share in the rewards of the resurrection and immortality, for the body is "yoked" to the soul.[959] Such an account of the body, which elevates it to the same status as the soul, and even to the status of the soul's companion in the hereafter, is clearly a Christian standpoint, perhaps even more body-affirming than some classically Platonist Christian thought.[960] This has also been commented by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who says that Dionysius in this way represents "one of the striking deviations from the Platonic world… For the soul is for Dionysius, in a much clearer way than for Origen, Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine, a spirit bound to the body with ways of perception conditioned by the body."[961] The very idea that the body should also experience a resurrection must have seemed absurd to the ancient pagan philosophers who often understood the body as the major obstacle for the soul's ascent and sometimes even as an evil. Dionysius says that for the pagans it is "against nature" to assert that the body should also experience immortality, but for the Christians it is true, and it appears divine and supernatural.[962] For Dionysius, purification, perfection and union apply to

[959] *DN* 856D.
[960] See, for instance, J.A. Harris, "The Body as Temple" in (ed.) Baumgarten 2018: 246: "In the Greek patristic tradition the material body was believed to be at best a garment covering the spiritual body, or at worst a regrettable consequence of sin and the Fall. In either case, the material body obscured the image of God … the locus of human redemption."
[961] Von Balthasar 2006: 160-161.
[962] *EH* 553B.

both body and soul and the model for this ideal union between the human and the divine is Jesus Christ, the Godman.

The Platonists perceive, as we saw, separation from the body as being the soul's highest good since the body is considered to prevent the soul's purification. For Plotinus, the soul is evil if it is completely united with the body. At the same time, he defends the notion of the part of the soul that is not descended. That is to say, the part of the soul that has not descended completely into the material world, which makes it possible for it to ascend, without external material help. This is the higher, transcendent soul, which is the true and essential self; it only needs to realize its own nature as such to initiate this return. There is no need for bodily theurgic assistance nor any form of worship or religious practice for Plotinus.

For later Neoplatonists, however, such as Iamblichus and Proclus, the body and materiality take on a more positive meaning. Perceiving the soul in its fallen state, they consider the soul to have lost its connection to the intelligible, it is not innately empowered to affect its own salvation, so it therefore needs assistance from the material rites to ascend. The fully descended, embodied soul now is dependent on theurgy for its return. Dionysius builds on these ideas, as he sees man as a composition of body and soul, and the theurgical rites as important in assisting the soul in its purification and ascension. This becomes especially evident on questions related to the problem of evil. In chapter IV of *DN*, where Dionysius sets out to explain the evil in the world, he concludes that the existence of evil is problematic because God or the Good is the source of all that is. Everything that exists participates in the Good, albeit to a greater or lesser degree, so the evil must therefore be understood as non-existent, or as a "defect" or absence of the good. Evil is seen as a category that has no ontological existence, i.e., no substance in itself. If this is the case, then neither matter nor the body can be evil. The fact that the body exists means that it participates in the good and the beautiful.

The body is therefore not the origin of the evil in the soul. Dionysius exemplifies a coherent response to this by emphasising evil existing independently of matter as it does with demons. If disembodied demons are evil, then the soul cannot blame the body as the origin of evil. The body and matter share in the good merely by virtue of existing. These are thoughts originating from Proclus *On Evil*, which Dionysius quotes or paraphrases in *DN* IV. However, although there are similarities between Dionysius and later Neoplatonism when it comes to questions about the body and evil, his thoughts are also grounded in the biblical tradition where the whole of creation is judged as good by the Creator.

Even if the body achieves the status of "tool" for the soul in later Neoplatonism, and even if it then posits that man is to be a composite of body and soul, it is the separation of the soul from the body that is still the goal. This cannot be the final goal for someone like Dionysius, who is rooted in Christian anthropology in which the resurrection of the body plays a deeply significant role. Dionysius is explicit on this point in the last chapter of *EH* where he stresses that the body, which has fought alongside the soul, deserves to be rewarded at the end of this race.[963] It is precisely on this point that Dionysius differs most distinctly from the pagan authors. That the body is equated with the soul, in the way that it has the potential for perfection and that it too will experience immortality, would have been unthinkable for the Neoplatonists.

[963] *EH* 121, 553BC.

# CHAPTER 4: THE CORPUS AREOPAGITICUM ON THE CHURCH AND THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

In this chapter I will survey certain ecclesiological aspects of *theosis* (θέωσις) by focusing on the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the sacramental implementations of deification. In the rich history of the reception of Dionysius' works, the treatise *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* has arguably been given less serious philosophical attention. In this treatise, Dionysius deals with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the order of the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and the Ointment, the rites of burial and the whole system of the church. This text is considered helpful in gaining information about the period and context of Dionysius' writings, and as a contribution to ecclesiology, but is not generally taken to be interesting or important from a philosophical point of view. I share the view of Gorazd Kocijančič among others, however, that it is only possible to understand Dionysius' concept of deification if one also reads him in an ecclesiastical/liturgical context.[964] Dionysius says that theurgy (θεουργία) or 'the divine works' consummate or complete the divine words (θεολογία). The background for such a remark may be that he is envisioning the liturgy and the experience of the divine works as more perfecting than scriptural contemplation or theologizing.[965] The church sacraments are, for Dionysius, vital for man's way to restoration to the image of God. This chapter will argue that the sacraments in Dionysius are the modus operandi of the process of deification of the human being.

For Dionysius the sacraments are the sacred working (ἱερουργία) of God. He says that "the objective, the prime purpose of each sacrament is to impart the mysteries of the Deity to the one being initiated (τὸ δὲ τέλος ἁπάσῃ καὶ τὸ κεφάλαιον ἡ τῶν θεαρχικῶν μυστηρίων τῷ

[964] See Gorazd Kocijančič, "The identity of Dionysius the Areopagite: a philosophical approach" in (ed.) Ivanović 2011: 9-10.
[965] *EH* 84, 15–21.

τελουμένῳ μετάδοσις)" (*EH* III, 1). This process of initiation must start somewhere, and the beginning, for Dionysius, is marked by entry into the community of the church, through baptism. Likewise, to be deified, is for Dionysius, to be baptised or to have "divine birth" (θεία γέννησις) as he calls it.[966] It is the divine birth that raises the believer to a "divine level of existence" (*EH* II, 1), or into a divine Christian life.

While Dionysius is clearly a Christian thinker rooted in an ecclesiastical context, he is also evidently familiar with Neoplatonic philosophical terminology and teachings of the time. The present chapter observes how he develops central concepts from the Neoplatonic tradition, the predominant example being the term theurgy (θεουργία), and how he in strikingly innovative ways gives it a greater Christian meaning and context. One may argue that Dionysius' choice of this term may have been influenced by a similar language of theurgy within Iamblichean and Proclean Neoplatonism. Both the liturgical identity of Dionysius' theology and that of the later Neoplatonists' rituals suggest a pivotal point of connection between the invisible reality of the heavenly realm and the visible reality of the world. However, what distinguishes Dionysius' Christian (theurgic) rituals from Neoplatonic rituals is how the church and Christ are given focus in the rituals. Thus, what follows should be read on this premise that Dionysius' use of the term *theourgia* is applied to a radically different reality, that of the Christian sacraments. I echo Panagiotis Pavlos's argument that Dionysius fundamentally resituates *theourgia*, embedding the concept in a Christian metaphysical and sacramental framework to the extent that it represents a radical departure from its original Neoplatonic setting.[967]

For both Iamblichean and Proclean Neoplatonism and for Dionysius, the divine work is divinely transmitted into the created world in religious rites and perceptible symbols. Symbols

[966] *EH* 2, I, 392B.
[967] Panagiotis G. Pavlos, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite", in (eds.) Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019: 151-80.

are a prominent feature of both Dionysius' ecclesiology and the Neoplatonic theurgy. But whereas the symbols employed in the theurgical rituals of the Neoplatonists derive from the natural world – involving elements such as: animation of statues, magical use of names, states of trance, revelations of various gods in the form of fire and light – nothing of this is to be found in Dionysius' Christian liturgy.[968] It is the scriptural and theurgical/liturgical symbols used in the church that forms Dionysius' context.

Dionysius speaks of symbols in several places in *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. He even refers to the Eucharist as a symbolic sacred act.[969] Bread and wine are the symbols par excellence with which Jesus is identified and through which he is shared.[970] We are not to understand symbols as merely pure signs as symbols often are understood today, rather they are participatory. Against a Neo-Platonising interpretation of Dionysius this chapter suggests that it is the Incarnation that validates the possibility of matter to convey the divine in to the sensible world. Participation in the symbol is, for Dionysius, participation in the symbolized, meaning that Christ is present in that symbol. By exploring the meaning Dionysius attributes to symbols and how he develops his symbolic theology, via what he understands as natural manifestations of God in the sensible and intelligible nature and in the rites and the sacraments of the church, we will observe important distinguishing points between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists.

**Pagan theurgy and Christian sacramentalism in Dionysius**

When calling attention to the sacramental reality of the Church in Dionysius it can be helpful to start by examining the distinction between pagan and Christian theurgy. In what follows some modern interpretations of theurgy will first be presented, as well as some of its ancient interpretations that are to be found among certain Dionysius' forerunners within the fold of Neoplatonism. We shall then proceed by discussing different aspects of the significance of

[968] Stock 2008: 166.
[969] *EH* 92, 8-11 (441D).
[970] *EH* 89, 7f (437C).

Dionysian theurgy, especially focusing on how it is related to the sacraments and his concept of the reform of human subjectivity.

**Some modern interpretations of theurgy**

The modern study of theurgy dates back to the Irish classicist E. R. Dodds, who in 1947 published his article "Theurgy and its relationship to Neoplatonism".[971] Dodds ranked theurgy as just a lower kind of magical religiosity promoted by the fourth-century Neoplatonist Iamblichus, a "superficial" thinker whose divine work (*θεῖον ἔργον*) was simply an oriental superstition that appealed to human weakness: "As vulgar magic is commonly the last resort of the personal desperate, of those whom man and God have alike failed, so theurgy became a refuge of a despairing intelligentsia which already felt *la fascination de l'abîme*."[972] Writing about antiquity but rather referring to his own time, Dodds described theurgy as a strategy to manipulate the gods in a magical way: "The creator of theurgy was a magician, not a Neoplatonist, and the creator of Neoplatonism was neither a magician nor—*pace* certain modern writers—a theurgist."[973] Thus Dodds placed theurgy on the one side, and Plotinus' "rational mysticism" on the other from whence theurgy degenerated.[974] A profound examination of theurgy and the relationship between the Chaldean Oracles and the later Neoplatonists is Hans Léwy's *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire* (1956). Unlike Dodds, who distinguishes between irrational theurgy and rational philosophy, Léwy portrays contemplative philosophy as the

[971] Later printed as Appendix II to the lecture collection *The Greeks and The Irrational* (1951).
[972] Dodds 1951: 288.
[973] Ibid. 285.
[974] Ibid. 288; cf. Shaw 1985: 5.

path to divine union on the one hand and ritual theurgy on the other.[975] This view has also been supported by the French classicist Festugière.[976]

A different view is presented by Jean Trouillard (1973), who instead of seeing theurgy as one of two separate paths to divine union, sees it as the culmination of an integrated path starting with purification and contemplation. He defines theurgy as a continuation and refinement of Neoplatonic philosophy.[977] As if defending it against the charge of magic, he describes it as a discipline to bring the practitioner further than mere reflection and intellectual activity could do. Thus, theurgy could be seen as a development of the negative theology of Neo-Platonism, leading from moral practices and contemplation into theurgy, the fruit of which was the *unio mystica*.[978] Trouillard describes theurgy in terms of negative theology in a dichotomy with positive theology and theoretical philosophy, but also as a non-manipulative discipline as different from magic. Andrew Smith, following Laurence Rosan, introduces a dichotomy within theurgy to account for ritual activity, which he regards, like Dodds, as inferior to Plotinian *θεωρία*: he contends that there is a higher theurgy, and a lower variant of it for the more simple souls with rites "sinister" and "regrettable".[979] Shaw, building on Trouillard, also stresses a similar, but inverted, inner dichotomy of theurgy, that of pious ritual performance to achieve unity with the highest reality, in tension with theoretical philosophy, which is organically the theoretical side of the ritual which is the work of the gods, and which make man divine, "he takes on the shape of the god", and thus the soul *becomes* the ritual.[980]

[975] Léwy 1978: 462.
[976] See Shaw 1985: 5.
[977] Neuchatel 1973; Shaw 1985: 6.
[978] Trouillard 1972: 34.
[979] Shaw 1985: 7–9.
[980] Shaw 1985: 9.

**Some ancient interpretations of theurgy**

We shall now look at some ancient interpretations of theurgy that we find among some of Dionysius' Neoplatonic forerunners among others. Damascius, in his commentary on the *Phaedo* states the following: 'Now Plotinus, Porphyry and many others honour philosophy more highly, while Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and the other Theurgists give more honour to the hieratic art.'[981] Porphyry would contend that only the lower part of the soul was purified by rites,[982] a position taken by Andrew Smith in his interpretation of theurgy. St. Augustine condemned the theurgists and juxtaposed their practice with magic and sorcery: "that which they call magic, or with a more detestable word sorcery, or a more honourable word Theurgy."[983] For Christians after St. Augustine theurgy was considered as nothing but a diabolic attempt to converse with demons and manipulate the gods. Eusebius made theurgy one of his main objects of attack in his Christian crusade against demonology and magical practices.[984]

But how did the theurgists understand themselves? If one reads Iamblichus one will see that it was not as magicians at all. He stated that theurgy had nothing to do with either sorcerers (γόης) or their wonderworking (θαυματουργία). For him theurgy was rather a ritual process that starts where theoretical philosophy ends and had the soteriological aim of attaining theurgical union with the ineffable and the divine.[985] Finally, through theurgy the soul is lifted up into immortality.[986] If that is the case, then it is likely, as argued by Trouillard and Shaw, that theurgy is best understood by means of the dichotomy philosophy/ritual, i.e. rational theorizing contrasted with ritual action, rather than the dichotonomy

[981] Ibid. 2.
[982] Ibid.
[983] *Civ. D.*10.9.10f.: *Quam vel magian vel detestabiliore nomine goetian vel honorabiliore theurgian vovant.*
[984] Lewy 1978: 65; cf. Lewy 1978: 246.
[985] Iamb. *Myst.* 161.10–6, 175.13ff., 96.13–97.9, 270.14–9; cf. Lewy 1978: 275.
[986] Ibid.

rationalism/magic. However, theurgy is often called magic both in antiquity and modern times not without reason, perhaps, as in both cases the same terminology is often used,[987] and there might as well have been other ritual similarities, at least in appearance, if not in self-declared theory and intention. Proclus would explain that, by means of the manifestation of the divine, divine power was present in the material, plant, animal, soul, or spirit of which it was the first cause. Thus, the soul might be elevated by theurgic ritual because of the divine presence in everything.[988]

The goal of theurgic rituals could be summed up as follows: they lead the soul from the material world upwards to the divine through the divine, which is immanent in "vertical" series, and thus in different subjects, such as stones and amulets, but also in verbal "symbols".[989] The central position of Hecate in theurgy as the universal feminine power or cosmic soul is reminiscent of magic as well.[990] The Neoplatonic theurgical authors carefully stress that it is not the practitioner but god who, being the substance of ritual itself, performs the ritual.[991] Iamblichus denies that the spells of theurgy are coercive: gods reveal themselves by their own will.[992] For Iamblichus theurgy is the cultic working of the gods (*θεῶν ἔργα*) or divine acts (*θεία ἔργα*) in metaphysical and ontological sense, which reveal the hidden henadic foundation of all manifested series of being, thereby re-affirming or re-collecting the ultimate divine presence in everything. Thus, for Iamblichus theurgical action is directed by the gods and aims at *θεουργικὴ ἕνωσις* or *theurgical union*. There is no question of

[987] Lewy 1978: 56f., 440f.
[988] *Theol.*145; cf. Dodds 1963.
[989] Cf. Lewy 1978: 471: "The theurgist who utters the "symbols" (i.e., the magical names) of the gods, causes the invoked gods link themselves with him through the "chain" of the demons attached to each of them, who draw him upward to the desired goal."
[990] Cf. Lewy 1978: 52: "We may conclude from the similarity of the literary form that the Chaldeans imitated the style of the normal type of Hecatean oracles. Thus, this relationship reflects the competition between Theurgy and the lower forms of magic." For Hecate as the cosmic soul, see ibid. 47.
[991] Shaw 1985: 28.
[992] Cf. Lewy 1978: 467–71; Majercik 1989: 23.

manipulation or coercing; man's union with the divine in the ritual is rather a submission to the divine nature.

**Dionysius' Christian Theurgy**

The word *theourgia*, appears 47 times in Dionysius' extant writings,[993] and is applied to the Christian sacraments. Paul Rorem, who collaborated with Colm Luibhéid on the English translation of *CA*, has been criticized for hiding away Dionysius' term *theourgia* in footnotes:[994] "while the translation includes helpful footnotes by Rorem and an exhaustive index to biblical "allusions and quotations," it includes no index of important Neoplatonic terms."[995] Nevertheless, it is a fact that "θεουργία" and its cognate "*θεουργική*" appear more than ten times in *CH*, more than thirty times in the *EH*, five times in the *DN*, and once in *Ep*. 9.[996] We shall see that certain aspects of the Neoplatonic theory on theurgy seem to have influenced Dionysius, whereas the Christian practice of Dionysian theurgy appears as radically divergent from Neoplatonism.

**Similarities**

Along with the divergence between Neoplatonic and Dionysian theurgy comes the distinction between *theologia* and *theourgia*. Certainly, this distinction too appears within Neoplatonism and is maintained by the Areopagite.[997] Dionysius says that the divine works (θεουργία) consummate or complete the divine words (*θεολογία*) as he envisioned theurgic or liturgical celebration and the experience of the divine works as more perfecting than scriptural contemplation or theologizing.[998] An account of the possible relation between Dionysius'

[993] Saffrey 1982: 72; on the ritual continuity between theurgy and Christianity, see Shaw 1985: 11; Trouillard 1968–73: 582.
[994] See Struck 2001: 26; Shaw 1999: 574.
[995] Shaw 1999: 574, n. 1.
[996] Cf. 199, ed. and trans. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter.
[997] *EH* 84, 1–3; *EH* 113, 20–24.
[998] *EH* 84, 15–21.

understanding of Christian ritual and Iamblichean theurgic practice has been made by John Dillon, who stresses the importance of Iamblichus' theory of theurgy for the sacramental theology of the Greek Christian Fathers.[999] Dillon points to some elements that, at least at first glance, may seem common to Hellenic and Dionysian theurgy: for both rites are indispensable for reaching divinization. The rites themselves are governed by the gods or Christ, respectively, and individuals can only participate in the rites after having been mentally prepared through initiations that permit and increase man's receptivity. The liturgical context of the rites seems to be important to both as well.[1000] For both the Neoplatonists and Dionysius, the divine work (θεουργία) of the single, transcendent God is divinely transmitted into the created world in religious rites and symbols.

Liturgical praxis as superior to scriptural learning is underlined by Dionysius' reference to the holy Hierotheus, whose (allegedly) work *Elements of Theology* is also mentioned in the *DN*.[1001] Dionysius says the following about Hierotheus: What he learned, either directly from the sacred writers, or what he otherwise have comprehended from his discerning and laborious research of Scriptures, or whatever was revealed to him by a sort of more divine inspiration, not only did he receive the true spiritual *notions*, but also the true spiritual *motions* (ἅπερ ἐκεῖνος εἴτε πρὸς τῶν ἱερῶν θεολόγων παρείληφεν εἴτε καὶ ἐκ τῆς ἐπιστημονικῆς τῶν λογίων ἐρεύνης συνεώρακεν ἐκ πολλῆς τῆς περὶ αὐτὰ γυμνασίας καὶ τριβῆς εἴτε καὶ ἔκ τινος ἐμυήθη θειοτέρας ἐπιπνοίας οὐ μόνον μαθὼν ἀλλὰ καὶ παθὼν τὰ θεῖα)."[1002] The divine things praised through the liturgies are not merely viewed and worshipped, they are experienced or "suffered" and ecstatically so. The Eucharist is the way par excellence to this experience of the divine. This emphasis on the divine works Dionysius

[999] Cf. Dillon 1973: 29.
[1000] Dillon and Wear 2007: 114.
[1001] *DN* II, 9, 648A.
[1002] *DN* II, 9, 648A (ed. Suchla 1990: 133).

shares with the Neoplatonists, who also regard theurgic praxis as more efficacious than the theoretic contemplation for the being's elevation to a union with the divine. Peter Struck concludes that both Dionysius and Iamblichus understand theurgy as "divinely initiated, sanctioned, or revealed actions in which humans can participate as a way of bringing the material world into line with the divine, as far as such a thing is possible".[1003] Struck argues that Iamblichus too gives the human a passive role in Theurgy, where God is the agent and is understood to affect the celebrant.[1004] According to Iamblichus, theurgy is a worship offered by the gods and, enacted by humans.[1005] Iamblichus explains that the theurgist does not compel the gods, but is in effect authorized by them to act on their behalf.[1006] Also, for Dionysius, theurgy is by no means understood as human activity, but rather as a term exclusively used to refer to the divinizing work of God. Dionysius understands "work of God" in the sense that God himself is doing the work, and not the ritual celebrant.[1007] For both the Neoplatonists and Dionysius, all deifying power seem to derive from one source, whether termed "theurgic", sacramental, liturgical, "initiating" or "perfecting" power, it all derives from the one transcendent God. But as we shall see in the following, similarly to what Peter Struck argues, it is precisely the acts of Jesus that has meaning as theurgy in Dionysius.[1008]

**Differences**

For Dionysius, the divine works of God, culminate in the saving historical "theurgies" of the incarnate Christ which in turn, instantiated in the sacraments, are the focal point of all Christian liturgical celebration.[1009] Paul Rorem, who has made a rather detailed accounting of the ties between Iamblichean theurgy and Dionysian liturgy, claims that Dionysius must be

[1003] Struck 2001: 25–38.
[1004] Cf. Struck 2001: 27.
[1005] See *De Mysteriis* IV, 1–4.
[1006] *De Mysteriis*, II, 184.
[1007] Rorem 1982: 459–60.
[1008] Struck 2001: 32.
[1009] *EH* 512BC; 513A; 561D–564C.

understood rather in the context of his patristic precedents.[1010] He argues that the use of the term *theourgia* to describe Christian liturgical activity is a Dionysian innovation that finds no analogue among pagan Neoplatonists. His conclusion is that Dionysius reshapes the Neoplatonic notion of *theourgia* so drastically that it would be misleading to render it into the English "theurgy". However, the classical distinction made by scholars between "pagan" and Dionysian theurgy may be somewhat superficial. Gregory Shaw argues that such a distinction is based on a caricature of Neoplatonic/Iamblichean theurgy and should invoke a more extensive and deeper knowledge of theurgy as it is presented by Iamblichus in his *De Mysteriis*.[1011] Shaw argues that when Iamblichean theurgy is properly understood, the Christian theurgy of Dionysius may be seen as an example of the same kind of theurgy that Iamblichus defined. Shaw aims to refute what he calls "false distinctions" between "pagan" and Christian theurgy, as he finds that such distinctions reflect more the apologetic interest of scholars than an accurate reading of evidence.

Shaw, a prolific Iamblichean scholar,[1012] who understands Iamblichus' theurgy on the basis on his philosophy, argues that Dionysius adapted the principles and some of the terminology of Iamblichus' psychology and theurgy to complete his hieratic vision of the Church. He sees Dionysius as a "Christian Iamblichus" who succeeded—where Iamblichus himself had failed—in building a theurgic society.[1013] Shaw does indeed have a point in stressing that "scholars of Neoplatonic theurgy could learn a great deal from Dionysius about the specifics of theurgic ritual that Iamblichus does not discuss.'[1014] Dionysius did ground his theurgy in a time and milieu that was different to the one of Iamblichus. His Christocentric

[1010] Rorem 1982: 456.
[1011] Shaw 1999.
[1012] Shaw's monograph, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (1995), is perhaps the most comprehensive work on Iamblichus from recent scholarship.
[1013] Shaw 1999: 586–7.
[1014] Ibid. 596.

approach is not the same as the Iamblichean Neoplatonic one. But to state that "the Christian theurgy of Dionysius may be seen as an example of the same kind of theurgy that Iamblichus" when Iamblichean theurgy is properly understood, and even to see Dionysius' concept of theurgy as a "caricature" of Iamblichan theurgy, as Shaw does, may be taking it a bit too far, and should perhaps invoke a more extensive and deeper knowledge of Dionysius.

John Dillon and Sarah Wear have also pointed to the common elements in Dionysian and Hellenic theurgy, such as the necessity for both to use rites at the way of reaching divinization.[1015] For both the rites are seen as controlled by the gods (or the Trinity, and in particular Christ) and individuals can only participate in the rites after they are mentally prepared through a series of initiations that permit receptivity. For both it is also crucial that the rites take place in a liturgical context, which means they are performed in a holy setting and in a particular order.[1016]

Theurgy, in both Neoplatonism and in Dionysius, works by helping to assimilate the divine with the divine. However, in Dionysius we are speaking of Jesus' work in bestowing power appropriately so that we imitate the activity of the angels.[1017] Clearly, the centrality of Christ's Incarnation and its conveyance of the divine works to man distinguishes Dionysian theurgy from the Hellenic tradition. Dillon and Wear have further pointed to what they see as a salient distinction between Dionysian and Iamblichean ritual: "for Dionysius, the hierarchs are conduits of divine theurgy to their congregations. The Neoplatonic theurgist, on the other hand, appears as more of a lone figure, concerned only, or primarily, with his own personal unification. The "congregation", if any, remains very much in the shadows."[1018] This is a valid assumption, grounded by the importance that Dionysius ascribes to the sacraments and

[1015] Dillon and Wear 2007: 114.
[1016] Ibid.
[1017] Ibid.
[1018] Ibid. 115.

the mediation of liturgy, which provides a significant account of the Christian idea of divinization (θέωσις), which is achieved in the community gathered in worship.

**Dionysian Theurgy: purpose and benefit**

Although Dionysius' theurgical view may have some similar features to that of the Neoplatonists, he does not use the term in the same sense as Iamblichus and Proclus. Dionysius did not inherit the characteristic practices of Theurgy such as animation of statues, the use of stones and amulets, etc. The theurgical context he describes in *EH* is to be found in the Christian liturgy. It may be true that both Dionysius and the Neoplatonists understood theurgy as the work of the divine, aiming at the return of rational beings. Theurgy, in its Dionysian as well as in its Neoplatonic sense, works by helping those who contemplate the divine to assimilate it. In both cases theurgy originates from a single, transcendent divine source—God or the One. But while for the Neoplatonists the divine works are carried out in the world by a multitude of gods, for Dionysius it is the Incarnate Christ who is at work. This becomes clear for example in *CH* IV, 4, where Dionysius says that John the Baptist was to serve as a prophet of "the human theurgy of Jesus" (*τῆς … ἀνδρικῆς τοῦ Ἰησοῦ θεουργίας*).[1019] While for Iamblichus theurgy, the "work of God", is refracted through the many gods, which we can access and channel through proper rituals, for Dionysius the "work of God" is Christ himself who processes into plurality in order to gather all up into unity. It is Christ who is the source of all powers and activities. Exactly this centrality of the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus Christ to Dionysius' soteriology is what differs him the most from the Neoplatonists.[1020]

[1019] *CH* IV, 4, 181B.
[1020] *EH* 512BC; 513A; 561D–564C. This point was also made by Panagiotis G. Pavlos in his article "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite" in Pavlos, Janby, Emilsson, and Tollefsen 2019: 151-170. See also Louth 1989: 434 ff; Burns 2004: 121ff; Coughlin 2006: 151ff and Addey 2014.

Thus, in order to appreciate Dionysius' inheritance of theurgy it is necessary to understand his Christology.

**Theourgia and hierourgia**

Dionysius makes a distinction between *theourgia*, which refers to the divine work itself, i.e., the divine acts praised in the liturgy, and *hierourgia*, which is the ritual enactment of divine works or the human celebration of the liturgy itself.[1021] *Hierourgia*, which Golitzin has called a "strikingly Dionysian term", is perhaps the closest that Dionysius gets to the Neoplatonist's *theourgia*.[1022] Whereas *theourgia* is the work of God for man's salvation, *hierourgia* is man's collaboration in the work through ritual celebration. The connection between the *theourgia* and the ritual seems to be that in the performance of religious ritual the divine acts are praised and celebrated (ὑμνεῖν).[1023] This distinction is made very clear in *EH* 425D where Dionysius speaks of the hierarch who is praising the sacred works of God (*θεουργίας*), performs or celebrates (ἱερουργεῖ) the divine rites, and brings to view the things praised (τὰ ὑμνούμενα) through the sacredly displayed symbols. Having revealed the gifts of the work of God, he himself (the hierarch) comes into sacred communion (κοινωνίαν) with them, and then invites the others.[1024]

*Theourgia*, for Dionysius, specifically means the work of God. However, when we enact this work, through *hierourgia*, we become *θεουργικοί*, which means, as we have seen earlier, participants of the work, or co-workers of the work.[1025] In essence this means we are receiving what is primarily enacted by Christ as theurgy. Dionysius says that the goal of man is deification and perfection, which implies being uplifted to the imitation of God and

[1021] *EH* 425D.
[1022] Golitzin 2001: 140.
[1023] Cf. Louth 1989: 434.
[1024] *EH* 425D.
[1025] Dillon and Wear 2007: 100.

become "a co-worker with God" (*Θεοῦ συνεργόν*).[1026] The phrase "co-worker with God" stems from 1 Cor 3: 9, where Paul states, "we are co-workers of God." For Dionysius becoming "a co-worker with God" implies to show the divine energy (*τὴν θείαν ἐνέργειαν*) in oneself as far as possible.[1027] It is a description of the Christian who channels and shows forth the divine light of Christ.[1028] This is a point made by Charles Stang who notes that Dionysius refrains from using the title "theurgist" or "god-worker" (*θεουργός*), and that the term that he uses, *theourgikoi*, "co-workers with God", is very close to "theurgist", as the root of all these terms, *ergon* or "work," is related to cooperation (*συνεργία*) with the work of God (θεουργία), and that this is possible only through the liturgy (λειτουργία).[1029] Becoming "a co-worker with God" is exemplified in *EH* I, 1 where Dionysius says that by beholding the light of Christ we will be able to become "purified and purifiers, images of light and theurgical [*thourgikoi*], perfected and perfecting".[1030] And also in *CH* III, 2 where Dionysius explains that perfection of man consists of being "uplifted to the imitation of God according to proper analogy and … to become a co-worker with God (*Θεοῦ συνεργὸν*) and to show the divine energy in himself as far as possible".[1031] Hence, we may understand the term *Theourgikoi* as being close to "theurgist", but in a Dionysian sense, referring strictly to theurgical co-workers of God in the liturgy.

Dionysius' Christian Theurgy, understood as liturgy, is thus not the ritual itself, but the divine activities.[1032] What are these divine activities that are celebrated in the liturgy? Dionysius' answer would be that it is the incarnation of Christ, which is enacted by men through sacramental *hierourgia*. As Andrew Louth states, Dionysius is referring to the acts

[1026] *CH* III, 2, 165B.
[1027] Ibid.
[1028] Stang 2011: 12.
[1029] Ibid.
[1030] *EH* I, 1, 372A–B.
[1031] *CH* III, 2, 165B.
[1032] *CH* 181B.

of God in creation and redemption, culminating in the Incarnation celebrated in all the ancient Eucharist prayers.[1033] *Theourgia* simply refers to the historical divine acts recalled and experienced in liturgical celebration. It is understood as a ritual enactment and not merely spiritual understanding of symbols. In short, Dionysius' Christian Theurgy is nothing but the divine activity of Jesus Christ (*ἀνδρικῆς τοῦ Ἰησοῦ θεουργίας*).[1034] To summarize, for Dionysius, *theourgia* is the works of Christ or the historical divine acts recalled in liturgical celebrations, whereas *hierourgia* is the operations of sacred men in receiving, on behalf of the entire ecclesiastical body and community, the theurgically enacted and transmitted divine work of Christ.

**Dionysian theurgy and sacramentalism**

Louth points out that in more than a third of its occurrences *theourgia* refers to the divine activity of the Incarnate Christ, and that it frequently occurs in the context of descriptions of religious rituals.[1035] The sacred rituals, i.e. the sacraments (*teletes*) are the mysteries (*mysteria*) given by God—his *theourgia* revealing his work for the return of rational beings to likness and participation in the divine.[1036] As we have seen earlier, the "sacred words" are not the only perceptible tokens that lure human desires toward the divine. Union with God, which is the ultimate goal for man, can be attained through certain "sacred works," i.e. sacraments that are acting on the soul spiritually and on the body physically, both of which are necessary. For there is indeed "a place for genuine sacramental efficacy in Dionysian sacramental

[1033] Louth 1986: 435.
[1034] *CH* 181B.
[1035] *Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite*, p. 434.
[1036] *EH* 425D, 445B, 485B; Rorem 2014: 97. The sacraments (τελετές) are: 1) The Divine Birth (baptism), 2) The Gathering or Synaxis (the Eucharist), and 3) The Myron (blessing the oil used in anointing). Dionysius used a creative variety of words for liturgical ceremonies, but the Greek word *telete* for sacrament (*EH* 485A) was only used for baptism, Eucharist, and the consecration of the ointment. The plural form mysteries could mean mysterious concepts, the eucharistic elements, or sacred ceremonies in general, but the singular was never used to indicate an entire rite.

theology," as Louth has stressed.[1037] The starting point of sacred enactment is, as Dionysius says, "to dispose our souls to hear the sacred words as receptively as possible", and "to be open to the divine workings of God". Participation in the Christian community "forms our souls and makes them fit to receive the sacred words and sacred works."[1038]

Dionysius' insistence on the place of sacraments within the Christian community is clear. He describes the ecclesiastical hierarchy as consisting of sacraments, initiators and initiated, and suggests that the highest order in the structure is the sacraments.[1039] In *EH* Dionysius describes and interprets the main Christian rites "sacraments" (τελετές)—baptism, the anointing with oil, and the reception of Communion. Here he provides a systematic commentary on the sacraments intended to lead the reader through the perceptible tokens employed in the rites to their conceptual meaning.

The commentary on each sacrament consists of three sections: In the first section comes a brief introduction to the sacrament and its importance, then in the second section a very brief summary of the ritual itself and its procedure (πρᾶξις), and, finally, in the third and largest section, Dionysius' interpretation of the rite under the title of contemplation (θεωρία). As pointed out by Rorem, this format of 1) introducing a rite, 2) describing it succinctly, and then 3) contemplating its spiritual meaning had already appeared in some patristic exegeses of the Bible, notably Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*, which introduced, presented, and then interpreted Moses' life in a third section also entitled "Contemplation", or "Theoria".[1040] Rorem also notes that this triadic structure may subtly express the Neoplatonic triad of remaining, procession, and return, since "the three parts present the foundation, the successive events which the senses perceive, and the interpreter's return from sense

[1037] Louth 1986: 438.
[1038] *EH* II, I, 392A.
[1039] *EH* V, 1.1 501A; Luibheid 1987: 233, n.142.
[1040] Rorem 2014: 96–7.

perception up to the conceptual contemplation".[1041] It certainly appears like Dionyius' threefold structures reflect Neoplatonic triads. Both the threefold work of the divine as it unfolds in the sacred rites and symbols, and the work of human souls as it is expressed in the performance of the rites, is common to both traditions. Dionysius speaks of "the most holy operations" of the sacraments and how in their holy work the sacraments both individually and collectively relate to the threefold process of purification (*κάθαρσις*), illumination (*φωτισμὸς*) and perfection (*τελείωσις*).[1042] It is through the dynamics of the sacraments and their triple power for effecting salvation that "there is effected both the unifying uplifting toward the divinity and the most blessed communion with it," says Dionysius.[1043] By participating in the eucharist, the disorder is ordered and what is formless is formed into place. The soul is purified and "formed of light" (*φωτοειδής*).[1044] Thus, we can conclude that the sacraments, by virtue of their holy operations, re-arrange the soul's disorder and transform the whole human being. As we shall see later, in the chapter on Eschatology in the *DN*, Dionysius makes a distinction between the transformation of body and soul and the attainment of holiness which may be acquired in this life and the more complete bodily and spiritual transformation in the life to come.[1045] When body and soul have been fully transfigured, one shall attain immortality and be "equal to angels and sons of God, being sons of the resurrection (ἰσάγγελοι…καὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες)".[1046]

God works through the rites in order to transform man. He works through "a variety and abundance of divisible symbols (ποικιλίᾳ καὶ πλήθει διαιρετῶν συμβόλων)," Dionysius says, to "bequeath salvation and divinization to every being endowed with reason and

[1041] Ibid. 97.
[1042] *EH* 501D, 504AB, 532D.
[1043] *EH* 504BC.
[1044] *EH* 501D.
[1045] See *DN* 114.
[1046] See *DN* 114.

intelligence (ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ καὶ θεώσει πάντων τῶν λογικῶν τε καὶ νοερῶν οὐσιῶν ἐδωρήσατο)."[1047] Thus, the sacraments are in essence "theurgical" because they mediate theurgy, i.e., God's own work, to us. Dionysius also reminds us of the importance of keeping certain things sacred and explains that one ought to "share the mysteries of God only to the godly men, and perfection to those capable of perfection, and to share the holy only with the most holy (κοινωνεῖν δὲ μόνοις τῶν θεουργικῶν τοῖς θείοις καὶ τῶν τελείων τοῖς τελειωτικοῖς ἁγίοις τε τῶν παναγεστάτων)".[1048]

**Sacramental efficacy in Dionysius**

Rorem has argued that, whereas for Iamblichus the pagan rites are efficacious in being performed rather than understood, for Dionysius, the efficacy of the Christian sacraments lies not in being performed, but in their being contemplated and understood.[1049] For Rorem, it is the understanding of the sacred symbols which raises us to contemplation. He argues that the human anagogy in Dionysius consists in a "thoroughly interpretive nature […], namely that the uplifting does not occur by virtues of rites or symbols by themselves but rather by their interpretation, in the upward movement through the perceptible to the intelligible".[1050] The anagogy is purely cognitive and leads solely to a "special knowledge or spiritual comprehension".[1051] So, whereas the Theurgy of Iamblichus refers to the performance itself of religious rituals, which have the purificatory, elevating, and unifying divine force, the Christian Theurgy of Dionysius is, according to Rorem, efficacious through being *understood*. It is through the understanding of the sacred symbols that one can be raised up.

[1047] *EH* 376B.
[1048] *EH* I, 5, 377B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 68).
[1049] See Louth 1986: 435–436; and Rorem 1984: 99–116.
[1050] Rorem 1984: 116.
[1051] Ibid. 99–116.

Louth notes that Rorem's treatment of anagogy points to the close link in Dionysius between Scripture and liturgy, and affirms that anagogy is effected through knowledge and understanding, but he asks whether this is the whole story, and suggests that Dionysius may not have thought that sacramental efficacy was solely a matter of intelligibility.[1052] As Louth sees it, the dual activity of the sacraments is important for Dionysius; both as operating on the soul spiritually through knowledge and on the body physically. Yes, knowledge and understanding are paramount for the soul's anagogy, but there is also a place for genuine sacramental efficacy in Dionysian sacramental theology, says Louth.[1053]

Despite Louth's valuable reflection here, which is indeed pivotal for a true understanding of Dionysius' sacramentalism, both Louth and Rorem seem to be exaggerating the contrast between Dionysius and Iamblichus somewhat. We have already seen important distinctions in the view that Dionysius and Iamblichus have of theurgy, but for both thinkers the efficacy of religious ritual lies undeniably in its performance and in the experience of the divine and its effects. Both Dionysius and Iamblichus associate experiental knowledge with the notion of the soul's return towards union with the divine, for Iamblichus it is theurgic knowledge and for Dionysius it is *theoria.* For both Iamblichus and Dionysius anagogy happens through rituals that are effected by virtue of the presence and activity of the divine. For both the divine is seen as transcendent, unintelligible, and ineffable. Transcending human understanding, the divine must be experienced and approached in theurgic and liturgical practice. However, although the religious practice and the experiental knowledge that it bestows are regarded as the superior path to deification of man for both Dionysius and Iamblichus, "theurgic knowledge" and *theoria* are still a necessary preliminary for approaching and attaining union with the divine.

[1052] Louth 1986: 436.
[1053] Ibid. 438.

Dionysius stresses the importance to the "intelligibility" of the Christian sacraments, as he sees both performance of and contemplation of the sacramental rites and their symbols as paramount for the ascent of the soul. This is why he in *EH* gives a systematic commentary on the sacraments in order to help the reader to a conceptual meaning of the rites. The commentary on each and one of the three sacraments consists in three elements: first Dionysius briefly introduces the sacrament and its importance. Then he gives a description of the rite. And at last, he interprets each element of the rite with regard to the conceptual reality that underwrites the efficacy it. In *EH* II he describes baptism, or the rite of illumination (*φωτισμὸς*), which he also refers to as "divine birth" or "birth into divinity" (*θεογενεσία*). In *EH* III he describes the rite of *synaxis,* or the eucharist, which is the most important of the sacraments, and in *EH* IV he describes the rite of anointing, or chrism (*τελετή μύρου*). Dionysius' sacraments are enacted to recreate the divine work of the incarnation of Christ. The efficacy on these rites depends on their use of material elements such as water, bread and wine, and oil. These are "sacred things in perceptible form", says Dionysius, "they represent conceptual things, they lead to them and show the way to them. And conceptual things are the source and understanding behind hierarchical things that can be perceived by the senses."[1054] The efficacy given to contemplation and materiality of the rites reveals a bodily appreciation that is crucial for a Christian like Dionysius, and which would be underlined by the central event on which his Christian faith is founded: the Incarnation, the word that became flesh. The whole system shows how God works through the rites "for the salvation and deification to every being endowed with reason and intelligence".[1055] Dionysius' interpretation of each and one sacrament is to show how the sacred rites of the church are there to help man live out a Christian life, which grows from participation in the Christian community. This

[1054] *EH* II, 3, 2. 397C.
[1055] *EH* I, 4, 376B.

participation "forms our souls and makes them fit to receive the sacred words and sacred works."[1056]

## Formation of the human condition through the sacraments

### The rite of the Divine Birth

The departure from a Neoplatonic worldview is apparent in the positive participative role played by the body in Dionysius' account of baptism. Dionysius calls the rite of baptism by one of its traditional names, "illumination" (*photisma*), whereas the word for baptism, *baptisma*, which literally means dipping, is only mentioned twice, specifically as reference to the immersion in water. The New Testament has two main ways of understanding baptism: as rebirth (especially characteristic of the Johannine tradition), and as death and resurrection (especially characteristic of St. Paul).[1057] Dionysius, who primarily sees baptism as rebirth, calls this sacrament "divine birth" (*theogeneisa*). He says that "to be divinized is to have a divine birth."[1058] It is baptism that brings us into the divine life and that enables deification. In baptism the catechumen demonstrates through the rituals that he moves away from a sinful life to participate in the mystery of Christ's death, and through this, to be reborn in Christ.[1059] If a daily dying with Christ to sin, for example by practising penitence, is not mentioned in *CA*, baptism certainly means dying with Christ, and dying to sin for Dionysius. *EH* II contemplates the meaning of the threefold immersion of baptism: "By dying to sin in baptism one could say mystically that he shares in the death of Christ himself".[1060] The reference is to the three days in the tomb and the resurrection: "The symbolical teaching, then, reveals in mystery that by this triple immersion and emersion he (the one who is baptised) imitates, as far as the imitation

[1056] *EH* II, 1, 392.
[1057] Louth 1989: 58.
[1058] *EH* II, 1, 392B.
[1059] *EH* VI, 9, 7 392B.
[1060] *EH* II, 3, 6.

is possible to men, the divine death of one who was three days and nights in the tomb, the lifegiving Jesus".[1061] In this passage, the imitation of Christ is explicitly mentioned. The ideal life of the Christian can thus be called to be "Christ-like". However, the limitation expressed by the words "as far as possible" brings a certain realism to the presentation, something that may point to the potential for a continuous spiritual development of the Christian after baptism. The trinitarian-christological content of the rites is clearly demonstrated, and, as Andrew Louth has pointed out, in accordance with practice in Syria at the end of the fourth century.[1062]

As well as being a remembrance and imitation of the death and resurrection of Christ, baptism is also a testimony of the catechumen of his repentance, purification from evil and desire to turn towards God.[1063] It signifies the individual's initiation into the Christian life and unity, that is the entrance into the community of the Church. Dionysius describes it as a series of steps which bring about union and presence of God. Andrew Louth has argued that "receptivity to illumination is the heart of the rite" of the divine birth.[1064] He argues that whereas only the individual undergoes baptism, immersion, the entire community participates in the rite as a whole. The entire community, in other words, is made receptive to the illumination that the sacrament offers. For this reason, Dionysius notes that even infants are included in the sacrament because of their continual participation in the life of the community gathered for worship, and the receptivity to illumination that they receive in the sacrament instils in them a habit of holiness. The participation in the rite happens on the corporeal level. The infant has no understanding of the sacrament, yet the sacrament is efficacious. This shows what an important

[1061] *EH* II, 3, 7, 404B: Τὸν οὖν ἱερῶς βαπτιζόμενον ἡ συμβολικὴ διδασκαλία μυσταγωγεῖ ταῖς ἐν τῷ ὕδατι τρισὶ καταδύσεσι τὸν θεαρχικὸν τῆς τριημερονύκτου ταφῆς Ἰησοῦ τοῦ ζωοδότου μιμεῖσθαι θάνατον ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀνδράσι τὸ θεομίμητον, ἐν ᾧ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ λογίου μυστηριώδη καὶ κρυφίαν παράδοσιν οὐδὲν εὕρηκεν ὁ τοῦ κόσμου ἄρχων.
[1062] Louth 1989: 58; see also Brock 1985: 25.
[1063] *EH* 73.17–19 397B.
[1064] Louth 1989: 59.

role the body plays in the performance of the liturgical acts and leads us to reflect on the role of the body and of the senses for the deification of man.

> For to us death is not, as others assume, an annihilation of being, but the separating of things which have been united. It leads the soul into what for us is an invisible realm. Here the soul, in the loss of the body, becomes formless. The body, which lies buried in earth, undergoes a change from its corporeal shape, it becomes invisible to human ken. Appropriately, the whole covering by water would be taken as an image of death, and the invisible tomb.[1065]

The separation of body and soul at death leads not to dissolution of being, but to another level of being, says Dionysius. To symbolize the new life in Christ, free from passion and in firm thrust towards the One, the initiate is re-clothed in garments "white as light (φωτοειδής) after the immersion in water. Dionysius describes the transformation as a new order that descends upon disorder within the initiate, as a new form that takes over from formlessness, and as light that shines through all his life:

> For though his courage and likeness to God, and though his firm thrust towards the One, he is made indifferent to all contrary passions. The unadorned is adorned, order descends upon disorder within him, form takes over the formless, light shines through his life.[1066]

The human beings become again embodied beings. As a substitution of the Platonic contrast between the sensible and the intelligible, Dionysius presents a Christian view, where to be human is to be embodied. A disembodied life would be disorder and formlessness. It is through participation in both the sensible and intelligible realms that the human beings exist in their true form and beauty.

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[1065] *EH* II, 3, 7, 404B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 77-78): Καὶ γὰρ ἐπειδὴ θάνατός ἐστιν ἐφ' ἡμῶν οὐ τῆς οὐσίας ἀνυπαρξία κατὰ τὸ δόξαν ἑτέροις ἀλλ' ἡ τῶν ἡνωμένων διάκρισις εἰς τὸ ἡμῖν ἀφανὲς ἄγουσα τὴν ψυχὴν μὲν ὡς ἐν στερήσει σώματος ἀειδῆ γινομένην, τὸ σῶμα δὲ ὡς ἐν γῇ καλυπτόμενον ἢ καθ' ἑτέραν τινὰ τῶν σωματοειδῶν ἀλλοιώσεων ἐκ τῆς κατ' ἄνθρωπον ἰδέας ἀφανιζόμενον, οἰκείως ἡ δι' ὕδατος ὁλικὴ κάλυψις εἰς τὴν τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ τῆς ταφῆς ἀειδοῦς εἰκόνα παρείληπται.

[1066] *EH* II, 3, 8, 404C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 78): Τῇ γὰρ ἀνδρικῇ καὶ θεοειδεῖ τῶν ἐναντίων ἀπαθείᾳ καὶ τῇ πρὸς τὸ ἓν ἐν συντονίᾳ συννεύσει τὸ ἄκοσμον κοσμεῖται καὶ τὸ ἀνείδεον εἰδοποιεῖται τῇ φωτοειδεῖ καθόλου ζωῇ λαμπρυνόμενον.

It is consistent with Dionysius' ideas that salvation is mediated to man through the body and the sensory faculties. Every sacrament is directed to both body and soul. Dionysius explains that the perceptible tokens of the rite of divine birth—water, oil, turning east and west, the words of the hierarch—are all instruments through which God uplifts the catechumen towards oneness, each according to his or her capacity. The material symbols become the stepping-stone for ascension to the levels which broaden the vision. Participation in the symbols happen on the level of the body: the body feels the water of baptism, feels and smells the oil of chrismation, tastes the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Through the sensual participation in the rites the soul is being affected through the body. By participating in the rituals and contemplating the conceptual things, the initiate advances to higher degrees of knowledge, reality, and activity.

**The Sacrament of the Gathering**

After being initiated into the mysteries in the baptism, the catechumen is welcomed into the full fellowship of the Christian community, both physically and spiritually, to participate in the Eucharist, which Dionysius calls the rite of the *synaxis*, or the 'gathering-together.' He devotes the third chapter of the *EH* to the Eucharist, and explains here that synaxis means 'communion' or 'gathering' because it forges a divine unity out of division and grants communion and union with the One.[1067] The Eucharist, which was called 'the rites of rites', or 'sacrament of sacraments'(*τελετῶν τελετὴ*) by Dionysius' 'celebrated teacher', the fictional Hierotheus, represents the "culmination (*κεφάλαιον*)" of the other sacraments.[1068] Dionysius explains that this is because the other sacraments are incomplete in the sense that they do not

[1067] *EH* III, 1, 424D.
[1068] *EH* III, 1, 424C.

perfect the communion and "gathering" to the One.[1069] It is the Eucharist that perfects the initiate's communion with the divine mysteries:[1070]

> The other hierarchic rites are incomplete, because they cannot perfect our communion and gathering to the One, and they can therefore not work our full perfection. However, the goal and the prime purpose of each sacrament is to give the one being initiated participation in the divine mysteries. Based on the truth of what is happening, the hierarchical insight has rightly derived a suitable name for this Eucharist.[1071]

For Dionysius participation in the Eucharist is participation in Jesus. This participation happens through the symbols. All heavenly things are given us through visible symbols, as the elements of the Eucharist are symbols of Christ.[1072] This should not be read in the light of the Eucharist quarrels in Reformation times but in accordance with Dionysius' own theory of symbols, where participation in the divine is what matters. Participation in the divine, which happens through the symbols, is what deification of man is all about. This is what takes place in the Eucharist. In Dionysius' analysis of the symbols of the Eucharist we find the clearest indication of how his ecclesiology, Christology and theological anthropology are interconnected. There is a major clash between scholars, however, on how to understand the meaning of symbols in Dionysius. The debate between Wesche and Golitzin, for example, revolves around whether a 'symbol' in *CA* is something that unites with the thing/God symbolised or if it indicates the separation between the thing symbolised and the symbol. Golitzin, who seems to reject Weschse's "Neo-Platonising" interpretation of Dionysius, argues convincingly that "Christ's presence on the altar is quite real for Dionysius, though it be 'symbolical'. That is, it is different in degree, if not in kind, from His presence in the other

[1069] *EH* III, 1, 425A.
[1070] *Ep.* IX 1108A.
[1071] *EH* III, 1, 424D (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 79): Φαμὲν δέ, ὅτι ταῖς τῶν ἄλλων ἱεραρχικῶν συμβόλων μεθέξεσιν ἡ τελείωσις ἐκ τῶν ταύτης θεαρχικῶν καὶ τελειωτικῶν ἔνεστι δωρεῶν. Οὐ γὰρ ἔνεστιν σχεδόν τινα τελεσθῆναι τελετὴν ἱεραρχικὴν μὴ τῆς θειοτάτης εὐχαριστίας ἐν κεφαλαίῳ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα τελουμένων τὴν ἐπὶ τὸ ἓν τοῦ τελεσθέντος ἱερουργούσης συναγωγὴν καὶ τῇ θεοπαραδότῳ δωρεᾷ τῶν τελειωτικῶν μυστηρίων τελεσιουργούσης αὐτοῦ τὴν πρὸς θεὸν κοινωνίαν.
[1072] *EH* III, 3, 9.

symbols of scripture and liturgy".[1073] Dionysius' account of the celebration of the Eucharist begins with the *movement* of the liturgical action, starting with the hierarch censing the sanctuary, beginning with the altar and proceeding from there to circle the entire sanctuary, returning to the altar at the end:

> The hierarch, having completed a reverent prayer at the divine altar, starts with the incensing, and proceeds to the entire sacred place. He then returns to the divine altar, and begins the sacred chanting of the psalms and the whole ecclesiastical assembly joins him. After that follows the reading of the holy scriptures by the deacons [*leitourgoi*], after which the catechumens [*katechoumenoi*] leave the sacred enclosure, followed by the 'possessed'[*energoumenoi*], and the penitents. But those who are eligible for the vision and participation of the divine things remain. Some of the deacons stand on guard by the closed doors of the sanctuary, whereas others perform different duties of their own order.[1074]

These main components of the rite reflect the divine communication and cosmic participation, designed to align the fallen human being with its proper place in the created cosmos. The movement of the hierarch reminds the assembly of God's love outwards to humanity in creation and redemption, drawing us back into communion with him. In the same way as God proceeds out to humanity, without losing his own unity, creating all things and drawing humanity back to himself, "the divine sacrament of the Eucharist remains a unique, simple and indivisible source, it becomes multiplied out of love for humanity into a variety of symbols".[1075] It is interesting that the word Dionysius uses for love in this particular context, *philantropos*, is otherwise his frequent term for the Incarnation. It seems to be a deliberate choice of term as if he intends to show that both the Eucharist and the Incarnation bring about

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[1073] Golitzin 1999: 148-149, n. 58.

[1074] *EH* III, 1-2, 425B-C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 80): Ὁ μὲν ἱεράρχης εὐχὴν ἱερὰν ἐπὶ τοῦ θείου θυσιαστηρίου τελέσας, ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ θυμιᾶν ἀρξάμενος ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἔρχεται τὴν τοῦ ἱεροῦ χώρου περιοχήν· ἀναλύσας δὲ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ θεῖον θυσιαστήριον ἀπάρχεται τῆς ἱερᾶς τῶν ψαλμῶν μελῳδίας συνᾳδούσης αὐτῷ τὴν ψαλμικὴν ἱερολογίαν ἁπάσης τῆς ἐκκλησιαστικῆς διακοσμήσεως. Ἐξῆς δὲ διὰ τῶν λειτουργῶν ἡ τῶν ἁγιογράφων δέλτων ἀνάγνωσις ἀκολούθως γίνεται, καὶ μετὰ ταύτας ἔξω γίνονται τῆς ἱερᾶς περιοχῆς οἱ κατηχούμενοι καὶ πρὸς αὐτοῖς οἱ ἐνεργούμενοι καὶ οἱ ἐν μετανοίᾳ ὄντες, μένουσι δὲ οἱ τῆς τῶν θείων ἐποψίας καὶ κοινωνίας ἄξιοι. Τῶν λειτουργῶν δὲ οἱ μὲν ἑστᾶσι παρὰ τὰς τοῦ ἱεροῦ πύλας συγκεκλεισμένας, οἱ δὲ ἄλλο τι τῶν τῆς οἰκείας τάξεως ἐνεργοῦσιν,

[1075] *EH* III, 1, 429A.

deification. While the Eucharist remains a unity it is at the same time 'multiplied out of love for humanity into a variety of symbols' in order to reach out to humanity. Symbols, however, are central in both Christian liturgy and pagan liturgy. The theurgist is using symbols and signs from both the sensible and intelligible realms; be it animals, plants, stones, images of gods, names, music and numbers.[1076] In pagan Neoplatonism the symbols are seen as divine. The Chaldean Oracles says: "The Intellect of the father has sown *symbola* into the cosmos".[1077] This implies that symbols have an immediate link to the divine. In Dionysius, however, symbols are not holy as such, only in and through the liturgy.[1078] The symbols Dionysius is interested in are biblical symbols such angels and the names of God, but also sensible symbols such as bread, wine, oil, gestures etc. Bread and wine are not holy in themselves, the "inbreaking" of the divine happens in a specific moment of the liturgy.[1079] For Dionysius, contemplation and understanding of the symbols in the sacraments are of vital importance. Nevertheless, it is in the corporeal participation that the efficacy of the sacrament lies. As we saw earlier, when Dionysius reflects on baptism of infants, understanding of the meaning of the rites is not necessary for the sacramental efficacy, the same applies for the rites of the burial that he discusses in *EH* II. According to Dionysius, the sacraments are efficient in themselves. Contemplation is important, but the efficacy of the rites is based on corporeal participation. Performance of the liturgy is therefore necessary. The anagogical power that enables deification is based on participation of the rites. Through the Eucharist we are being raised to a vision of the truth and an experience of the mystery of the incarnate Christ, Dionysius explains.[1080] "How else are we to achieve imitation of God if not by endlessly reminding ourselves of God's sacred works and doing so by way of the sacred

[1076] Stock 2013: 19.
[1077] *Chaldean Oracles*, fr. 108 (ed. Majercik). Cf. Trouillard, see n. 19, 179.
[1078] Louth 1981: 164.
[1079] Stock 2013: 20.
[1080] *Ep*. IX 1108A.

hymns and the sacred acts established by the hierarchy? We do this, as the scriptures say, in remembrance of him."[1081] Saying this, Dionysius indicates that he himself is a person who regularly attends the liturgy, paying attention to everything in the Eucharist liturgy that refers to the work of Christ. For Dionysius the Eucharist is the centre of the Divine Liturgy service, and it is the actual recreation of the divine incarnation. Everything leads to receiving the body and blood of Christ as a celebration of his death and resurrection.[1082] The Eucharist is essentially the continuation and culmination of the divinatory process, in which our nature is gradually being transformed into Christ's nature. In being united to the Incarnation, man is being divinized by union with the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

**The rite of the ointment**

The sacrament that completes Dionysius' triad of rites is the rite of ointment, or chrism (*τελετή μύρου*). Dionysius calls it "another rite of perfection"[1083] and the "perfecting rite of God" (τελετή θεοῦ). What he is concerned with first and foremost is the consecration of the oil and the occasions it is being used in the church rites such as in baptism, funeral, and the Eucharistic altar. "The divine oil", Dionysius explains, "is used for the consecration of any sacred thing, thereby showing clearly that, as Scripture proclaims, he who consecrates [Jesus] remains for ever the same amid all the workings of his divine goodness".[1084] The rite must be regarded with reverence since divinity was bestowed to us by means of it in the act of the consecration. Dionsyius explains how God, first of all, having become man, was consecrated for us and, secondly, this divine act is the source of all perfection and of all consecration.[1085]

[1081] *EH* III, 3, 12.
[1082] *EH* 441A–C.
[1083] *EH* 472D.
[1084] *EH* 484A.
[1085] *EH* IV, 3, 12, 485A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 103): ὡς ἄν τις φαίη θεοῦ τελετήν, ἑκατέρῳ νῷ τὴν θείαν αὐτῆς τελετουργίαν ὑμνοῦντες. Ἔστι γὰρ αὐτοῦ τελετὴ καὶ τὸ δι' ἡμᾶς ἀνθρωποπρεπῶς ἁγιάζεσθαι καὶ τὸ θεουργικῶς ἅπαντα τελεῖν καὶ ἁγιάζειν τὰ τελούμενα.

The ointment itself thus a symbol of the consecration that took place in the incarnation. Christ is the one consecrating:

> In him, according to the scripture, "we have access" to consecration and are mystically offered as a whole burnt-offering. So let us gaze with supermundane eyes upon the most divine altar where sanctifying consecrations are performed, being consecrated by the most divine ointment itself. For the most holy Jesus consecrates himself on our behalf, and fills us full of his own consecration, and he arranges to offer generously to us, as children of God, whatever is consecrated on him.[1086]

Christ has given man "access" to God, the possibility of assimilation to the "divine condition" and being led to knowledge of the truth, and communion, as well as participation in the divine reality. Hence, for Dionysius the focal point of all Christian liturgical celebration, is the incarnate Christ.[1087] Dionysius stresses that "we have access" to Christ, that means every baptised Christian. Through the ointment, the baptised Christian gets access to Christ. Just like Christ himself got the Holy Spirit after baptism, the Christian gets the ointment after baptism, and thereby the Spirit.[1088] The unbaptised are thus excluded from the ointment and also the eucharist according to the *CA*.

Dionysius says that the blessing of the ointment "has an introductory, uplifting lesson in that way the divine ointment is sacredly handled". It is, he continues, "to show us that divine men cover in secret the fragrance of that sanctity within their minds".[1089] Whereas the other

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[1086] *EH* IV, 3, 12, 484D–485A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 103): Εἰ γάρ ἐστι τὸ θειότατον ἡμῶν θυσιαστήριον Ἰησοῦς, ἡ θεαρχικὴ τῶν θείων νοῶν ἀφιέρωσις, ἐν ᾧ, κατὰ τὸ λόγιον, ἀφιερούμενοι καὶ μυστικῶς ὁλοκαυτούμενοι τὴν προσαγωγὴν ἔχομεν, ὑπερκοσμίοις ὀφθαλμοῖς ἐποπτεύσωμεν αὐτὸ τὸ θειότατον θυσιαστήριον, ἐν ᾧ τὰ τελούμενα τελεῖται καὶ ἁγιάζεται, πρὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦ θειοτάτου μύρου τελούμενον. Ἁγιάζει γὰρ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἑαυτὸν ὁ παναγιώτατος Ἰησοῦς καὶ πάσης ἡμᾶς ἁγιαστείας ἀποπληροῖ τῶν ἐπ' αὐτῷ τελουμένων οἰκονομικῶς εἰς ἡμᾶς ὡς θεογεννήτους λοιπὸν ἀγαθουργικῶς διαβαινόντων.

[1087] For the centrality of Christ and the Incarnation to Dionysian soteriology, see Louth 1989: 74; Louth 1986: 434–435; Rorem 1993: 220–223.

[1088] *EH* III, 3, 10.

[1089] *EH* IV, 3, 1, 473B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 95): Ἡ μὲν εἰσαγωγικὴ τῆς τελειωτικῆς ταύτης ἱερουργίας ἀναγωγὴ διὰ τῶν κατὰ τὸ θεῖον μύρον ἱερῶς δρωμένων ἐκεῖνο οἶμαι δηλοῖ· τὸ περικεκαλύφθαι τῶν θείων ἀνδρῶν τὸ κατὰ νοῦν ἱερὸν καὶ εὐῶδες.

sacraments involve senses such as sight, sound, and touch, the rite of ointment appeals to the sense of smell, which is connected to contemplation.

The divine knowledge, which is concealed as symbols in the rite, must be contemplated and understood, and, as Dionysius explains, the deeper understanding is accessible only to those minds who are capable of grasping it. Consequently, the divine meaning of the ointment is not concealed for all, it is revealed according to one's receptivity.[1090] It is through virtuous conformity to God that the soul can increase its receptivity:

> The persistent and unwavering contemplation of the fragrant and hidden beauty will confer the most Godlike appearance […] they reverently behold those most holy things of the Church, veiled in the rite of the divine ointment as in an image. That is why, these also, sacredly conceal what is holy and most divine in their mind, imitating and depicting God. They gaze solely to the conceptual archetype, for not only are they blind to the dissimilar things, they neither do they look at them nor let themselves be drawn down to them. And as becomes their character, these people yearn only for what is truly good and just, and not for what just appears like that. They do not gaze after the false glory with which the multitude adorns itself, but, by living after the divine example they know the difference between good and evil as it is in itself.[1091]

It is typical for Dionysius to stress the importance of interpretation of divine symbols, whether the biblical depictions of the angels or the liturgical actions of consecration, so that we might be uplifted through and beyond these things to the higher realm. The stress that Dionysius constantly lays on the symbolic character of the sacraments, however, should not be misunderstood as obscure. It is important to keep in mind that the sacraments are not merely symbols. Water, bread and wine, and oil have been changed and transformed, they are no longer ordinary water, bread, wine and oil. In the Eucharist the bread and wine are changed into Christ himself. The water blessed for baptism and the oil blessed for healing

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[1090] *EH* 473B.

[1091] *EH* IV, 3, 1, 473D–476 (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 96): ἡ πρὸς τὸ εὐῶδες καὶ κρύφιον κάλλος ἀτενὴς καὶ ἀπαρέγκλιτος θεωρία τὸ ἁπλανὲς δωρήσεται καὶ θεοειδέστατον ἴνδαλμα…ἀλλ' ἱερῶς ἐποπτεύουσιν ὡς ἐν εἰκόνι τῷ θείῳ μύρῳ τὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἱερώτατα περικεκαλυμμένα. Διὸ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὸ κατ' ἀρετὴν ἱερὸν καὶ θεοειδέστατον εἴσω τοῦ θεομιμήτου καὶ θεογράπτου νοὸς ἱερῶς περικαλύπτοντες πρὸς μόνην ἀποβλέπουσι τὴν ἀρχέτυπον νόησιν. Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀθέατοι μόνον εἰσὶ τοῖς ἀνομοίοις, ἀλλ' οὐδ' αὐτοὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνων καθέλκονται θέαν. Ὅθεν ἑαυτοῖς ἀκολούθως οὐδὲ τῶν δοκούντων εἰκῆ καλῶν καὶ δικαίων.

also comprise a real change. They accomplish something that would not be achieved by ordinary water and ordinary oil.[1092]

Since each mind receives according to its own capacity for illumination, the perfecting illumination made available by the ointment is received differently by various individuals. This is a central theme for Dionysius' theological anthropology and a point that he repeatedly makes. Both the hierarch, the priest, and the monk, all perceive God in different ways, depending on their mind's capacity. Even the unbaptised who are excluded from the ointment can at some level participate in the rite because they can smell the sweet fragrance of the oil, which prompts them to a sensual pleasure. This shows that Dionysius takes into account that God's self-revelation attends to differences, that his grace reaches beyond human incapacities, so that even those who are governed by their passions also may to some degree receive illumination.

Dionysius argues that the significance of the sacred oil is that its perceptible token points to a more fundamental reality, the incarnation. The oil itself, a mixture of oils of balsam and olive oil, points us to Christ since it is a composition of oils symbolizing the Godman.[1093] Some have seen in this comparison suggestions of Apollinarianism or Monophysitism.[1094] Dionysius does not offer an explanation of this composition as such, his incarnational focus and understanding of the sacred oil seem to transcend any possibly heterodox implications. He points to Jesus himself as the source of all that is derived from the sacraments: "The symbolic composition of the oil gives form to the formless; it depicts Jesus as the wellspring of the wealth of divine fragrance; as befits his divinity, he pours out divine perfumes on the minds most comfortable to God so that they might delight in these pleasures and be sacredly

[1092] Cf. Louth 2013: 110.
[1093] Louth 1989: 64.
[1094] Cf. Strothmann 1978.

filled with conceptual food."[1095] The grace God shows man by becoming man himself, engenders a yearning for him and a delight in things divine.

Dionysius describes the oil as 'most theurgic,' or 'most deifying,' as it mediates the consecrating work of the incarnation to the church. The rite of the ointment embraces and perfects the other sacraments and their liturgies in that it leads them full circle to the altar, the point of contact between the earthly and celestial, where the initiators are drawn into communion with the divine mysteries. Dionysius initially established that this rite is on the same level as the eucharist in terms of the highest power, that of perfection, and he closes with a reference to the rite of ointment as perfecting. The perfection is expressed in two ways: first, in the incarnation, when God was consecrated for us; second, in the theurgical fulfilment of all consecration and all perfection in the anointment.[1096] The very source of the consecrating power of the sacred oil is that Christ was consecrated for us. This divine work is then mediated to the participant in the divine rite.

**SYMBOLIC THEOLOGY**

In this section, I shall focus on Dionysius' *symbolic theology*, his own method of interpreting religious symbols, which according to himself is indispensable for the ascent of the mind. According to Dionysius, it is impossible for man to contemplate the divine without using material representations that must be interpreted.[1097] He explains that while "the heavenly beings, because of their intelligences, have their own permitted conceptions of God, we on the other hand have to rely on perceptible images to help us rise, as far as we can, to the contemplation of what is divine."[1098] Dionysius says that symbolic language works theurgically in us through our mental faculties to moves us towards truth, and "sets us in

[1095] *EH* IV, 3, 4 477D.
[1096] *EH* IV, 3, 12 485A.
[1097] *CH* I, 121.
[1098] *EH* I, 2, 373B.

place before God through mysteries that cannot be taught."[1099] Referring to Scripture, he argues that "Jesus himself speaks of God in parables and imparts the mystery of theurgy to us through the figure of a *table,* something which has the effect of bringing unity to human life which is both undivided and divided."[1100] The power inherent in symbolic language, such as the parables of Jesus and in the Eucharistic symbols, has a redemptive and transformative effect on the passionate part of the soul, bringing harmony and order. In what follows the focus shall be on how Dionysius justifies the use of symbolic language.

**Anagoge through symbols**

We must contemplate the symbolism contained in the Holy Scriptures and in the rites of the church, says Dionysius.[1101] In this manner, the mind is being lifted up from the sensible to the intelligible. It is inherent that the material symbolizes a spiritual reality. In both *CH* and *EH*, in *Ep*. IX[1102] and *MT*, and in the references to the "symbolic theology" in *CA*, the symbolic anagogic function of the material world is emphasized.[1103] Here he discusses the language that the Bible uses for the divine and uses several examples.

In *CH* II and *CH* XV Dionysius presents to us a complex method of interpreting religious symbols, both biblical symbols and names of angels and God, and the symbolism of the liturgy. Two chapters are thus devoted to this symbolic understanding, one of the first and the last. In addition, *Ep.* IX also deals with his understanding of symbolism. Dionysius gives by and large reflections on symbolism and aesthetics an essential importance in his work. His

[1099] *Ep*. IV, 1, 1105D.
[1100] *Ep.* IV, 1, 1108A.
[1101] *CH* I, 3.
[1102] Rorem suggests that *Ep*. IX may introduce a summary of the Symbolic Theology. See Rorem 1984: 72, 127; Rorem 1993: 197. In another place, Rorem says that "perhaps the Ninth Epistle is not a summary but a subtle substitution for the fictious Symbolical Theology" (Rorem 1980: 88).
[1103] Rorem 1993: 78. Such a reading of Scripture had a great impact on especially thirteenth-century scholasticism. In the latter half of this century a new interest in studying Dionysius' writings arose, something which also has been described as a "Dionysius-renaissance". Bonaventure thanks Dionysius for his method of reading the Scriptures anagogically. His own writings contain numerous examples of anagogic interpretation of intelligible beings. See Keck 1998: 49ff.

entire worldview is characterized by an understanding of creation as good and beautiful.[1104] He understands the hierarchy as a "beautiful order", a counterpoint to the chaos. In *CH* I, he says: "Any thinking individual understands that the appearance of beauty is a sign of invisible love."[1105] According to Hans Urs von Balthasar's analysis aesthetics is most prominent in Dionysius' theology:

> Denys can be regarded as the most aesthetic of all Christian theologians, because the aesthetic transcendence we know in this world (from the sensible as manifestation to the spiritual as what is manifest) provides the formal schema for understanding theological or mystical transcendence (from the world to God).[1106]

Given the importance Dionysius gives his aesthetic and understanding of symbols, and the fact that his view on this subsequently was to become of such great importance throughout the Middle Ages to the present time,[1107] it is remarkable that in *CA*, there is no proper detailed and systematic presentation of his teaching on symbolism. In several of his writings Dionysius himself refers to a work entitled *The Symbolic Theology*, a work that does not exist. Whether it is lost or a fictional work remains an open question. Dionysius himself explains what the content of this work is about:

> In my *Symbolic Theology* I have discussed metaphors drawn from the world of senses that are applied to the nature of God. I have considered what are the mental or material images we form of God, the functions and the instruments of activity we attribute to him, the places where he dwells, the ornaments he is adorned with. I have discussed what is meant by his anger, grief and divine wrath, his drunkenness and morning after, of his oaths and curses, of him sleeping and awakening, and all these other inspired images we have of him presented though allegoric symbolism.[1108]

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[1104] In *DN* IV Beauty is equated with the Good.
[1105] *CH* I, 121D.
[1106] Balthasar 1986: 168, 154.
[1107] See Balthasar 1962: 145-214 and Putnan 1960.
[1108] *MT* III, 1033B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 146): Ἐν δὲ τῇ Συμβολικῇ Θεολογίᾳ, τίνες αἱ ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα μετωνυμίαι, τίνες αἱ θεῖαι μορφαί, τίνα τὰ θεῖα σχήματα καὶ μέρη καὶ ὄργανα, τίνες οἱ θεῖοι τόποι καὶ κόσμοι, τίνες οἱ θυμοί, τίνες αἱ λῦπαι καὶ αἱ μήνιδες, τίνες αἱ μέθαι καὶ αἱ κραιπάλαι, τίνες οἱ ὅρκοι καὶ τίνες αἱ ἀραί, τίνες οἱ ὕπνοι καὶ τίνες αἱ ἐγρηγόρσεις καὶ ὅσαι ἄλλαι τῆς συμβολικῆς εἰσι θεοτυπίας ἱερόπλαστοι μορφώσεις.

Despite the fact that the *Symbolic Theology* is absent as a work in *CA*, Dionysius expresses the content of his understanding of symbols in several places.[1109] An attempted reconstruction of these fragments to a whole has been made by the Jewish-Christian mystic Edith Stein (one of Edmund Husserl's students, later Carmelite nun and victim of the Holocaust). According to Stein, God's whole creation is a symbolic theology for Dionysius, and man has the opportunity to acquire first-hand knowledge of this "Natural revelation" of God.[1110] Dionysius' symbolism relates both to God, the angels, and the church—or to use his own language: the *thearchy*, the heavenly and the ecclesiastical hierarchies—and then the rest of the cosmos. His imagery thus covers manifestations of God and the divine—*theophanies* and *hierofanies*—in the sensible and intelligible nature on the one hand,[1111] and in the rites and the sacraments on the other hand. This dual symbolism is again linked to two further distinctions, between what Dionysius himself describes as "like" and "dissimilar" images, and between the affirmative (cataphatic) and the negative (apophatic) theology. René Roques stresses the dialectical function of the symbols in Dionysius, and states that we, through the symbols, have been given a language that enables us to comprehend the deity, if not in a complete way, at least through forms and shapes that better apply to our intellect, and that this makes it easier for us to interpret and understand the reality of the heavenly order.[1112]

In particular, Dionysius is concerned to justify the use of symbols that may seem vulgar or banal, what he describes as "dissimilar similarities".[1113] He argues that it is easier to understand that these symbols cannot say something real about the deity, while "similar"

[1109] Especially in *CH* II and in *Ep* IX Dionysius is expounding his method of interpretation of religious symbols.
[1110] Stein 1979: 43, 19f. See also Ladner 1992: 90.
[1111] Cf. *DN* I, 2; 1, 4.
[1112] Roques 1958: XXI. Proposés par les Livres Saints, les symboles sont l'effet d'une condescendance par laquelle Dieu se rend, d'une certaine manière, accessible aux intelligences incarnées; par laquelle en tout cas il nous permet de mieux comprendre les réalités d'ordre spirituel. Les symboles en effet sont des schèmes, des figures, des formes […] qui tombent sous nos sens et peuvent être facilement interprétés et compris.
[1113] Dionysius writes "different similarities" of "different" symbols, see *CH* II, 4; *DN* IX, 6. I choose to use the term "different symbols".

symbols may mislead one to believe that the transcendent deity is possible to describe in a full manner.[1114] We shall now look closer at what Dionysius might have meant by this.

**Similar and dissimilar symbols**

Attempting to explain how conceptual and symbolic liturgical language are related, Dionysius introduces  a distinctions between what he describes as "like" and "dissimilar" symbols.[1115] This distinction has many parallels to the relation between apophatic and cataphatic theology, the symbols represent a double or two-sided way to describe God, and they do not exclude each other. "Similar" symbols have a certain similarity to what they symbolize, they seem noble or exalted and hence appropriate to what they represent. Dionysius exemplifies them with the concepts of mind, spirit, and being. "Dissimilar" symbols seem inappropriate and repugnant, they derive from the material world, such as anthropomorphic representations of God as a warrior, passionate lover, or jealous and deceitful, or biblical descriptions of angels disguised as horses, cows, and fiery wheels.[1116] Since all expressions are infinitely inadequate to God, both the intelligible and sensible symbols are equally inadequate, and hence all are "dissimilar".

The obviously "dissimilar" symbols are a more appropriate way to represent the invisible, says Dionysius.[1117] His explanation is that there is less chance that they will be interpreted literally, they will rather make us understand that the divine surpasses everything and is impossible to describe in words.[1118] For, as he emphasizes, it would be absurd if we were to take what the Bible says about the heavenly beings literally and believe that heaven is filled with hordes of lions and horses and flock of birds.[1119] The Bible describes the heavenly

[1114] *CH* II, 2,
[1115] *CH* II, 3, 140C.
[1116] In *Ep.* IX Dionysius gives a long list of dissimilar symbols.
[1117] *CH* II, 3, 141A.
[1118] *CH* II, 3, 141AB.
[1119] *CH* II, 2.

and angelic world using a symbolic language taken from this world to make this transcendent reality intelligible to us.[1120] The lower images applied to the divine are a more clear indication of the infinite otherness of all things from God. Dionysius exemplifies this by referring to Psalm 78, 65: "Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine." Taken literally, the verse indicates that God sleeps and gets drunk on wine, two activities that belong to man, not to God. Since drunkenness and sleep strike us as exceptionally unworthy of God, and so are dissimilar, Dionysius finds this is a preferable way to describe God. The very materiality and ignobility of the dissimilar similarities cries out that these images do not literally describe the godhead and compels the reader to seek the intelligible truth behind them.

**The worm**

A dissimilar image that Dionysius finds most appropriate is the worm. He writes: "Sometimes the imagery is even derived from animals so that God is described as a lion or a panther, a leopard or a charging bear. Add to this what seems the lowliest and most incongruous of all, for the experts in things divine gave him the form of a worm."[1121] The reference is Psalm 22, 21: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people." This reference implies not only awareness of the Psalm, but also knowledge to the antecedent patristic interpretation of it. The Psalm was by many Fathers interpreted as the lament of Christ on the cross, a self-definition of Christ Himself.[1122] In John of Scythopolis' commentary on *CH*, he suggests that Christ calls himself "worm" because, like a worm, he was conceived without sexual intercourse.[1123] In antiquity it was a common belief that worms came to life through "spontaneous generation" (*Generatio Aequivoca*), that they were

[1120] *CH* II, 137D.
[1121] *CH* II, 5, 145AB.
[1122] Ruaro 2008: 588.
[1123] John of Scythopolis, *Scholia* (PG 4:48); Ruaro 2008: 588.

developed directly from inanimate matter and not through male-female copulation.[1124] By using the image of the worm Dionysius may have wanted to emphasize the dissimilarity and otherness of both Christ and worm.[1125] Coming from matter and being at the bottom of creation the worm represents the ultimate dissimilarity. With its ugliness the image of the worm, as applied to Christ, has the power to shock and elevate the mind. At the same time the worm, as being part of God's creation, can represent goodness and beauty. This is expressed in Augustine who in his "praise of the worm" writes about the brightness of its colouring, the slender rounded shape of its body, its fitness, its precision in movement, etc.[1126] As an affirmation of the biblical statement, "everything is beautiful" Augustine argues against the Manicheans that everything that exists, coming from God, is good and beautiful. Dionysius may well have been familiar with such interpretations of the worm and may as well himself have had an anti-Manichean agenda behind the use of this image. By using the image of the worm, he certainly shows the close connection between ugliness and beauty, shocking and elevating in his theory of dissimilar images. For as he explains, it was to avoid confusion with those who are incapable of lifting themselves up beyond the worldly beauty (cf. "similar" symbols) that the theologians[1127] so wisely made use of "dissimilar" symbols.[1128] For no sensible human will doubt that absurd images are to a larger extent able to lift our mind up to the intelligible sphere than "similar" images are.[1129]

[1124] See Origen, *In Lucam* XIV, 8, 8-17 (PG 13: 1857); Eusebius, *Comm. in Ps.* 21, 7 (PG 23: 205–6); Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps.* 21, 7 (PL 36:174).
[1125] Cf. Ruaro 2008: 589.
[1126] Augustine, *De vera rel.* XLI, 77 (PL 34: 156–7).
[1127] When Dionysius in this context writes "theologians" he means the Evangelists, whom he describes as the true theologians.
[1128] *CH* II, 141B.
[1129] *CH* II, 141B.

**Why dissimilar images are superior**

Dionysius argues that lower descriptions of the divine will hardly be interpreted literally. They will, on the contrary, function so that even those with "material inclinations" cannot accept them as appropriate descriptions of the divine.[1130] It seems like Dionysius is speaking out of personal experience here; he says that he would not have cared to seek anagogic and precise explanations of the secret truths if it was not that he himself got distracted by the unfortunate scriptural images of the angels. He says that this provoked his mind to go beyond the material and look beyond this world's appearances.[1131] Furthermore, he is keen to avoid anthropomorphic symbols to be interpreted literally.[1132] Representations of angels with human features can easily lead us to believe that angels are "super humans", or as he puts it himself, "golden and gleaming men, glamorous, wearing lustrous clothing".[1133] The anthropomorphic problem is the starting point for Dionysius' hermeneutics: he rails against anthropomorphic images of God and shows by an abundant use of metaphors that the deity cannot be captured in a single term. On the other hand, he shows, by using negating statements, the necessity of transcending all of God's names.

Dionysius emphasizes the importance of knowing how to interpret the "dissimilar" images, that is how to transcend attributes ascribed to the Deity, such as anger and lust, from the lower realities that have to do with the senses, to a higher divine reality. [1134] In *CH* II, he gives a detailed description of his method for this. The aim is thus to help the reader to get used to thinking differently about symbols, namely, to move beyond the outer side with all its worldly wrappings, so that at any time when we encounter the symbols we can understand

[1130] *CH* II, 141B.
[1131] *CH* II, 145B.
[1132] Hugo Koch (1900: 206) shows several examples of how Dionysius fights all anthropomorphic notions of God and the heavenly beings that otherwise were prevalent at that time in Christian circles, including in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.
[1133] *CH* II, 141B.
[1134] *CH* II, 141C.

them for what they really are and understand them rightly. This is first and foremost an educational and anagogic aid to interpretation, a help to lift our minds in a manner suitable to our nature.

**The ambiguity of the symbols**

In addition to being a help to lift us up to the divine, symbols have another function as well—to conceal. Dionysius writes that it is necessary that the divine and hidden truths about the heavenly intelligences remain hidden for diversity, for not all are sacred and knowledge of the sacred is not for everyone.[1135] Thus there is a dual purpose of the symbols: revealing and concealing. They meet those who are receptive with visible signs and revelations, whereas they keep the truth hidden to others. For the initiate the symbols serve as a way into a profound interpretation of the divine, whereas the non-initiated will not see the inner meaning, they will stop at the outer wrapping and the symbols will appear absurd, which is also the intention. The ambiguity of the symbols consequently include: on the one hand an inner meaning or a higher content, and on the other hand an outer absurdity or a lower visible level. On the one hand, symbols are there to reveal the sacred truths to those who have insight, on the other hand they conceal and prevent the uninitiated to participate in secret knowledge. This is the subject of symbolism—secrecy and disclosure, depending on what the interpreter is capable of detecting.

For the same reason as "dissimilar" symbols are best suited to describe the divine Dionysius argues for the use of the "negative" theology.[1136] This means that the only thing we ultimately can say about God is that he is neither the one nor the other, and that he exists beyond all being and non-being. The importance Dionysius attributes to "dissimilar" symbols and

[1135] *CH* II, 2.
[1136] *CH* II, 3.

negative theology leads him to the mystical theology, especially as it is presented in *MT*. The mystical theology leads to the highest form of transcendence that Dionysius describes as follows: "The universal Cause transcends all things and is neither inexistent nor lifeless, nor irrational nor mindless. It is not a material body, and therefore it has no outward shape or form, or quality, or quantity, or wight […] or anything else which the senses may perceive (Λέγομεν οὖν, ὡς ἡ πάντων αἰτία καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα οὖσα οὔτε ἀνούσιός ἐστιν οὔτε ἄζωος, οὔτε ἄλογος οὔτε ἄνους· οὐδὲ σῶμά ἐστιν οὔτε σχῆμα, οὔτε εἶδος οὔτε ποιότητα ἢ ποσότητα ἢ ὄγκον ἔχει…οὔτε ἐπαφὴν αἰσθητὴν ἔχει·)."[1137]

Despite Dionysius' preference for negations, he analyses the Bible's images of angels and God and accepts them as symbolic descriptions of the sacred. In the same way his entire work *DN* seeks to provide a description of the deity through names like "goodness", "light", "beauty", "love" and "ecstasy".[1138] Dionysius does not, however, distinguish sharply between the intelligible "names" of God and the sensible "symbols."[1139] Since God is "all things in all things and nothing in any"[1140] lowly and sensible expressions of God hold the same truth as the exalted and intelligible. Everything participates in God, "there is nothing which lacks participation in the beautiful, for as the truth of scripture says, 'everything is good' (…τὸ μηδὲ ἓν τῶν ὄντων εἶναι καθόλου τῆς τοῦ καλοῦ μετουσίας ἐστερημένον, εἴπερ ὡς ἡ τῶν λογίων ἀλήθειά φησι «Πάντα καλὰ λίαν»)."[1141] This applies, as we have seen, even to the worm. By participating in Beauty or God all manifestations of God are hence "similar". According to Dionysius the symbol is a genuine presentation of the symbolized. The symbol is realistically bound with the symbolized. By justifying the participation of all things in God,

[1137] *MT* IV, 1040D (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 148).
[1138] *DN* IV.
[1139] See Perl 2007: 102. Perl (2007: 101–13) has devoted an entire chapter to Dionysius' symbolic learning.
[1140] *DN* VII, 3, 872A.
[1141] *CH* II, 3, 141C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 13).

all things are suitable to symbolize God, and the symbolized is present in the symbol. The symbol obtains not only a connection of knowledge, but also a connection of presence.

At the same time all symbols are "dissimilar" as they are not God himself. Both intelligible names and sensible symbols, whether they are "similar" or "dissimilar" expressions, are ultimately both, as they are only symbols for God.[1142] All expressions of God therefore have the same ontological status as nothing can say something real about God.[1143] The nature of symbols is both to reveal and conceal that which they symbolize, and they do both in one. "Every being, or symbol, is a differentiated expression, a presentation, a coming forth of God into openness, manifestness, availability. As such it reveals God, making him knowable in and as the content of that being. To know anything is to know God as manifest in that thing."[1144]

**Light symbolism**

The symbol par excellence in Dionysius is the light.[1145] Dionysius makes use of many light-metaphors such as: πολύφωτός, a term that expresses Dionysius' emphasis on both light and illumination;[1146] *φωτοδοσία*, used in *CH* 121B about the thearchy's "light radiance", *πατρικόν φῶς* used about Christ, the "Light of the Father" in *CH* 121A; and *φωτίζεται* for "illumination" in *CH* 165B.[1147] *CH* begins by praising the light through reference to words

[1142] Jeffrey Fisher (2001: 529–48) appropriately uses the term "dis/similarity" to indicate this twofold dynamic.
[1143] Perl 2007: 102f.
[1144] Ibid. 104.
[1145] All in all, the light symbolism is of such great significance for Dionysius, it has been considered the most prominent symbolism throughout his work. This is especially visible in *CH*, which is also being called a manual in light metaphysics, see Koch 1960: 656. For more on light symbolism in Dionysius, see also Ladner 1992. Dionysius' use of light as an image of divine illumination had such great impact on medieval thinking, to such an extent, says Kurt Ruh, that Dionysius may be regarded as the foremost exponent of the medieval light metaphysics: "So sehr die Lichtmetapher, wie gerade die Eröffnung der *CH* erweist, biblische Erbe ist—die besondere Akzente, die Dionysios setzt, der Emanationsgedanke, das Intelligible des Lichtes oder gar die ‚Helios'—Etymologie verweisen primär auf die platonisch-neuplatonische Tradition. Es ist nicht zuletzt Dionysios, der die neuplatonische 'Lichtmetaphysik' dem Mittelalter vermittelt hat" (Ruh 1990: 48).
[1146] Koch 1900: 187.
[1147] Gersh 1978: 23f.

from the Bible: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights.”[1148] Since God is “the Father of lights” (*πατερικόν φῶς*), any gift is light radiance. At the same time the light beam leads us back to unity with the Father as the beginning of *CH* shows us: “Every procession of the illuminating light, which is inspired by the Father, reaches us, enlightens us generously, and in its unifying power it leads us again upwards. It returns us to the unity with the Father, who unites all, and to his deifying simplicity (Ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσα πατροκινήτου φωτοφανείας πρόοδος εἰς ἡμᾶς ἀγαθοδότως φοιτῶσα πάλιν ὡς ἑνοποιὸς δύναμις ἀνατατικῶς ἡμᾶς ἀναπλοῖ καὶ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς τὴν τοῦ συναγωγοῦ πατρὸς ἑνότητα καὶ θεοποιὸν ἁπλότητα.)”[1149] This statement is followed by another biblical quotation: “from Him and to Him are all things.”[1150] It is the “light” that proceeds from the Father and lifts us back to the Father. The light represents an prosession from the Father (the source) that permeates everything, even the lower matter, and that multiplies itself in creation.[1151] The ultimate goal is union with the divine, not understood as a union with the transcendent God, but rather as an imitation or mirroring of God’s manifestations.[1152]

All levels in the celestial hierarchy receive purification, light, and wisdom from the levels above who are in possession of a greater degree of this and whose mission is to pass this on to those below.[1153] In this manner, each level is to be illuminated. A reversion to the source of light is the final stage in a circular motion where the light in fullness remains in itself, while light rays emanate from and return to the source.

[1148] Jas 1:17.
[1149] *CH* I, 1, 120B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 7).
[1150] *Rom* 11: 36.
[1151] Cf. *CH* I, 2.
[1152] Louth 1989: 39.
[1153] *CH* VII, 3, 208A.

After opening the text by laying the premises for the authorship of light radiance from God and return to God, Dionysius goes straight to the point and urges to invoke Jesus:

> Let us, then, invoke Jesus, the Paternal Light, the true light enlightening every man coming into the world, through whom we have access to the Father, who is the source of all light. Let us aspire, as far as it is attainable, to the paternally transmitted illuminations in the sacred scripture, and let us gaze, as far as we can, upon the hierarchies of the heavenly minds, which scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion.[1154]

Dionysius' use of "light" is thus equivalent to Christ, the light of the Father (*πατρικόν φῶς*), the real and the true light that is unfolding in the world. The Father Himself is the original light (*ἀρχίφωτος πατήρ*). Interestingly enough Dionysius uses the term *theurgika* ("theurgical lights") in the sense of "deifying" of the divine light.[1155] This means that light has a transforming power, which corresponds to its function, and effect, which is to penetrate and educate all levels in turn, from the higher to the lower. This is reflected in the *CH* 15:

> Wherever it is, it brings things toward its own energy, imparting itself to all who draw near, renewing them by its kindling warmth. With unveiled illuminations it grants light yet continues to be pure and undiluted. It makes distinctions and is unchangeable. It rises and penetrates deeply. It is exalted and never inferior. It is always moving, both itself and others. It extends in all directions and is in comprehended. It needs no other. Imperceptibly increasing itself and manifesting its own greatness to those receiving it. It is dynamic, powerful, invisibly present in everything.[1156]

It appears that the light provides all beings power to be individual, to realize themselves, each in their own way. God's light is thus a source of a rich diversity of individual expression. This is because each mind receives light according to its own capacity for illumination.

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[1154] *CH* I, 2, 121A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 7): Οὐκοῦν Ἰησοῦν ἐπικαλεσάμενοι, τὸ πατρικὸν φῶς, τὸ ὂν «τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον», δι' οὗ τὴν πρὸς τὸν ἀρχίφωτον πατέρα προσαγωγὴν ἐσχήκαμεν, ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν ἱεροτάτων λογίων πατροπαραδότους ἐλλάμψεις ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀνανεύσωμεν καὶ τὰς ὑπ' αὐτῶν συμβολικῶς ἡμῖν καὶ ἀναγωγικῶς ἐκφανθείσας τῶν οὐρανίων νοῶν ἱεραρχίας…

[1155] *CH* VII, 2, 208B.

[1156] *CH* XV, 2, 329B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 69): αὐτοκρατητικὸν ἁπάντων καὶ τὰ ἐν οἷς ἂν ἐγγένηται πρὸς τὴν οἰκείαν ἐνέργειαν ἀλλοιωτικόν μεταδοτικὸν ἑαυτοῦ πᾶσι τοῖς ὀπωσοῦν πλησιάζουσιν, ἀνανεωτικὸν τῇ ζωπύρῳ θερμότητι, φωτιστικὸν ταῖς ἀπερικαλύπτοις ἐλλάμψεσιν, ἀκράτητον ἀμιγὲς διακριτικὸν ἀναλλοίωτον, ἀνώφορον ὀξύπορον, ὑψη- λὸν οὐδεμιᾶς ἀνεχόμενον ὑποπεζίας ὑφέσεως, ἀεικίνητον ταυτοκίνητον κινητικὸν ἑτέρων, περιληπτικὸν ἀπερίληπτον, ἀπροσδεὲς ἑτέρου, λανθανόντως αὐξητικὸν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ πρὸς τὰς ὑποδεχομένας ὕλας ἐκφαῖνον τὴν ἑαυτοῦ μεγαλειότητα, δραστήριον δυνατόν, ἅπασι παρὸν ἀοράτως…

The light is transmitted to us through the Son, and it is not only "through" him, but it is indeed Christ himself who is communicated to us, since Christ is understood as light. Dionysius says that Jesus is the source of hierarchies, the gift given through the hierarchy and hierarchy's ultimate goal.[1157] By turning towards the source of light "we thereby come to look up to the blessed and ultimately divine ray of Jesus himself"[1158] and through Jesus our nature undergoes a complete change, we are being divinized:

> In its goodness it [the Deity] completely transformed our nature to its opposite; for the darkness of our mind it filled with a blessed and most divine light and it adorned the formless with divine beauty. The dwelling place of our soul it liberated from the most unclean passions and from destructive stains. Finally it showed us a transcendent ascending and an inspired way through which we, as far as possible, are brought to a sacred assimilation to itself.[1159]

Both *CH* and *EH* begins with calling Jesus, the "Light of the Father."[1160]It is the light transmitted to us that has the power to lead us to the "limitless and bounteous ocean of divine Light,"[1161] which is an image of the Father. The goal seems to be to raise the level of contemplation until we finally reach participation in the Father who is "the source of illumination for those who are illuminated, for he is truly and really Light itself".[1162]

**How to receive/achieve divine enlightenment**

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[1157] *EH* I, 1.
[1158] *EH* I, 1.
[1159] *EH* III, 3, 11, 441A-B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 91): τὸ μὲν γὰρ κατὰ νοῦν ἡμῶν ἀλαμπὲς ἐνέπλησεν ὀλβίου καὶ θειοτάτου φωτὸς καὶ τοῖς θεοειδέσιν ἐκόσμησε τὸ ἀνείδεον κάλλεσι, τὸ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς οἰκητήριον ἐν παντελεῖ σωτηρίᾳ τῆς ὅσον οὔπω καταπεσούσης ἡμῶν οὐσίας ἐναγεστάτων παθῶν καὶ φθοροποιῶν μολυσμῶν ἠλευθέρωσεν ἀναγωγὴν ἡμῖν ὑπερ- κόσμιον ὑποδείξασα καὶ πολιτείαν ἔνθεον ἐν ταῖς πρὸς αὐτὴν ἡμῶν ἱεραῖς κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀφομοιώσεσιν.
[1160] *CH* I, 2, 7, 9; *EH* I, 2, 65, 20f.
[1161] *CH* IX.
[1162] *CH* XIII, 3, 301D. The "father-mediated" light described in *CH* I has, however, in early commentary work also been interpreted as a reference to the Fathers. John Schytopolis claims this must be a matter of the Greek Fathers, that Dionysius actually refers to his own teachers when speaking of the father-mediated light and illumination and adds that Dionysius with this does not necessarily mean his own ancestors. See *Scholia* 32.2; 7.12 16.19 (*CH* 1.2, 121A), see Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 154. John Scotus Eriugena, on the other hand, does not understand *CH*'s light metaphysics as anything else than divine illumination conveyed by the Father God, he does not seem to provide this biographical significance. *Expositiones* 1.225-228, s. 7. See Rorem 2005: 18.

According to Dionysius himself, it is Jesus who enlightens:[1163] "Even Jesus himself, the transcendent, most divine mind, the source and essence, and most supremely divine power of every hierarchy, sanctification, and all the workings of God (Ἰησοῦς, ὁ θεαρχικώτατος νοῦς καὶ ὑπερούσιος, ἡ πάσης ἱεραρχίας ἁγιαστείας τε καὶ θεουργίας ἀρχὴ καὶ οὐσία καὶ θεαρχικωτάτη δύναμις)"[1164] He assimilates us, as much as we are able, to his own light.[1165] This requires us invoking Jesus' name, "for otherwise it is not possible that the divine light beam can light into us".[1166] Illumination that cannot be achieved without invoking Jesus' help. We find similar in other Church Fathers such as Symeon the New Theologian who understands Christ as light and refers to him as such:

> God is Light: It shines on us without evening, without change, without alteration, without form. It speaks, works, lives, gives life, and changes into light those whom it illuminates. We bear witness that "God is light," and those to whom it has been granted to see Him have all beheld Him as light. Those who have received him as light, because the light of his glory goes before him, and it is impossible for him to appear without light. Those who have not seen his light have not seen him, for he is the light, and those who have not received the light have not received grace. Those who have received grace have received the light of God and have received God, even as Christ Himself, who is the Light, has said, "I will live in them and move among them." [2 Cor. 6:16] [1167]

The experience of the light shows that Christ shines his light and is within the person. Symeon says that the light speaks, works, lives, gives life, and changes into light those whom it illuminates. Dionysius speaks of the light in similar manner. His whole theology is a theology of divine illumination that penetrates all aspects of cosmic and human life. God for Dionysius is the "light of the mind"[1168] and the incarnation of Christ is "divine enlightenment."[1169]

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[1163] Cf. *EH* I, 1, 372A.
[1164] *EH* I, 1, 372A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 63-4).
[1165] *EH* I, 1, 372B.
[1166] *CH* I, 121C.
[1167] Symeon the New Theologian (C. J. de Catanzaro trans.) 1980: 28, 298.
[1168] *DN* IV, 5, 700C.
[1169] *DN* I, 4, 592B.

**How light and darkness are related**

The light is, however, associated with darkness in Dionysius' system. The darkness is understood as an expression of the transcendent deity who is unknowable, and is paradoxically enough, equivalent with the light.[1170] In *Ep*. 1 Dionysius explains that darkness is the strongest light, and that *agnosia* is darkening *gnosis*. Werner Beierwaltes has interpreted this to mean that the transformation of light to darkness has nothing to do with what is vague or irrational, but that it rather describes God as "überhelle", a kind of super light.[1171] Here the radical negativity and God's absolute transcendence is expressed.

In *MT* the divine union is described with terms such as darkness (*γνόφος*) and ignorance (*ἀγνώσια*). Dionysius has two terms for darkness: he uses the term σκότος when he refers to a darkness that is different from the light. The second word, (*γνόφος*), has a more specific meaning as different expressions of divinity: "invisible darkness"[1172] "brilliant darkness,"[1173] "darkness of ignorance"[1174] and "darkness above light."[1175] Dionysius says that the divine darkness (*θείος γνόφος*) is "the inaccessible light (*ἀπρόσιτον φώς*) that God dwells in,"[1176] it is invisible and inaccessible because of the "abundance" (*ὑπερβολή*) of the radiant light. Dionysius' darkness should therefore not be understood as the darkness we experience at night, and really not as darkness at all, but rather as an excess of light that may appear dark because it is so intense that we manage to see just as little as if it were dark.[1177]

[1170] For more on the juxtaposition of light and darkness in Dionysius, see Vanneste 1959: 64ff., 125ff.
[1171] Beierwaltes 1985: 149
[1172] *DN* 869A.
[1173] *MT* 997B.
[1174] *MT* 1001A.
[1175] *MT* 1025A.
[1176] *Ep* V.
[1177] See Ruh 1987: 37 for an interpretation of darkness in Dionysius.

Images as the dazzling darkness have been used in various religious traditions.[1178] In 2 M where God reveals Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai and gives him the Ten Commandments, both cloud and darkness are used as images of divine bliss and protection. In 2 Chronicles 6, 1 it says that "the Lord has said he will stay in the darkness". That darkness is connected to knowledge and enlightenment is described by Philo in a comment to 2 M: "Entering into the dark cloud, the invisible region, [Moses] abides there while being initiated into the most holy mysteries. He becomes, however, not only an initiate, but also hierophant and instructor of divine rites, which he will impart to those whose ears have been purified (καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον, τὸν ἀειδῆ χῶρον, εἰσελθὼν αὐτοῦ καταμένει τελούμενος τὰς ἱερωτάτας τελετάς. γίνεται δὲ οὐ μόνον μύστης, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἱεροφάντης ὀργίων καὶ διδάσκαλος θείων, ἃ τοῖς ὦτα κεκαθαρμένοις ὑφηγήσεται.)."[1179] The motifs of a divine darkness, Moses as hierophant, purification as precursor for illumination or initiation into the mysteries, and a knowledge passed on to those who are pure and thus receptive to it, are mystery terminology which we find again amongst the Alexandrians and the Cappadocians.[1180]

The unknowable God is thus described as a divine darkness, and is actually a symbol of an excess of inaccessible light. His "transcendent darkness remains hidden from all light and concealed from all knowledge (τὸ ὑπερκείμενον αὐτοῦ σκότος καὶ καλύπτεται παντὶ φωτὶ καὶ ἀποκρύπτεται πᾶσαν γνῶσιν)", Dionysius says.[1181] In this sphere God resides. Thus,

[1178] Rosemary Arthur refers to this phenomenon in both the Jewish, Christian, and pagan traditions, see Arthur 2008: 73ff.
[1179] Filon, *The Giants* XII (CWS: 69).
[1180] The classical analogy of Moses' ascent is for example treated in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Moses. Gregory of Nyssa was in his turn influenced by Origen, and the lines can be drawn back to Clements and Philo. Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Moses is considered particularly significant for Dionysius and has most likely been a source of inspiration for *MT*. See Arthur 2008: 75ff. and Louth 1989: 100.
[1181] *Ep*. I, 1065A.

knowledge about Him cannot be affirmative since God exists beyond being and is above everything that is known.[1182] The way to know God is through un-knowing.[1183]

## CONCLUSION

Since the Enlightenment the ritual life of the church has tended to being considered as less significant than doctrine and faith by theologians. Today religion is often reduced to a set of beliefs and ethical codes. But for a late antique theologian like Dionysius religion was arrayed in more complexity. As this chapter has observed participation in the Christian community is what forms the Christian life for Dionysius. He says that it "forms our souls and makes them fit to receive the sacred words and sacred works."[1184] When Dionysius speaks of 'the sacred works,' he means the sacraments, which are Baptism (The Divine Birth), The Eucharist (The Gathering or Synaxis), and The Myron (anointing).

Dionysius envisions theurgic or liturgical celebration, and the experience of the sacred works, as more perfecting than scriptural contemplation or theorizing. Whilst contemplation is vital also, there is an organic relationship between theourgia and theoria in Dionysius' system; ultimately it is through the sacraments that deification is achieved. Both body and soul are included in the performance and participation of the rites; pure thought is not sufficient. The rites are perceived by both sense-perception and intellect. They are conceived as liturgical images, and simultaneously they are an aesthetic sensory experience, and a mediation of understanding.

[1182] *Ep*. I, 1065AB.
[1183] *MT*; *Ep*.1-2.
[1184] *EH* II, 1, 392A.

Dionysius says it is impossible for man to contemplate the divine without using symbols or material representations of perceptible images that must be interpreted. He explains and defends the uplifting power that "the symbolic acts" or the sacraments have when being interpreted and contemplated. The systematic commentary that Dionysius gives on each sacrament is intended to lead the reader from the perceptible to the conceptual. He says that they work theurgically in us via our mental faculties, to move us toward the divine. Again, whilst contemplation and understanding of the symbols in the sacraments are of vital importance, it is in corporeal participation that the efficacy of the sacrament lies.

Dionysius is clear that engagement with the divine through the sacraments signifies dynamic participation in that divine. Intellect, soul, the senses and the body all play a part in the participation inherent in the ritual. The sacraments, which each depend on perceptible elements, show the way to the conceptual things inherent in the divine and efficaciously form the inner life of the human subject. Dionysius says that God works through "a variety and abundance of divisible symbols to bestow salvation and divinisation to every being endowed with reason and intelligence."[1185] God's acts through the perceptible, both in the sacraments and the Incarnation, have provided a profound opportunity for human formation and transformation.

The chapter has discussed how both for the Hellenic Neoplatonists and for Dionysius, the divine work (θεουργία) is divinely transmitted into the created world in religious rites and symbols. Iamblichus, Proclus and Dionysius hold similar views on the validity of the materiality of the theurgical and liturgical rituals. Both traditions have an internal dynamic of theurgy that is strikingly similar: the procession and return of the cosmos from and to the One or God. Both soteriological systems comprise the work of the divine, the sacred rites and

[1185] *EH* I, 4, 376B.

symbols, and the human performance of these rites. The work of the divine is for both derived from a single, transcendent divine source. Yet, evidently, the contexts for the two traditions are fundamentally different in how terms of how cosmic hierarchy is understood. Whereas the divine work for the salvation of souls is carried out by the pagan gods (and the theurgist) for Iamblichus and Proclus, it is carried out in the cosmos by the incarnate Christ (as well as by the angelic beings and the hierarchs) for Dionysius. What is most central to Dionysius' soteriology is the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus Christ, and his saving historical "theurgies" and their symbolic representation in the Christian liturgy. For Dionysius it is Jesus Christ who is the center of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and thus of the salvation of rational beings. Because God had become man, then humanity could again be created in God's image, and be healed and redeemed from the passions. The Church's role was to continue to mediate this redemptive power of the Incarnation to humanity.

This chapter has demonstrated that although Dionysius was intimately familiar with many of the Neoplatonic notions, and although in many respects Dionysius' own sacramentalism echoes the Neoplatonic theurgy, it is significantly altered in order to uphold certain fundamental Christian tenets. Dionysius adopts the term theourgia to express the full spectrum of the Godhead's providential activity in the created world. However, he differentiates the dimensions of his soteriological system by the term theourgia and hierourgia. In doing so Dionysius reinforces the cooperation of human and divine, whilst at the same time preserving the distinction between Creator and creature.

# CHAPTER 5: ESCHATOLOGY

## Introductory remarks

In the present chapter I shall be surveying Dionysius' view on eschatology. The word eschatology is a modern term of Greek origin. Eschaton means "the uttermost", and logia means "doctrine" or "discussion". Eschatology is thus about "the uttermost" times and differing notions and expectations of these. Relatively little has been written on eschatology in Dionysius, and the reasons for that can seem evident. At first glance the *CA* may not seem much concerned with eschatological topics, apart from some few passages where Dionysius mentions our future condition in the eschaton.[1186] However, eschatology is not only about future predictions, it is also, as I will argue, about the overall relationship between our present being and our *skopos* in God, and can thus be seen as a process, not only as the end goal. In Dionysius' thinking, one senses that the kingdom of God and perfection are present in the tension between an already now and a not yet. In this respect, the *CA* is eschatological through and through. Dionysius does use an eschatological language when describing the dynamic between hierarchical mediation and divine transcendence. The contrast is between the present, in which "we now grasp these things in the best way we can," and the "time to come," in which "somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with God".[1187]

In the present chapter I shall focus on the eschatological state of the human nature, and hone in the discourse on the body as it relates to our final state in Dionysius' system. We will uncover that Dionysius – unlike the Greek Platonists – pursues a holistic anthropology, asserting that the state of the human nature in eschaton is not purely intellectual, but also

[1186] These passages are *DN* I, 4, 589D-593A; *DN* IV, 35, 736A-B; *EH* VII, 552D-569A.
[1187] *DN* I, 4, 529B.

materially embodied; there is no dissolution or evaporation of the body in the eschaton, man will be transformed as a whole. This is because God made the human flesh his own in the incarnation; otherwise, the body would be a barrier to our becoming like God.

Moreover, we will find that Dionysius sees the transformation or metamorphosis of human beings as a constant process during one's life that leads to greater earthly levels of realization before true unification at the eschaton. This means that the process of metamorphosis involves the whole man both in this world and in the one to come. I will argue that this, for Dionysius, implies a form of "realized eschatology", which refers to the achievement of deification in the here and now, pointing to those who are eschatologically realized in their earthly life: monks and hierarchs for instance, who again are aids in the ascent of other human beings.

We shall see that the person of Christ has a central position in Dionysius' eschatology as bodily and spiritual death is overcome by Christ's death on the cross and by his resurrection, and subsequently by the imitation of Christ by man. Dionysius argues that, ultimately, all "will have a sacred reward proportionate to his merits." The rewards of the just will correspond to the degree to which one "imitated God" on earth with a "divine and holy life." I shall argue that for Dionysius overall, humanity ascends to God whole, transformed in every sense back to its original state. This process is ascetic: it serves as a unceasing process during one's life that leads to greater earthly levels of realization before true unification at the eschaton.

**Transformation of man in an eschatological perspective**

Dionysius' eschatological account is not an arbitrary one. He does not speculate about the final state of man and the cosmos, and at first glance, he does not seem to have much to say about the last things. Paul Rorem may at first sight be right in remarking that Dionysius'

work is devoid of eschatology.[1188] Presumably he means for the world as opposed to the individual. Yet, such a claim needs some clarification. We are aware of at least one passage from the *DN* which seems to contain in a compressed form what constitutes Dionysius' eschatological vision:

> But *then*, when we have become incorruptible and immortal and have reached a state of Christlikeness and highest bliss, "we shall," according to the Holy Scripture, "always be with the Lord". Through the sacred contemplation, we will be ever filled with the visible manifestation of God, shining in glory around us with its most luminous rays, just like it once shone for the disciples at the divine Transfiguration. We shall participate in His gift of spiritual light, with a mind that is free from passion and immaterial, and in an incomprehensible manner to us, we shall be one with Him. In an incomprehensible and most blissful way, we shall be struck by His blazing light. For in the most divine imitation of the transcendental intellects (supercelestial minds) we shall be equal to the angels, and, just as the truthful Scripture' s words attest to, sons of God, since we are sons of the resurrection.[1189]

In this there are five observable claims about the eschatological condition of human beings: incorruptibility, immortality, Christlikeness, glorification from God, and equality with the angels.

It is fairly characteristic for Dionysius to describe the relationship between the present being and the perfected one in eschatological terms. He tends to divide between now (*νῦν*) and then (*τότε*); a reminiscent from 1 Corinthians 13: 12, "now in a glass darkly, but then face to face."[1190] The divide goes between, a) present time, in which "we now grasp these things in

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[1188] Rorem 1993: 122.

[1189] *DN* I, 4, 592B-C (ed. Suchla 1990: 113-14): Τότε δέ, ὅταν ἄφθαρτοι καὶ ἀθάνατοι γενώμεθα καὶ τῆς χριστοειδοῦς καὶ μακαριωτάτης ἐφικώμεθα λήξεως, «πάντοτε σὺν κυρίῳ» κατὰ τὸ λόγιον «ἐσόμεθα» τῆς μὲν ὁρατῆς αὐτοῦ θεοφανείας ἐν πανάγνοις θεωρίαις ἀποπληρούμενοι φανοτάταις μαρμαρυγαῖς ἡμᾶς περιαυγαζούσης ὡς τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ θειοτάτῃ μεταμορφώσει, τῆς δὲ νοητῆς αὐτοῦ φωτοδοσίας ἐν ἀπαθεῖ καὶ ἀΰλῳ τῷ νῷ μετέχοντες καὶ τῆς ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἑνώσεως ἐν ταῖς τῶν ὑπερφανῶν ἀκτίνων ἀγνώστοις καὶ μακαρίαις ἐπιβολαῖς. Ἐν θειοτέρᾳ μιμήσει τῶν ὑπερουρανίων νοῶν «ἰσάγ- γελοι γάρ», ὡς ἡ τῶν λογίων ἀλήθειά φησιν, ἐσόμεθα «καὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες.

[1190] We find similar notions on knowledge and the eschaton in other Church Farthers such as Origen's *On First Principles* 2.3.2, 2.6.7, 2.11.6-7; *Dialogue with Heraclides* 27; Tertullian's *Adversus Praxeam* 14 and 16. It's also a common theme in Clement's *Stromateis* 1.94, 4.12, 5.7, 5.40, 5.74, 6.102, 7.13, 7.57, 7.68. As for the Cappadocians, see Basil, *Against Eunomius* 3.7; *On the Holy Spirit* 14.33. Nazianzen, *Oration 28* 17-20. Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.232 and 2.251. According to the Biblia Patristica index (Index of Biblical Quotations in Early Christian Literature), it appears around 270 times in the writers catalogued.

the best way we can," and the b) "time to come" in which "somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with him."[1191]

But *now* we employ appropriate symbols of the divine, and with the help of these analogies we reach up, as far as possible for us, to the simple and unified truth about the spiritual visions, thanks to the sacred veils of both the scriptural words and patristic traditions of philanthropy which wrap up the spiritual things through the perceptible ones as well as the natural beings through the supernatural ones (μεμυήμεθα νῦν μὲν ἀναλόγως ἡμῖν διὰ τῶν ἱερῶν παραπετασμάτων τῆς τῶν λογίων καὶ τῶν ἱεραρχικῶν παραδόσεων φιλανθρωπίας αἰσθητοῖς τὰ νοητὰ καὶ τοῖς οὖσι τὰ ὑπερούσια περικαλυπτούσης)… *But in time to come* [italic added], when we are incorruptible and immortal (Τότε δέ, ὅταν ἄφθαρτοι καὶ ἀθάνατοι γενώμεθα)… our minds, deprived of any passion, shall receive the gift of spiritual light from Him and, in an incomprehensible manner to us, which is neither possible to conceive nor express, nor in any way to contemplate, we shall take part in his intelligible gift of light in the impassible and immaterial intellect and of the super-intelligible union in the unknowable and blessed projections of its transcendent rays (τῆς δὲ νοητῆς αὐτοῦ φωτοδοσίας ἐν ἀπαθεῖ καὶ ἀΰλῳ τῷ νῷ μετέχοντες καὶ τῆς ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἑνώσεως ἐν ταῖς τῶν ὑπερφανῶν ἀκτίνων ἀγνώστοις καὶ μακαρίαις ἐπιβολαῖς).[1192]

For Dionysius the goal of history is salvation of all creation and union with God. For the human being, this union will mean perfection of body and soul and mind, a transformation of all faculties, as well as the redemption of the bodies of the dead. Their resurrection will be part of a wider transformation of the whole created universe. The heart of this eschatological renewal is the deification of man. As we learned in the previous chapter (in the section on body and evil), deification is for Dionysius, by and large, a question of merits and free *will* in man. He speaks about the two wills; the divine and human will, and relates them to each other:[1193] God's divine decrees (*θεία θελήματα*) are the cause of everything that exists,[1194] and furthermore, "all things are moved by a longing for the Beautiful and Good to accomplish every outward work and form every act of will (καὶ πάντα τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἐφιέμενα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται πάντα, ὅσα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται.)."[1195] Hence, human will is connected to

[1191] *DN* I, 4, 529B; see also Newheiser 2012.
[1192] *DN* I, 4, 592B-C (ed. Suchla 1990: 113-14).
[1193] *DN* IV, 32-33, 733A–734B. He hereby anticipates the orthodoxy which Maximus the Confessor was to establish in the seventh century. At the beginning of the sixth century, there was not yet a consensus as to whether Christ had two wills.
[1194] *DN* V, 848B.
[1195] *DN* IV, 10, 708A (ed. Suchla 1990: 155).

the divine will in its "yearning" for union with God.[1196] The notion of will is essential and expressed in a number of places in the corpus. For example, Dionysius explains how the human will is instrumental in salvation when he lists the rituals a person needs to undergo when becoming a Christian, or rather a better Christian: "A postulant who wishes to enter the spiritual life has a sponsor who presents him to the hierarch,"[1197] "the other is moved by the desire of salvation…" [1198] Likewise, in giving advice to one of his friends, Dionysius says:

> That is what I pray for. And Timothy, my friend, while seeking a vision of the mysterious things, I advise you to turn your back on everything perceived and comprehended, all that exists and that does not exist. You shall, as far as possible without your understanding, strive upwards as high as possible, aspiring to a union with Him who transcends every being and knowledge. By unreservedly and totally leaving behind yourself and everything, discarding all, liberated from all, you will be elevated to the rays of divine darkness, which is above all existence.[1199]

Hence, Dionysius understands *will* to have an essential role in the process of the human soul's return to assimilation and union with God. Everyone is initially created free and good by God, the Creator. The goal is to know good and do good, and become deified and ultimately assimilated to God. Yet, there are those who fail, Dionysius says, due to their weak will—they know the good will of God, but refuse to act in accordance to it—and there are even those who do not want to know how to do good:

> By "men who sin knowingly" Scripture means those who consciously lack in the knowledge of the good and who also lack in performance of the good. They know the will of God but do not follow it, and they have heard it but are either weak in faith or in doing good. Some people do not even want to understand doing good, because their will has been distorted or weakened. And, as I have said many times, evil is utterly weakness, powerlessness and lack of knowledge (at least, of exercised knowledge), as well as a lack of faith, aspiration and good deeds.[1200]

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[1196] *MT* I, 1, 997B.
[1197] *EH* II, 2, 1, 393A; See D-Vasilescu 2018: 1–2.
[1198] Ibid.
[1199] *MT* I, 997B–1000 A (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 142): Ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα ηὔχθω· σὺ δέ, ὦ φίλε Τιμόθεε, τῇ περὶ τὰ μυστικὰ θεάματα συντόνῳ διατριβῇ καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀπόλειπε καὶ τὰς νοερὰς ἐνεργείας καὶ πάντα αἰσθητὰ καὶ νοητὰ καὶ πάντα οὐκ ὄντα καὶ ὄντα καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἕνωσιν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, ἀγνώστως ἀνατάθητι τοῦ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν· τῇ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ πάντων ἀσχέτῳ καὶ ἀπολύτῳ καθαρῶς ἐκστάσει πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θείου σκότους ἀκτῖνα, πάντα ἀφελὼν καὶ ἐκ πάντων ἀπολυθείς, ἀναχθήσῃ.
[1200] *DN* IV, 35, 736A (ed. Suchla 1990: 179): Ἐν γνώσει δὲ ἁμαρτάνοντας καλεῖ τὰ λόγια τοὺς περὶ τὴν ἄληστον τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ γνῶσιν ἢ τὴν ποίησιν ἐξασθενοῦντας καὶ τοὺς εἰδότας «τὸ θέλημα» καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντας, τοὺς ἀκηκοότας μέν, ἀσθενοῦντας δὲ περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἢ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ. Καὶ ἀβούλητόν τισι τὸ «συνιέναι τοῦ ἀγαθῦναι» κατὰ τὴν παρατροπὴν ἢ τὴν ἀσθένειαν τῆς βουλήσεως. Καὶ ὅλως τὸ κακόν, ὡς πολλάκις

As we saw in the previous chapter, in the section on evil, failing to do good and failing to live in accordance with one's true nature is the core of Dionysius' *theodicy*. The causes of evil are among other things understood as weakness, impotence, and deficiency of knowledge. Yet, evil "comes into being not on its own account (εἶναι…οὐκ ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἰκείας)," [1201] but, paradoxically, "for the sake of the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἕνεκα)", says Dionysius.[1202] Evil is, nevertheless, a voluntary deprivation from participation in God. What eschatological repercussions does this have? Dionysius answers that the punishment in the times to come is man's self-imposed separation from God, which means that man deprives himself from divinization, and distances himself from the true assimilation to God and the true vocation for his life. Dionysius emphasizes that "it is not God who will rightly separate himself from the wicked but, rather, it is the wicked who will separate themselves completely from God."[1203]

**Personal virtues: "everyone will have a sacred reward proportionate to his merits"**

According to Dionysius, ultimately, everyone "will have a sacred reward proportionate to his merits."[1204] He insists that the rewards of the just will correspond to the degree to which one "imitated God" on earth with a "divine and holy life": "Everyone who will be reborn (in the union with God) will have their lots in the future in accordance with the life allotted to them here" (ἔσονται πάντες ἐν τῇ παλιγγενεσίᾳ τὰς ἀποκληρώσεις, καθ' ἃς ἐνθάδε τὴν οἰκείαν ζωὴν ἀπεκλήρωσαν).[1205] If Christ is God, then 'mimesis' could be seen as a process that one could justifiably consider to be *deifying*. This statement by Dionysius that everyone will receive proportionally to what he has done to the body, echoes Paul, who says that man is

εἰρήκαμεν, ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀδυναμία καὶ ἔλλειψίς ἐστιν ἢ τῆς γνώσεως ἢ τῆς ἀλήστου γνώσεως ἢ τῆς πίστεως ἢ τῆς ἐφέσεως ἢ τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.
[1201] *DN* IV, 31, 732C.
[1202] *DN* IV, 31, 732C.
[1203] *Ep.* X, 1117B.
[1204] *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A.
[1205] *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A.

destined by his own sinful or godly will: "everyone will receive good or evil, according to what he has done to the body" (2 Cor 5, 10). Dionysius does in fact refer to this passage in *EH* VII, 3, 6-7, where he affirms that "But I, following Scripture, know very well that each will have the lot which is their due"(Ἐγὼ δὲ, ὅτι μὲν ἀμοιβαίαν ἕξει τὴν ἀποκλήρωσιν ἕκαστος, εὖ οἶδα τοῖς λογίοις ἀκολουθῶν)."[1206] He makes it clear that living a holy life of perseverance, to the extent that a man may do this, is imperative to reach "the state of divine blessedness" in the time to come:[1207]

> The altogether holy man, who is entitled to take part in the divine mysteries, and who has attained the greatest possible extent of godlikeness, in complete and most perfect divinization, such a man is truly indifferent to the works of the flesh, it will not affect him (except the most necessary requirements of nature, and that only in passing). Instead, he will have attained the highest possible degree of divinization and he will be at the same time a temple and a companion to the supreme divine spirit.[1208]

This is the promise given to the just and divine man: he will achieve divinization and will be "both the temple and the companion of the Spirit". In another place Dionysius asserts that the holy man will share in the "ageless and most blessed fulfillment" to which the saints and patriarchs have already come.[1209] Deification is realized in the resurrection of the dead, since for the faithful the resurrection brings them into "unshakable conformity to God," where both their souls and bodies will participate in divine life.[1210] Yet, although Dionysius speaks of the rewards of the just as coincident with the resurrection,[1211] he assumes that those who lived a holy life are already "sharing truly in eternal rewards."[1212] This is because a properly led life can bring man to the achievement of deification already in this life that resembles angelic life.

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[1206] *EH* VII, 3, 6–7, 560C-561D.
[1207] *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A.
[1208] *EH* III, 3, 7, 433C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 86): ὡς ὁ καθόλου θεῖος ἀνὴρ ὁ τῶν θείων ἄξιος κοινωνὸς ὁ πρὸς τὸ τοῦ κατ᾽ αὐτὸν θεοειδοῦς ἄκρον ἐν παντελέσι καὶ τελειωτικαῖς θεώσεσιν ἀνηγμένος οὐδὲ τὰ σαρκὸς ἐνεργήσει παρὰ τὰ κατὰ φύσιν ἀναγκαιότατα καὶ τοῦτο εἰ τύχοι παρέργως, ναὸς δὲ ἅμα καὶ ὀπαδὸς ἐν τῇ κατ᾽ αὐτὸν ἀκροτάτῃ θεώσει τοῦ θεαρχικοῦ πνεύματος ἔσται.
[1209] *EH* VII, 3, 5, 560B-C.
[1210] *Ep.* X, 1117B.
[1211] *EH* VII, 1, 1; *EH* 7, 3, 1; See Daley 2010: 183-4.
[1212] *EH* VII, 3, 3; *EH* 7, 3, 1; See Daley 2010: 183–4.

Dionysius refers to those who already in this life seem to be with God and in his tenth and last letter he says that they "live like angels among men":

> We also see others who are already here on earth who are with God, and because they love the truth, they separate themselves from the passion for material things. Completely free from all evil and driven by divine love for all good things, they love peace and holiness. Already in this life they begin the life which is to come. Having set themselves free from all passion, they live like angels in the midst of men, and praise ceaselessly the name of God, and practice holiness and all other virtues.[1213]

This is an auspicious potential that Dionysius attributes to man. It is not unlikely that he is here referring to monks since living like angels can be understood as a monastic aspiration.[1214] That these men "already here on earth are united with God" and that they have already started the life to come, is a thought that comes close to the notion of a "realized eschatology" which is a Christian eschatological theory referring to the achievement of deification already in this life, where individuals living exemplary lives according to God attain a kind of angelic state.

**Living like angels and realized eschatology**

We find this thought expressed in various theologians and the background seems to be found already in the early Christian literature. Various eschatological thoughts and motives are thematized in early Christian literature. One important motive is the idea of the kingdom of God as an already realized fact. Jesus was announcing that the kingdom *was already present,* that it had in fact been "realised" (Luke 17: 21). As is often the case with the words of Jesus of Nazareth, the debate on what he meant has never ceased. Modern scholars have wrestled with this question and further discussed how such a "realized eschatology" relates to

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[1213] *Ep*. X, 1117B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 208-9): Ὥσπερ καὶ θατέρους ὁρῶμεν ἐντεῦθεν ἤδη μετὰ τοῦ θεοῦ γιγνομένους, ἐπειδὴ ἀληθείας ὄντες ἐρασταί, τῆς προσπαθείας μὲν ἀναχωροῦσι τῶν ὑλικῶν, ἐν πάσῃ δὲ πάντων κακῶν ἐλευθερίᾳ καὶ ἔρωτι θείῳ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἁπάντων εἰρήνην ἀγαπῶσι καὶ τὸν ἁγιασμὸν κἀκ τῆς παρούσης ζωῆς ἀπάρχονται τῆς μελλούσης ἀγγελοπρεπῶς ἐν μέσῳ ἀνθρώπων ἐμπολιτευόμενοι ξὺν ἀπαθείᾳ πάσῃ καὶ θεωνυμίᾳ καὶ ἁγιότητι καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀγαθοῖς.

[1214] Dionysius also devotes time to description of monks both in *EH* 6.3.1 533C and *EP* 8 1084B-1100D. The addressee of the eighth epistle is a certain monk, Demophilus. The Dionysian monk and the relations between monks and clergy is explained in, R. Roques, "Éléments pour une théologie de l'état monastique chez Denys l'Aréopagite", in Théologie de la vie monastique (Paris:1961) 283-314, esp. 297-304.

expectations associated with the future, especially with regard to the New Testament.[1215] One of the foremost representatives, C.H. Dodd, speaks of eschatology in the process of being realised in *Parables of the Kingdom*, leaving open what the kingdom might be.[1216] This study that was first published in 1935, opened a new era in the study of the parables of Jesus. The idea is that Jesus' references to the kingdom of God meant a present reality rather than a future apocalypse. The eschatological passages in the New Testament are not seen as references to the future, but instead as references to the ministry of Jesus and his lasting legacy. Eschatology is therefore not the end of the world, but its rebirth instituted by Jesus and continued by his disciples, a historical (rather than transhistorical) phenomenon. Those holding this view generally dismiss end times theories, believing them to be irrelevant; they hold that what Jesus said and did, and told his disciples to do likewise, are of greater significance than any messianic expectations.[1217] The idea is that eschatology should be about being engaged in the process of becoming.

This theory of a realized eschatology is, alongside future eschatological expectations, pervasive in large parts of early Christian literature.[1218] We find the theme in many of the New Testament texts, but also later in Origen (d. 256) and in the emerging monastic movement of the 300s and beyond.[1219] In the monastic tradition, the ascetic life that monks and nuns aspire to is in a way anticipating life after the resurrection. The discipline of one's

[1215] See Charles Harold Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935).
[1216] Dodd 1961: 43ff.
[1217] See Charles Harold Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935). Realized eschatology as a Christian eschatological theory was popularized by J.A.T. Robinson, Joachim Jeremias, Ethelbert Stauffer (1902- 1979), and C. H. Dodd (1884–1973). Realized eschatology is contrasted with consistent eschatology, which is an exclusive eschatology with future orientation.
[1218] Diognetas contends that Christians are to the world as the soul is to the body, and Ignatius too appears to find some kind of realized eschatology in the passionate *mimesis* of Christ. Also, Chrysostom in his letters to Theodore broaches upon the topic of realized eschatology and makes some rather forceful claims about the existence and nature of hell. For many this remained a manner of gradation: Origen, Basil, Nazianzen and others would still be strongly of the belief that there is a more concrete eschatology at the end of days.
[1219] See, for example, Luke 17: 20-21: "And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." For early monastic eschatology, see Daley, *Hope of the Early Church*, 69-72, 117-120.

own body becomes a way of trying to live an angelic life already here and now. The equation of the ascetic life with "the angelic life" permeates ancient writing about the Christians, and even contemporary scholars often use this as a discourse for the ascetic movement in Christianity. Robin Lane Fox dedicates a chapter to asceticism with the title "Living like Angels" in *Pagan and Christians* and Peter Brown chose the rubric «these are our angels» when discussing Syriac asceticism in his book about late antique asceticism, *The Body and Society.*[1220] From antiquity we find several accounts on the *vita angelica* in early monastic texts, such as the sayings of the Desert Fathers, *Apophthegmata Patrum* (various collections from the end of the 5th century onwards), *Vita Antoni*, *Historia Monachorum.* In Theodoret of Cyrrhus' (d. 458) *Philotheos* it is told about monks who through their asceticism and hard efforts have already become like angels in this life.

This is literature that Dionysius may well have known, and in any case, a mentality that he seems to be familiar with. Dionysius, who is predominantly Christocentric orientated, recommends that in achieving the angelic life we must turn to Christ and give our full attention to his divine life in the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα ζωή).[1221] It is Christ's sacred sinlessness that should inspire us and be our model, so that we may aspire to a godlike condition:

> If we want to have fellowship with him, we must look at his divine life in the flesh and by imitating that life ascend to the godlike and unblemished life by becoming like [this divinity] in holy sinlessness.[1222]

[1220] Lane Fox 1986: 307. See chapter "Living like angels."
[1221] This term may be reminiscence of Romans 8:1; 9.5, and Ignatius mentions this 10 times in the middle recension (considered to be his authentic works). See *Ephesians* 8; 16; 20; *Magnesians* 6; 13; *Romans* in salutation, also in 8; 9; *Smyrnaeans* 1; *Philadelphians* 6. This term is also very common in spurious works so Dionysius' early interpreters may have seen this as a priority term for him. Ignatius was probably an uncontroversial Christological authority who could probably be used effectively against monophysites in particular, being both Antiochene and therefore their spiritual father and also being an undisputedly holy man and martyr.
[1222] *EH* III, 3, 12, 444B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 93): εἰς τὴν θειοτάτην αὐτοῦ κατὰ σάρκα ζωὴν ἀποσκοπεῦσαι τῇ πρὸς αὐτὴν ἀφομοιώσει τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀναμαρτησίας εἰς τὴν θεοειδῆ καὶ ἀλώβητον ἕξιν ἀναδραμεῖν.

Thus, by imitating Christ, we may become God-like and deified. Dionysius here refers to the repetition of Christ's works and deeds, which is the starting point for the transformation of our nature into Christ's nature.

**What happens to the sinners?**

If a properly led life can bring man to the achievement of deification already in this life, what will happen to those who lived a less virtuous life? According to Brian Daley, Dionysius assumes that the possibility of moral change ends with death,[1223] and furthermore that "the sorrows promised to the unholy will have no end (κατ' αὐτὰς ἀνιέροις ἀτελευτήτους ἀνίας)".[1224] The sinners will "leave this life miserably and unwillingly, not being led off to any holy hope (ἐλεεινῶς καὶ ἀβουλήτως ἀποσχίζονται τοῦ τῇδε βίου πρὸς μηδεμίαν ἱερὰν ἐλπίδα χειραγωγούμενοι)."[1225] If indeed the dead can no longer change, Dionysius recognizes the theological difficulty raised by the practice of praying for the dead: Since each one will receive what he deserves,[1226] one is not encouraged to pray for the wicked, because one would not obtain the aim of such an impure prayer, since an unrighteous prayer would be rejected.[1227] Dionysius here refers to scriptures, "You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly" (Jas 4:3).[1228] According to Daley, Dionysius sees prayers for the dead in the liturgy as having a declaratory rather than an intercessory character, as in assuring the living that God will surely reward the just with a share in his own life.[1229] This assumption by Daley is problematic, because elsewhere, in *DN* IV, 35, 736A, where Dionysius treats the question of the merits, he does indeed say that "weakness must not be punished; on the contrary, it must

[1223] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 552D-553B; See Daley 2010: 183–4.
[1224] *EH* VII, 3, 3, 557D; See Daley 2010: 183–4.
[1225] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C.
[1226] *EH* VII, 3, 6-7, 560C-561D.
[1227] *EH* VII, 3, 6-7, 560C-561D.
[1228] *EH* VII, 3, 7, 561D.
[1229] Daley 2010: 184.

be forgiven," but then he maintains that this would be reasonable *only if* one is dealing with what is outside of human capacities; for God has indeed given man knowledge of what is good, and man has his responsibility, thus: "capacity comes from the Good which gives to each what is fitting, as Scriptures say, and, therefore, there can be no praise for any sin in the realm of one's own good, for any turning aside, any desertion, any lapse (Εἰ δὲ ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ τὸ δύνασθαι τοῦ διδόντος κατὰ τὰ λόγια τὰ προσήκοντα πᾶσιν ἁπλῶς, οὐκ ἐπαινετὸν ἡ τῆς ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ τῶν οἰκείων ἀγαθῶν ἕξεως ἁμαρτία καὶ παρατροπὴ καὶ ἀποφυγὴ καὶ ἀπόπτωσις)."[1230] Dionysius maintains that,

> According to the holy Scripture, I know that each one will have their lots in the future in accordance with the life allotted to them here: 'the Lord', it is said, 'has shut the door on him' (2Kings 4, 4 and 21,33/Lk 13,25) and 'everyone will receive good or evil, according to what he has done to the body' (2Cor 5,10) (Ἐγὼ δὲ, ὅτι μὲν ἀμοιβαίαν ἕξει τὴν ἀποκλήρωσιν ἕκαστος, εὖ οἶδα τοῖς λογίοις ἀκολουθῶν. Ἀπέκλεισε γάρ, φησίν, ὁ κύριος κατ' αὐτοῦ καὶ «Κομίσεται ἕκαστος τὰ διὰ τοῦ σώματος πρὸς ἃ ἔπραξεν, εἴτε ἀγαθὸν εἴτε κακόν».)…The hierarch, who is the interpreter of the supremely divine judgment, would never ask for anything that is not most pleasing to God (Οὐ γὰρ ἂν ὁ ἱεράρχης ὁ τῆς θεαρχικῆς δικαιώσεως ὑποφήτης ἐξήτει ποτὲ τὰ μὴ τῷ θεῷ προσφιλέστατα )…Therefore he does not pronounce this prayer for the wicked (Διὸ τοῖς ἀνιέροις οὐκ ἐπεύχεται ) because he would not obtain the aim of the impure prayer (ὅτι καὶ τῆς ἐναγοῦς εὐχῆς ἀποτεύξεται).[1231]

Despite the fact that God loves all creatures, is united with all and offers all share in his own being, the consequence for those who, out of their weak will, choose to reject God, is inevitable; they freely fall away from his ultimate love and grace, and thus also from their own natural finality. So, what we witness here is a discourse that takes into account both God's plan of universal salvation and the hope of deification for man, and, at the same time, more traditional prospects of judgment and eternal punishment.[1232] This is not to say that

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[1230] *DN* IV, 35, 736A (ed. Suchla 1990: 179).

[1231] *EH* VII, 3, 556B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 122).

[1232] *DN* IV, 20 (ed. Suchla 1990: 165): τοις μέν καθ΄υπομονήν έργου αγαθού "δόξαν καί τιμήν καί αφθαρσίαν ζητουσι ζωήν αιώνιον" τοις δέ εξ εριθείας καί απειθούσι μέν τη αληθεία, πειθομένοις δέ τη αδικία, "θυμός καί οργή. To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.

Dionysius claims a complete eschatological exclusion of the sinner, but it rather seems like he means that everyone must be judged, and that no one is entirely condemned in all respects.

Dionysius here seems to be in line with other church fathers from the time of Justin and Irenaeus, who thought of the souls of the departed as in an expectant attitude which was neither heaven nor hell, yet, "while all awaited the final judgement, the godly awaited it in a better place and the unrighteous in a worse."[1233] In *The Communion of Saints*, which gives a history of prayers for the dead in the early church, H. B. Swete refers to Irenaeus who teaches that the souls "depart at death into the place appointed for them of God, and there they abide until the Resurrection, when they will take again their bodies, and rise in the completeness of their nature, as the Lord rose; and so they will come to the sight of God."[1234]

According to Tertullian "heaven is open to none, while the earth still stands – not to say while it is still shut down upon us; with the passing away of the world the kingdom of heaven will be thrown open."[1235] What he describes here is the condition of the soul in the intermediate state (or place). He goes on discussing this in his treatise *On the Soul*: "Shall we sleep away our time there? No; sleep is a state into which the body falls, but not the soul. Even in life the soul can be active while the body is at rest, can suffer when the body feels no pain, and rejoice while the body suffers. So, in the state of the dead the soul may be in pain or in joy apart from the body. Hence there is no reason to doubt that future rewards and punishments may begin in the intermediate life though it remains for the risen life to experience them in their fulness."[1236] Elsewhere Tertullian writes: "The place of the dead is divided, as in the parable, into two regions remote from one another, Hades and Abraham's Bosom. Abraham's Bosom, the abode of the saintly dead, is not Heaven, but it is far above

[1233] Swete 1916: 214.
[1234] Irenaeus, *haer*. V. 31. I f.
[1235] Tertullian, *de anima* 55.
[1236] Tertullian, *de anima* 58.

Hades, an intermediate place of refreshment for the spirits of the righteous."[1237] There is another position or place that has a greater nearness to Christ, according to Tertullian, that is Paradise or the place "under the altar", where the martyrs belong, and where St John saw the souls of those who had died for their faith.[1238] To summarize, we can state that, according to Dionysius and other Church fathers, there was at least a contrast between the circumstances related to the fate of the sinner versus the faithful in the time to come, and this leads us to the next section.

**The vision of the Last Judgement**

One articulation of eschatology, especially in the West since the middle ages, is the "four last things" that Christian faith expects to be the destiny of humans and the end of time: resurrection, last judgment, heaven and hell.[1239] The word itself, which seems to have been first used in Germany in the early 1800s and was imported to the English-speaking world later that century, was given this meaning, to indicate some form of predictive historicism, where events are moving towards some kind of goal.[1240]

Dionysius does not give any account of hell, no juicy descriptions of what awaits the sinner of damnations and sufferings, and he never named the devil, Hades, or Gehenna in any place in the corpus.[1241] His accounts on heaven are also rather few, and he does not seem to treat the second coming of Christ at all. He does however, as we have seen, uphold a certain divergence between the circumstances related to the fate of the sinner versus the faithful in the time to come. We find a similar duality in Paul, an esteemed source for Dionysius, in his thought about salvation: On the one hand, the restoration through Christ is seen as a natural

[1237] Tertullian, *adv. Marc*. iv. 34.
[1238] Comunion of Saints, p. 214.
[1239] Bauckham in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (2007: 307).
[1240] Wright 2019: 131.
[1241] Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998: 96.

fulfilment and a necessity: The spiritual body will succeed the physical one just as the plant succeeds the seed, just as Christ succeeded Adam, as power succeeds weakness, and the imperishable the perishable (1 Cor. 15:47-53). Also, there is a distinction between sinners and saved. The righteous will receive "glory and honour and immorality, eternal life" while the children of perdition will receive "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish" (Rom. 2:7-9). According to Alan E. Bernstein, Paul never threatens the wicked with an eternity of punishment, but instead, he seems to hover between a hope that they eventually will be reconciled with God, and an expectation of their ceasing to exist.[1242] There are in fact a remarkable number of passages in Paul's writings that appear to promise a final salvation of all persons and all things.[1243]

For Hans Urs von Balthasar scripture confronts us with something like a dialectical oscillation between two kinds of absolute statements, both indissoluble in themselves and each seemingly irreconcilable with the other.[1244] On the one hand, we have Paul's statements as quoted in the footnote above, on the other hand we have more ominous verses that speak of a future discrimination between the righteous and the reprobate, and of an eschatological

[1242] Bernstein 1993: 214.

[1243] Some verses are: 1 Corinthians 15.22: "For just as in Adam all die, so also in the Anointed [Christ] all will be given life." Romans 5: 18-19: "So, then, just as through one transgression came condemnation for all human beings, so also through one act of righteousness came a rectification of life for all human beings; for, just as by the heedlessness of the one man the many were rendered sinners, so also by the obedience of the one many will be rendered righteous." 2 Corinthians 5:14: "For the love of the Anointed constrains us, having reached this judgement: that one died on behalf of all; all then have died…" Romans 11: 32: For God shut up everyone in obstinacy so that he might show mercy to everyone."1 Timothy 2: 3-6: "… our saviour God, who intends all human beings to be saved and to come to a full knowledge of truth. For there is one God, and also one mediator of God and human beings: a human being, the Anointed One Jesus, who gave himself as a liberation fee for all…". Titus 2: 11 "For the grace of God has appeared, giving salvation to all human beings…". 2 Corinthians 5: 19: "Thus God was in the Anointed reconciling the cosmos to himself, not accounting their trespasses to them, and placing in us the word of reconciliation." Ephesians 1: 9-10: "Making known to us the mystery of his will, which was his purpose in him, for a husbandry of the seasons' fullness, to recapitulate all things in the Anointed, the things in the heavens and the things on earth…". Colossians 1: 27-28: "By whom God wished to make known what the wealth of this mystery's glory is among the gentiles, which is the Anointed within you, the hope of glory, whom we proclaim, warning every human being and teaching every human being in all wisdom, so that we may present every human being as perfected in the Anointed…". Colossians 1: 19-20: "For in him all the Fullness was pleased to take up a dwelling, and through him to reconcile all things to him, making peace by the blood of his cross, whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens." 1 Timothy 4: 10: "… we have hoped in a living God who is the saviour of all human beings, especially those who have faith.

[1244] Balthasar and Kipp (translator) 2014.

exclusion or destruction of the wicked. We are supposed, according to von Balthasar, to hold the two seemingly "the two apparent antinomies" side of scripture's testimony in a sustained "tension," without attempting any sort of final resolution or synthesis between them, instead waiting on God's charity towards all.

Bernstein further points to *faith* as another criterion that, according to St Paul, decides who shall and who shall not be saved: "The righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all of them that believe" (Rom. 3:22). Only those with faith who accept the message of Christ will be saved. There is also a distinction in St Paul between the saved that God has chosen, and the reprobate that seem to depend all upon God's will, his election made from all eternity, and has nothing to do with one's own efforts (Rom. 9:15-18). According to Bernstein, St. Paul, does not have God condemn men from all eternity to eternal punishment. He does not envisage an everlasting hell, nor indeed any sort of hell.[1245]

Origen also discusses this and the time in which Christ shall come in the glory of the Father with his angels; it will happen when what is written in Paul's verse will be accomplished, namely when "we all appear before Christ's tribunal, so that everyone will receive corresponding to what he has done to the body, either good or bad («ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ βήματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ» δίδοται ἃ ἐπράξαμεν, «εἴτε ἀγαθὸν εἴτε φαῦλον»·)."[1246] According to Origen it is impossible for man to present himself flawless before the tribunal of Christ, and everyone will receive according to his own efforts. This does not mean eternal exclusion of someone from paradise; however, it just means that everyone must be judged. For Dionysius too, the goal of history is salvation of all creation and union with God. Yet, it is highly questionable whether he supported the theory of a universal salvation or *apokatastasis*

[1245] Bernstein 1993: 214.
[1246] Origen, *CMt* XII, 30 (GCS XL, p. 135).

*(ἀποκατάστασις)* as it was formulated in Origen.[1247] Although he acknowledges the restoration of the human soul and body to their original integrity, he makes it clear, as we have seen, that the final divinization will only be realized in those who have shown themselves worthy of God's gift. Each person remains free to achieve God's salvation by following the way of Christ.

Ilaria Ramelli, who argues for Origen's influence on Dionysius, and suggests it may be Origen and his tradition that Dionysius in *DN* I, 4 calls "the theological tradition,"[1248] maintains that Dionysius supported the *apokatastasis* doctrine, which she claims was upheld both by Origen and Paul himself in passages that Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and others referred to as universal restoration (1Cor 15:28 etc.).[1249] Ramelli regards *apokatastasis* as coinciding with the culmination of *epistrophe* in Dionysius, the return of all beings to their Cause, and she points to that Dionysius uses apokatastasis terminology and speaks of the eschatological *paligenesia* (*EH* VII,1,1,3; 7.3.1). She also regards Dionysius statements on "perfection, return of beings to God, and God's goodness and providence as cause of all" as coherent with an apokatastasis vision.[1250] Moreover, she questions the interpretation of *EH* 7, 3, in which Dionysus warns, on the basis of Scripture, that "everyone will receive what he deserves," as this assumption was also admitted by supporters of the doctrine of apokatastasis, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. She argues that "everyone will receive what he deserves" does not exclude that, after due retribution, the eventual apokatastasis can take place. [1251] She further remarks that the same is the case with *DN* 4, 35, in which Dionysius refutes the assumption that "weakness is not deserving of punishment, but instead

[1247] The notion of *apokatastasis* and the influence of Origen upon Dionysius has been discussed at length in Ramelli 2014. It is indeed rather difficult to extract oneself from Origenism even as late as the 6th century. Origen's influence over the Trinitarian debates was beyond profound.
[1248] Ibid. 710.
[1249] Ibid. 712.
[1250] Ibid. 700.
[1251] Ibid. 705.

is pardonable (Οὐ τιμωρητὸν ἡ ἀσθένεια, τοὐναντίον δὲ συγγνωστόν.)." According to Ramelli Dionysius is in line with Origen here, who also thought that each one has free will and must experience all the consequences of its use, and she does not see this conviction contradicting the possibility of an eventual restoration of all.[1252]

Emiliano Fiori, on the other hand, argues in his article "The impossibility of the Apokatastasis in Dionysius the Areopagite," that concepts such as 'universal redemption and salvation, union and commingling' are not to be interpreted as eschatological, but as cosmological concepts in Dionysius.[1253] In *DN* VIII Dionysius refers to salvation and redemption as the present ontological status of the world, not the eschaton, and in places where the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is echoed, such as the use of 1Cor 15,28 in *DN* IX, 5, it is used in the context of the illustration of the divine name "Other."[1254] Ramelli, however, holds that "if Dionysius uses the present, it is because the Godhead is beyond time; it always redeems its creatures from evil, and it will definitely do so in the end."[1255] This is because, "God's action is timeless, now and in the *telos*, because it is beyond time, and the telos will be a passage to timelessness for all the creation."[1256] Dionysius himself tells us that we call God 'Other' "because in his providence God is near to everything and becomes 'all things in all' on account of the salvation of all (ἐπειδὴ πᾶσι προνοητικῶς ὁ θεὸς πάρεστι καὶ «πάντα ἐν πᾶσι» διὰ τὴν πάντων σωτηρίαν γίγνεται)."[1257] This means that God is present in all the distinct beings, in each their individualities and reciprocal otherness.[1258] Fiori promotes what he sees as a crucial point for Dionysius, namely that union with God is not to be understood as a universal *οὐσία*, in which there is no distinctions at all; it is the definite distinctions and

[1252] Ibid.
[1253] Fiori in Pietras (ed.) 2011: 842.
[1254] Ibid.
[1255] Ramelli 2014: 711.
[1256] Ibid. 712.
[1257] *DN* IX, 5, 912D (ed. Suchla 1990: 210); Fiori in Pietras (ed.) 2011: 843.
[1258] Cf. Fiori in Pietras (ed.) 2011.

hierarchical ordering that is forming the precondition for the eschatological sharing in the light in Dionysius.[1259] Furthermore, beings who have deliberately excluded themselves from their hierarchical distinction, will not share in the consummation of their true nature in eternity. [1260] This is because not respecting the distinct position given to them in the hierarchy of being results in evil, one example being *Ep*. VIII where Demophilus is blamed for not having respected his providential hierarchical position.[1261] It is this loss of one's distinct position that is the essence of Dionysius' theory of evil and punishment, and therefore also of eschatological significance.

Dionysius bases his reasoning on God's 'unifying power will', which according to Gen 1:26 will restore humans to a state of unity and to the image and likeness of God, as they were created in the beginning. This "unifying power" realises the unity of the soul by restoring it to its original state of image and likeness of God by means of the movements of the souls that are related to it.[1262] Dionysius also calls this unifying power, 'the universal peace', and he does indeed seem to give some attention to topics such as "restoration that were foreseen from eternity' and 'when God will be "all in all" (cf. 1 Cor 15:28)".[1263] This does not mean a confusion and end of distinctions between rational beings for Dionysius. In *DN* XI, 2, for instance, he says that at the eschaton the union will preserve the distinction of beings, hierarchies will keep their orders, they will be "commingled according to their unconfused unity" (συγκεράννυσι κατὰ τὴν ἀσύγχυτον… ἕνωσιν)". And in the same passage he goes on to say that,

> God is the provider of perfect peace, both universally and in each, and mingles all things with one another in unconfused unity,[1264]according to which they are united inseparably and indivisibly,[1265]and

[1259] Fiori in Pietras (ed.) 2011: 838.
[1260] Fiori in Pietras (ed.) 2011: 842.
[1261] *Ep* VIII, 3, 1092D-1093B.
[1262] Cf. Ramelli 2014: 709.
[1263] *DN* XI, 2, 952A.
[1264] cf. Nemesius of Emesa and Chalcedon on Christ's natures.
[1265] Still the language of Chalcedon.

at the same time each remains stably in its own form without corruption. It is not muddled by mixture with its opposites, nor is its pure and perfect unity marred in any way.[1266]

He is, with other words, here talking of a union in which the determined identities are being kept intact, and in this way he also maintains his notion of a divinely ordered cosmos, *κόσμος νοητός*, and of the manifestations of Good in the world.

**What happens to the Body?**

An important theme in early Christian eschatology is the various notions of a bodily resurrection.[1267] An important early Christian text that addresses the resurrection is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen."[1268] But how do "the dead resurrect"? What body do they have? Paul points out the difference between the present body and the body to be resurrected by comparing it to a seed:

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.[1269]

[1266] *DN* XI, 2, 949C (ed. Suchla 1990: 218-19): ὅτι τῆς αὐτοειρήνης καὶ τῆς ὅλης καὶ τῆς καθ' ἕκαστόν ἐστιν ὑποστάτις καὶ ὅτι πάντα πρὸς ἄλληλα συγκεράννυσι κατὰ τὴν ἀσύγχυτον αὐτῶν ἕνωσιν, καθ' ἣν ἀδιαιρέτως ἡνωμένα καὶ ἀδιαστάτως ὅμως ἀκραιφνῆ κατὰ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἕκαστα εἶδος ἕστηκεν οὐκ ἐπιθολούμενα διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὰ ἀντικείμενα κράσεως οὐδὲ ἀπαμβλύνοντά τι τῆς ἑνωτικῆς ἀκριβείας καὶ καθαρότητος.
[1267] See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) and Outi Lethipuu, *Debates Over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[1268] 1 Corinthians 15:12-13.
[1269] 1 Corinthians 15:36-44.

Paul's parable emphasizes the different nature of the resurrected body, but Paul's text opened up several interpretations of the early Christian writers. One of these is Origen, who used Paul's text to emphasize the different character of the resurrection body, while others used the same text to emphasize bodily continuity instead of discontinuity.

**The body: continuity, identity and transformation**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Dionysius esteems the body and asserts that, with proper purification, it too will enjoy an immortal, divine life. The purified body is to share in the full rewards of the resurrection effected by Christ. Dionysius insists that just as our bodies now share in all struggles of the spirit, so they will receive a godlike and imperishable immortality as their blessed portion:

> Now, the purified bodies which are yoked to and traveling with the holy souls, and have fought together with the souls in their struggles throughout the divine life, will also be rewarded for their efforts in the service of God and receive their own resurrection and the same unchanged steadfastness as that bestowed upon souls. For having been united with the holy souls whose companions they were in this present life they have become members of Christ. They will receive in return the Godlike and imperishable immortality, and blessed tranquility.[1270]

Convinced of the intimate relation of body and soul, Dionysius explicitly says that the body will return to us. The bodies that in a mysterious way became "members of Christ (μέλη Χριστοῦ)" in this life, will, says Dionysius, enjoy the immortality and blessedness of an indestructible unity with God.[1271] Life after the resurrection for man is a Christ-like life of the entire composite human nature, where the body is esteemed and kept intact. As L.M. Harrington correctly notes, Dionysius rejects other possibilities such as: 1) that bodies are

[1270] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553A-B (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 121): τά δέ καθαρά ψυχών ομόζυγα καί ομοπόρευτα σώματα συναπογραφέντα καί συναθλήσαντα κατά τούς θείους αυτων ιδρώτας εν τη των ψυχων ατρέπτω κατά τήν θείαν ζωήν ιδρύσει συναπολήψεται τήν οικείαν ανάστασιν. Ενωθέντα γάρ αις ήνωντο κατά τόν τήδε βίον ιεραις ψυχαις, ως μέλη Χριστού γεγονότα τήν θεοειδη καί άφθαρτον αθάνατόν τε καί μακαρίαν απολήψεται ληξιν.
[1271] *EH* VII, 1.1, 553A-B.

destroyed, 2) that the link between soul and body is broken, 3) that we receive other bodies, and 4) that our bodies will live then as they do now, eating and drinking.[1272] In affirming the resurrection of the body, Dionysius does however do little to describe this future stage of blessedness. He does make it clear though, that becoming itself *one of the members* of Christ (μέλη Χριστού) the body will become deiform, incorruptible, immortal, and blessed (*DN* I, 4, 592BC). How are we to understand this transformation of the body? Dionysius distinguishes the transformation of body and soul and the attainment of holiness which may be had in this life from the more complete bodily and spiritual transformation in the life to come.[1273] When body and soul have been fully transfigured, one shall attain immortality and be "equal to angels and sons of God … and being sons of the resurrection («ἰσάγγελοι γάρ»…«καὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως υἱοὶ ὄντες».”[1274] As human beings, we always remain tied to our bodies in one way or another, but we change and develop new angelic characteristics. As Harrington astutely observes», "this is in fact the very definition of a theophany, when an embodied nature takes on the characteristics of a higher nature without losing its corporality".[1275] Our present, material body thus has an essential role to play in our experience of the divine.

For Dionysius, the body, which the Platonists considered a prison, has been replaced with a more holistic, Christian eschatology, which embraces both soul and body.[1276] For Platonism, the soul and body is placed in separatist categories.[1277] And within the soul, it is only the highest of its three parts, the intelligent or intellectual part (*λογιστικόν νοῦς*), that possesses immorality.[1278] The body is not necessarily seen as evil, but it needs to be kept

[1272] Harrington 2006: 151.
[1273] See *DN* I, 4, 592C.
[1274] Cf. Luke 20: 36; See *DN* I, 4, 592C.
[1275] Harrington 2006: 151.
[1276] See Kallistos Ware in (ed.) Coakley 1997. The extent to which the body served as a psychic prison was a subject of some debate amongst the Platonists.
[1277] For a summary on Platonist vs. Christian attitudes toward the body, see Ibid.
[1278] Plato, *Alcibiades I*. 130c, Burnet, ed. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1901), p. 344. Plato used *psyche* and *nous* pretty much interchangeably.

under control (cf. Plato's *Phaedrus*, 246ab, 253c-254b). The true person is considered to be the intellect or the mind, temporarily imprisoned in a material body that burdens the mind with ties to this material world of change and flux. The disembodied life of the mind was therefore the ideal state, according to Platonic thinking, in view of the intellect alone as eternal; pre-existing the body, surviving the body's dissolution. For Plato death would be understood as the culmination of one's life and "the dissolving of body and soul, by means of their total separation from each other."[1279] Death is seen as the termination of the human body and the final release of the soul from bodily chains and, thus, her liberty is to ascend to the realm of pure spirit. This is the realm of the true life, according to Plato, and is not confined to temporal bodily limits: "For a man who has really spent his life in philosophy is naturally courageous when he is about to die, and he is of good hope that when he dies he will attain the greatest blessings in that other land."[1280] Plato uses the term *appalage* (release, discharge) in regard to the relationship of the soul to the body, and with regard to human death: "We believe, do we not, that death is nothing else than the release of the soul from the body?"[1281] Following Plato, Plotinus, who seemed to be ashamed of being in a body[1282], would argue that the body is a chain and a tomb for the soul, while this present life is incomparable to the incorporeal one. "If then," Plotinus wrote, "life is soul and body held together and death is the dissolvement of these two, the soul can afford both of these. For if there is a life after death, and there is a soul after death, this is good, for she acts better to her own benefit without her body."[1283]

[1279] "This, Callicles, is what I have heard and believe to be true; and from these words I consider this to happen: death, as it seems to me, is in fact nothing other but the dissolving of two things, soul and body from each other"" Georgias, 524b, I. Burnet, ed., Platonis Opera (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1903).
[1280] Plato, *Phaedo*, 63e-64a, Duke et al. eds., pp. 97-98.
[1281] Ibid. 64 c2-8, p. 98.
[1282] Cf. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 1.1.
[1283] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus,* in Plotinus I, Armstrong, p.2.

Death is generally in Platonist dualistic anthropology conceived as a terminal experience that decisively affects the body and the soul of man, bringing about their separation. And thus, it becomes an ideal opportunity for man to accomplish virtue that will manifest the moral meaning of life and reveal the end. For the Platonists death enables the soul to return back to where she belongs, to her pure, immaterial pre-existence. The human soul is released from the captivity in the body into eternity. There does not seem to be a place for bodily resurrection in Plato's thought. Anastasis can relate only to the human soul, who according to Plato, is the "real person", in the manner of transmigration of souls. The future life concept of the "resurrection" of the soul is by means of the transmigration for souls.

In the Platonic *Alcibiades* 1, 130 C it says that "the soul is the man (ἡ ψυχή ἐστιν ἄνθρωποϛ)."[1284] Thus, the deceased continue to live though the liveliness of their souls, which constitutes the genuine being of the "selves" of the departed one. Likewise, in the words to Cebes, Sokrates says "I think, Cebes, that it is by all means so, and we are not misled in making such admissions, but coming back to life is a real fact, and it is true that the living arising from the dead and that the souls of the dead exist."[1285] For Plotinus too, any discussion about resurrection acquires meaning only in the context of a bodiless, immaterial awakening of the soul: "for true awakening is the true resurrection from the body, and not with the body".[1286]

Dionysius, and the other Christian Fathers, would hold an entirely different view on the status of the body, with regard to death and the afterlife. For them the hope was for a bodily resurrection and renewal of the cosmos. Whereas death for Plato and his exponent, Plotinus, provided man with the unique opportunity to "retreat" from the material world, and

[1284] Plato, *Alkibiades I*. 130c, Burnet, ed. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1901), p. 344.
[1285] Plato, *Phaedo 72D*, Duke et al, eds. P. 113.
[1286] Plotinus, *Enneads III*. 6. 6.

to "escape" from the body, Dionysius envisioned an embodied subject, where body and soul are located within the single being, and where one does not exist without the other.[1287] Without the body the soul is indeed in danger of an amorphous existence in which the uniqueness and individual agency of the subject is unimaginable. Dionysius comments on this misconception:

> Among the profane, there are some who illogically think that our bodies go to a dissolution of being. Others believe that the union between body and soul will be broken once for all, since they see it as unfitting for souls to be trammeled with a body in the divine life and blessed lots. Because of their lack of understanding of the divine things, these people do not consider the fact that our Godlike life in Christ has already begun. And there are others who would assign other bodies to the soul, committing injustice, as I see it, to the bodies which have struggled together with the holy souls. They wrongly deprive them of the sacred rewards which they have earned when they have reached the goal of their divine course. And others, again, say that the most holy and blessed beatitude, promised to the saints, is similar to our life in this world, and they impiously claim that those who have become equal to the angels enjoy the nourishment typical of mutable life. None of the sacred men, however, will ever fall into such errors, for they know that when they come to the goal of this present life, they will, with their whole being, inherit the tranquility that makes them Christ-like.[1288]

This view of the body's "unholy" hold over the soul, is as we can tell from the quote above, contrasted sharply by Dionysius, who sees bodies and matter as also created by the good God, and sharing in the resurrection of Christ. Believing that the link between body and soul will be broken, and denying them the sacred rewards which they have earned at the end of the divine race is unfair for the bodies which have shared in the struggles of divine souls; for the purified bodies yoked to the sacred souls will indeed enjoy the reward of the resurrection.[1289] In his treatment of the rites for the dead, Dionysius shows his appreciation of the body by exemplifying how the earthly bodies should receive honor in death:

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[1287] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553A.

[1288] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 121): Τῶν δὲ ἀνιέρων οἱ μὲν εἰς ἀνυπαρξίαν ἀλόγως οἴονται χωρεῖν, οἱ δὲ τὴν σωματικὴν εἰσάπαξ ἀπορρήγνυσθαι τῶν οἰκείων ψυχῶν συζυγίαν ὡς ἀνάρμοστον αὐταῖς ἐν θεοειδεῖ ζωῇ καὶ μακαρίαις λήξεσιν οὐκ ἐννοήσαντες οὐδὲ ἱκανῶς ἐν ἐπιστήμῃ θείᾳ μυηθέντες ἀρχθεῖσαν ἤδη τὴν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐν Χριστῷ θεοειδεστάτην ζωήν. (Ἄλλοι δὲ σωμάτων ἄλλων ἀπονέμουσι ταῖς ψυχαῖς συζυγίας ἀδικοῦντες τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ὡς οἶμαι τὰ συμπονήσαντα ταῖς θείαις ψυχαῖς καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀντιδόσεων οὐκ εὐαγῶς ἀποστεροῦντες τὰ πρὸς τὸ πέρας ἐλθόντα τῶν θειοτάτων δρόμων. Ἄλλοι δὲ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐπὶ προσύλους ἐννοίας ἀποκλιθέντες εἰρήκασιν ὁμοειδῆ τοῦ τῇδε βίου τὴν τοῖς ὁσίοις ἐπηγγελμένην ἁγιωτάτην καὶ μακαριστὴν λῆξιν καὶ τροφὰς οἰκείας ἀλλοιωτῷ βίῳ τοῖς ἰσαγγέλοις ἀθεμίτως ἀπέρριψαν).

[1289] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553A.

The divine hierarch gathers the sacred choir. If the departed were of the priestly rank, he places the body before the divine altar, and begins with the prayer and thanksgiving to God. If the departed belonged to the monks or the holy ones, he places the body near the hallowed sanctuary, at the entrance reserved for the clergy. Then the hierarch begins with prayer and thanksgiving to God. And the deacons reverently chant the odes from the holy Scripture, which are of the same teaching and power. This is after having read the scriptural promises concerning our divine resurrection. Then the leader of the deacons sends away the cathechumens and invokes the names of the holy departed ones. He then judges the man of the same rank, who has recently come to his life's end, to be worthy of commemoration along with them, and he urges everyone to seek the blessed consummation in Christ. Then the divine hierarch goes on with the most holy prayer over him, and thereafter he salutes the departed, and after him those who are present. When all have saluted, the hierarch anoints the deceased and prays for everyone, before he places the body in an honored place along with the other holy bodies of the same rank.[1290]

Since the body shared in the man's journey, it also receives honor in death and burial, and thereby anticipates the resurrection. The central truth that Dionysius affirms in the reverence he gives the body is that human beings are not simply spiritual, but are but are composite in the way they are constituted.

**Transformation of the human in eschaton**

Dionysius says that, at the eschaton, we will share in God's "intelligible gift of light in our passionless and immaterial mind (τῆς δὲ νοητῆς αὐτοῦ φωτοδοσίας ἐν ἀπαθεῖ καὶ ἀΰλῳ τῷ νῷ)."[1291] Describing our eschatological mode of knowing as "passionless and immaterial (ἀπαθεῖ καὶ ἀΰλῳ)," Dionysius is saying that such knowledge does not originate in the senses. This does not mean that matter has been abolished or the body done away. Alexander

[1290] *EH* VII, 2, 556C (eds. Ritter and Heil 1991: 122-23): Συναγαγὼν ὁ θεῖος ἱεράρχης <τὸν> ἱερὸν χορόν, εἰ μὲν ἱερατικῆς ἐγεγόνει τάξεως ὁ κεκοιμημένος, ἐπίπροσθεν τοῦ θείου θυσιαστηρίου κατακλίνας αὐτὸν ἀπάρχεται τῆς πρὸς θεὸν εὐχῆς καὶ εὐχαριστίας. Εἰ δὲ τοῖς εὐαγέσι μοναχοῖς ἢ τῷ ἱερῷ λαῷ κατετέτακτο, παρὰ τὸ τίμιον ἱερατεῖον αὐτὸν κατακλίνει πρὸ τῆς ἱερατικῆς εἰσελεύσεως, εἶτα τελεῖ τὴν πρὸς θεὸν εὐχαριστήριον εὐχὴν ὁ ἱεράρχης. Ἑξῆς δὲ οἱ λειτουργοὶ τὰς ἐν τοῖς θείοις λογίοις ἐμφερομένας ἀψευδεῖς ἐπαγγελίας περὶ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἡμῶν ἀναστάσεως ἀναγνόντες ἱερῶς ἄδουσι τὰς ὁμολόγους καὶ ταὐτοδυνάμους τῶν ψαλμικῶν λογίων ᾠδάς. Εἶτα τῶν λειτουργῶν ὁ πρῶτος ἀπολύει τοὺς κατηχουμένους καὶ ἀνακηρύττει τοὺς ἤδη κεκοιμημένους ἁγίους, μεθ' ὧν ἀξιοῖ τὸν ἄρτι τελειωθέντα τῆς ὁμοταγοῦς ἀναρρήσεως καὶ προτρέ- πεται πάντας αἰτῆσαι τὴν ἐν Χριστῷ μακαρίαν τελείωσιν. Εἶτα προσελθὼν ὁ θεῖος ἱεράρχης εὐχὴν ἱεροτάτην ἐπ' αὐτῷ ποιεῖται καὶ μετὰ τὴν εὐχὴν αὐτός τε ὁ ἱεράρχης ἀσπάζεται τὸν κεκοιμημένον καὶ μετ' αὐτὸν οἱ παρόντες ἅπαντες. Ἀσπασαμένων δὲ πάντων ἐπιχέει τῷ κεκοιμημένῳ τὸ ἔλαιον ὁ ἱεράρχης καὶ τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντων εὐχὴν ἱερὰν ποιησάμενος ἀποτίθησιν ἐν οἴκῳ τιμίῳ τὸ σῶμα μεθ' ἑτέρων ὁμοταγῶν ἱερῶν σωμάτων.
[1291] *DN* I, 4, 11–115, 592C.

Golitzin suggests a better reading is to say that matter and body have become instead "transparent" to the creative energy of God which informs and sustains them.[1292] "No dissolution or evaporation of the body is completed in eschaton. Man will be transformed as a whole."[1293] In his discussion of the future resurrection of the body in 1 Cor 15, for example, Paul describes the future human body with the term σῶμα πνευματικόν, a "pneumatic (spiritual) body" , whereas the present body, which will be buried, is a "psychical body", a σῶμα ψυχικόν. Golitzin refers to Dionysius' understanding of the *visio Dei,* which is a visible and bodily vision of Christ where the corporeal nature is affirmed, first of all by Dionysius' use of a qualifying adjective such as *ὁρατός*, "visible", and his emphasis on the body's involvement in the Transfiguration account in the Gospels (Mt 17:2-8) where the disciples look with their eyes on the unveiled glory of Christ's divinity.[1294] Dionysius also states that body and mind will receive the gift of light in a manner appropriate to each. Dionysius' articulation of the Christian hope is all about regaining unity of all intelligent creatures with God in contemplative knowledge and love.[1295] He identifies the time of eschatological fulfillment as "the regeneration" (*παλιγγενεσία*), a biblical term signifying both the transition of the soul "to an immutable state of steadfastness" and the resurrection of the body to share in the soul's incorruption.[1296]

## CONCLUSION

The present chapter has examined the eschatology in the *CA*. For Dionysius, the goal of all created existence is salvation and union with God. This means to regain the lost unity of intelligent creatures with God, in contemplative knowledge and love, a unity that forms in the

[1292] Golitzin1989: 314.
[1293] Ibid. 315.
[1294] Ibid. 314.
[1295] *DN* VII, 3, 869C; *CH* III, 2, 165A; *EH* II, 392A-C.
[1296] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553B; *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A; *EH* VII, 3, 9, 565B.

creature the likeness of God.[1297] For the human being, this union will mean perfection of body and soul and mind; a transformation of all faculties, as well as the redemption of the bodies of the dead. Their resurrection will be part of a wider transformation of the whole created universe.

In this chapter we additionally looked at certain key-aspects in Dionysius' eschatology, notably bodily resurrection, judgement and the afterlife. This was done in relation to the eschatological views of other patristic fathers and Greek Platonic authors where appropriate. The inclination developed in late Greek classical culture, to think of human life in essentially spiritual terms is, as we saw, rejected in the Dionysian writings. For the ancient Greeks the earthly life is generally seen as less valued than the incorporeal one, and death is what helps the soul to escape matter and achieve its purpose fully. The possibility of bodily resurrection is considered something beyond the capacity of human nature. In Platonism life after death is a welcome discharge out of the bodily bonds that enables the soul to return back to where it belongs, i.e., to its pure, immaterial immortality. According to Plato's dualistic anthropology death is the final release of the soul from bodily chains, and thereby also its liberty and ascent to the intelligible realm. Later, Plotinus argued that the body is a chain and a tomb of the soul. A typical thought for the pagan (Neo)-platonic authors is to perceive death as the termination of human life, and thus as the total separation of body and soul. Resurrection can relate only to the human soul, who is the 'real person', in the sense of transmigration of souls.

Dionysius has, as we observed, a more positive attitude towards the body. His Christian influences push him further than the Greek Platonic thinkers in elevating the body. In *DN* VI he explicitly mentions an afterlife of immortality for our 'mixed' natures as body

[1297] *DN* VII, 3, 869D-872A; *CH* III, 2, 165A-D; *EH* II, 1, 392A-C.

and soul and condemns those who think that resurrection of bodies is contrary to nature. Dionysius insists that the body, which was important in the earthly life, remains so in the afterlife. Just as now our bodies directly share in all daily struggles of the spirit, so "they will receive a godlike and imperishable immortality as their blessed portion".[1298] The reward of the just will correspond to the degree to which one "imitated God" on earth by a "divine and holy life".[1299] As we saw, Dionysius not only opposes pagan beliefs about death as the dissolution of being, or as the final separation of body and soul, he also rejects as equally foolish a totally spiritual conception of fulfillment, the theory of transmigration of souls.[1300] Dionysius' theory of the resurrection of the body clearly reflects the Christian doctrine which affirms that the human being is not simply spiritual, but constituted by both body and soul. In *EH* VII, where Dionysius offers a substantial treatment of eschatology in connection to the description of the Christian funeral liturgy, he identifies the time of eschatological fulfillment as "the regeneration."[1301] This is a biblical term signifying both the transition of the soul "to an immutable state of steadfastness" and the resurrection of the body to share in the soul's incorruption.[1302]

Dionysius' conviction about the resurrection of the body is grounded in a holistic anthropology, which in turn is profoundly connected to a Christology representing Christ as the ideal specimen of body-soul union. Just as Christ's incarnation applies to the whole person, both body and soul, so also does life in the eschaton apply to both body and soul. At the beginning of *DN* Dionysius uses the word "wholly" with regard to the incarnation: Christ became fully human, his "complete" sharing in humanity, allows his resurrection to also be complete in the sense that it applies to both our body and our soul. Salvation, therefore,

[1298] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553B.
[1299] *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A.
[1300] *EH* VII, 1, 2, 553C.
[1301] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553A; VII, 3, 1, 557A.
[1302] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553B; VII, 3, 9, 565B.

likewise applies to the body – with the soul it will be transformed, and eventually take part in the resurrection on the last day.

When examining eschatological perspectives in Dionysius, there is a clear impression that what transcends time is always present: – eschatology is not only about future predictions. Although Dionysius speaks of the rewards of 'the just' as coincident with the resurrection,[1303] he assumes that those who lived a holy life are already "sharing truly in eternal rewards."[1304] A properly led life can bring a human being to deification and eschatological realization already in this life. Accomplishment of salvation (in the complete and whole sense) is indeed sometime in the future, but salvation is already available now, the difference being that something remains for the future until all being is finally brought back to God. For Dionysius the kingdom of God and perfection are present in the tension between an 'already now' and the 'not yet'. It is already now because the historical incarnation of Christ has laid the foundation for the conversion. This is an ascetic process which serves as a constant process during one's life. Through the spiritual life, the Christian is already brought into contact with the power of transformation which leads to deification. But the ultimate goal and true unification is forthcoming. It is the eschatological hope of the restoration of all things in Christ.

[1303] *EH* VII, 1, 1, 553B; *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A; See Daley 2010: 183-4.
[1304] *EH* VII, 3, 3, 557C; *EH* VII, 3, 1, 557A; See Daley 2010: 183–4.

# FINAL CONCLUSION

The present thesis has examined the bodily and psychic *metamorphosis* in the anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite, and the development of the scholarly discussion around his concept of θέωσις, or deification. For Dionysius, *theosis* is a process that involves the metamorphosis of the entire human person into the perfected form of humankind. As a whole, the *Corpus Areopagiticum* calls the human being to the divine life and calls the human being to "imitate it as far as possible". This is so that the human being may "achieve perfection and truly enter into communion with God and the divine things."[1305] This calling is the vital heart of what it is to be human. But it has also been shown that Dionysius' anthropology must be seen in relation to the overall dynamics of his cosmic soteriological vision, and in turn from the perspective of an eschatology that, though not often explicitly stated, is ever-present in his writings.

We have observed how a great deal of the language and the assumptions that underpin Dionysius' thought on deification are symptomatic of Neoplatonism, especially the works of Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus. From the centrality of *henosis* and the language of divine light to the golden chain that leads up and to the divine reality itself, Dionysius' theological thought is Christianity that speaks in a Neoplatonic tongue and thinks in Neoplatonic images. Christian ritual is typified as *theurgy*, its Scriptures as Oracles, and its leaders as theoretic instructors. Still, there are significant departures effected by his Christian asceticism. Both the human body and the human soul are truly divinized for Dionysius, an idea which many Neoplatonic writers would have found spurious, as for them the ultimate divine reality is far removed from the human world, whilst the Christian God descended into it and took physical, human form. For the Areopagite the body is transfigured in metamorphosis, just as the rest of

[1305] *EH* 376A; 392A; 444CD; *CH*165A, *EH* 376A; 392A; 444CD; *CH*165A.

the self. Everything transforms, and everything ascends. Dionysius' theory of *theosis* thus exists as a transformation of Neoplatonism, where *theoria* and *theourgia* lead the believer to transmute into the image of Christ, the Godman, who is uplifted towards the highest form of being before eventually being united with it.

When Dionysius incorporates features of Greek Platonic thought to his own system, he does so by way of bringing forth certain fundamental correctives. In chapter one, we saw how he espouses Neoplatonic notions of unity and multiplicity, and how he applies certain Neoplatonic cosmological structures to his own Christian vision of hierarchy, both in terms of the division into three triads and in its mutual causality of relationality. Dionysius' adoption and transformation of Greek Platonic ideas centres upon his belief in a single Creator, a personal and providential God who out of his goodness and will created all things. This is a transcendent Godhead whose divine presence and activity alone pervades the cosmos, and in which all cosmic beings are grounded as animate expressions of this transcendent Godhead and are in participation with the Godhead. In contrast to the Neoplatonists, Dionysius emphasizes the fundamental difference between God and his creation, and he insists that though beings are derived from God alone, they have no ontological continuity with him. The transformation of Greek thought that Dionysius proposes therefore posits the centrality of the Incarnation and of the saving active theurgies of the historical Christ, moving within and shaping the world. As I have sought to demonstrate, in his appropriation of key Neoplatonic notions, Dionysius has also given expression to a Christian vision of the human being's relationship to God and the human being's attainment of divine likeness and union that is of greater depth and profundity than the Greek thought that originally shaped it.

In chapter two, we saw how Dionysius further emphasized and upheld Jesus Christ as the creator and keeper of the whole hierarchical cosmos. For Dionysius it is the incarnation that is the condition for man's transformation and deification throughout this hierarchical cosmos.

This Incarnation of Christ comes about because of God's love for a fallen humanity. Christ has, through his divine goodness, generosity and philanthropy, given humanity "access" to God; the power to become like God, that is the possibility of assimilation to, and participation in, the divine reality. Participation in the life and activity of God lies in participation in the divine energies, or *theandric activity* of Jesus Christ, who has provided the example of a human life conforming perfectly to God.

I have pointed out that Dionysius had little interest in the ongoing Christological crises of the era. For him, the goal of his doctrine of Christ was not to repudiate one faction or another, but to recenter him at the heart of all things, and to recall him as the being we are all called to imitate, as it is in the Mimesis of the enfleshed Christ that mankind becomes deified and comes to be as one with the divinity that was incarnate in him. Just as Christ was flesh and spirit, so will be the perfected, deified human being. Christ exists as the single closest image we have of the deified man, and of God itself. Where the relationship between humanity and the Trinity is one that remains – for now – relatively distant, the relationship between humanity and Christ is beyond intimate: he is the object of all humanity's desire for perfection, and the perfect image of what each human will become when they reach it. Consequently, the Christian mission is indeed the mimesis of Christ, and the participation in rites initiated by him are indeed the path upwards into the divine. In both body and in soul, Christ serves as the archetype of a divinized human and the earthly symbol of every Christian's eventual goal. Simultaneously, Christ exists as the principle and completion of all hierarchies, and it is particularly fitting that an incarnate deified human being serves in this role: as the ray of light that leads humanity through all the hierarchies into the divine reality itself.

From chapter three on the soul and body, we observed numerous parallels in the Dionysian and Greek Platonic psychology. Like the Neoplatonists, Dionysius is concerned with the purification and ascent of the soul. This is a process which for both traditions culminate

in union with the transcendent deity; a union that is both beyond all knowledge and that also transcends the bodily realm. However, whereas in Neoplatonism the emphasis lies with the soteriology of the human soul, deification for Dionysius applies to the whole human being. For Dionysius human nature is a composite, for a body is "yoked" to the soul (*DN* 856D). The body-soul association constitutes a true union. This view implies salvation for the body as well. Dionysius offers no developed theories of the body-soul association, but rather refers to his treatise on the soul. Nonetheless, something of his position can be known from his refutation of non-Christian doctrines: he rejects the theories that upon death 1) bodies (and souls) "experience a dissolution of being", 2) "the link of body and soul is broken forever (since) it would be inappropriate for souls to be trammeled with a body" upon their return to the divine realm, 3) other bodies are assigned to the soul, and, lastly, 4) "the holy calm of perfect beatitude, promised to the saints, is on level with worldly happiness, and claim that those who have become equal to the angels enjoy the nourishment typical of mutable life" (*EH* VII, 2, 553C).

Having focused on the cosmos, on Christ and on body-soul themes in the first three chapters, there is a natural progression to how Dionysian theurgy and sacramentalism becomes the focus of chapter four. While there are numerous examples of how Dionysian sacramentalism substantially echoes Greek Platonic theurgy, we saw that certain terms and concepts are substantially transformed to uphold, yet also further, vital fundamental Christian tenets. Indeed, it became clear that Dionysius adopts the distinctly Neoplatonic term theurgia to express the full spectrum of the Godhead's providential activity in the created world, but unlike the Neoplatonists he differentiates the dimensions of his soteriological system by distinguishing between the terms theurgia and hierourgia, and thereby preserves the distinction between Creator and creature.

Furthermore, for the Neoplatonists, the cosmos is the whole of the natural world, and thus the symbols employed in theurgic ritual are those deriving from the natural world. For Dionysius, the cosmos consisting of the ecclesiastical and celestial hierarchies, rely on the scriptural and liturgical symbols of the church, by which theurgic ritual operates. In this regard, clearly, the cosmic frameworks of theurgy in these traditions are fundamentally different. Nonetheless, their conceptions of the internal dynamics of theurgy by which beings participate in the procession and return of the cosmos from and to the First Principle are strikingly similar.

As the human is a genuine union of body and soul, and salvation is all-embracing, theurgy aims to return both body and soul to divine likeness and union. Theurgy for the Neoplatonists, we recall, seeks to restore the purified soul, that is, the soul as isolated from the body to the fullness of its role in the cosmos. The soteriological system of each tradition, in each of its dimensions, be it the work of the divine, the sacred rites and symbols, and the human performance of these rites is traced to a single, transcendent divine source. An important distinguishing point that was made, however, was that whereas for Dionysius, the theurgy for the salvation of souls is metamorphized, transformed and conveyed into the cosmos by the incarnate Christ, the source for Proclus and Iamblichus are the gods from the Greek pantheon. For Dionysius it is the Incarnation and humanity of Jesus Christ that is the foundation for all salvation. It is through the transformative power of Christ's historical acts, which is also transhistorical and divine, and holds the sacred power of salvation, that we may be transformed and deified. The redeeming efficacy of these acts is available to us through the sacraments, which are reenactments of the historical acts, and in their essence also living historical acts. Participating in the sacraments is participating in Christ's divine energies, that is in his theandric acts. I have remarked as well that while for Dionysius there is no ascent through the hierarchies as such, God's theophany and the humanity are brought together in Christ, for he

is the source of both the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the salvation of rational beings worked out in a thoroughly incarnate, material way, method and manner.

Finally, in chapter five, I considered the eschatological dimensions of theosis. For Dionysius, upon physical death, the body and soul become temporarily separated. The soul enters into an "invisible realm" where it, in the loss of the body, becomes formless; the body hidden in the earth undergoes a change from its corporeal shape and is withdrawn from its human appearance (*EH* II, 3, 7, 404B). Yet, Dionysius upholds the totality of the resurrection and asserts that both body and soul will be transformed, perfected and led to immortality (*EH* VII, 2, 553A). If, along with the soul, the body pursues a divine life on earth, then the body comes to share in the same "reward of the resurrection" and "the same unshakably divine life as that bestowed upon souls." That is why, explains Dionysius, divine justice links the body to the soul upon the final judgement, for the body has participated in the same life as the soul. Ultimately, united with the soul, the body too becomes a "member of Christ," and comes to enjoy "immortality and blessedness in an indestructible conformity with God" (*EH* VII, 2, 553B). That the body, too, should enjoy immortality, says Dionysius, appeared to antiquity to be "contrary to nature, but (to us) and to the truth it appears divine and supernatural." It is supernatural, he explains, because "while it rises above the visible order of things, it does not transcend the mighty nature of divine life" (*DN* VI, 2, 857A).

Moreover, we saw how Dionysius grasps the transformation or metamorphosis of human beings as a constant process that leads to greater earthly levels of realization. This means a form of "realized eschatology", which refers to the achievement of deification in the here and now, pointing to those who are eschatologically realized in their earthly life. It is because of the historical incarnation of Christ that the foundation for conversion has occured. Through the spiritual life, the Christian is brought into contact with the power of

transformation which leads to deification. The ultimate goal and true unification are forthcoming: it is the eschatological hope of the restoration of all things in Christ.

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