Synesius of Cyrene

Philosophy and poetry “sharing the same temple”¹

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Synesius of Cyrene (c. 370–413), the “Philosopher-Bishop” of the Libyan Pentapolis, is one of the most interesting and enigmatic figures of Early Christianity.² Much ink has been split over matters concerning his religious identity and philosophical beliefs. Far from being unanimous, scholars depict him in divergent ways, as a pagan Neoplatonist assuming the “black mantle” of Christian clergy for political reasons or as a Christian by birth with solid classical education.³ In either case, more than any other figure in the history of the Church, Synesius, a Neoplatonic philosopher but also a talented rhetorician and an inspired poet of majestic metaphysical hymns, combined Hellenism and Christianity, promulgating a powerful synthesis whose legacy still bears fruits.⁴

From Cyrene to Alexandria and Constantinople

Synesius, son of Hesychios,⁵ was born to an aristocratic family tracing its origins back to the Greek founders of Cyrene in (631 BCE).⁶ He had a brother, Euoptius, to whom, judging from their correspondence, he must have been quite close and who may have succeeded him in the episcopate of Ptolemais,⁷ as well as two sisters, Stratonike, wife of Theodosius,⁸ and an unnamed one, wife of Amelius.⁹ At the end of the fourth century CE, the once flourishing city¹⁰ had become “a vast ruin”,¹¹ while traditional Graeco-Roman polytheism was declining under the pressure of the new Christian religion. In this changing world, Synesius appears proud of his illustrious Spartan ancestry and praises the bygone glory of his fatherland. Irrespective of whether he was a late convert to Christianity (notoriously elected as bishop prior to being baptised¹²), as tradition has it,¹³ or a Christian by birth, as has recently been proposed and as is more widely accepted nowadays,¹⁴ throughout his life, Synesius remained faithful to the ideals of the Roman elites’ Hellenic paideia.

Synesius studied philosophy under the famous philosopher and mathematician Hypatia (c. 393–396). Hypatia (c. 360–415), daughter of Theon the Mathematician, had by that time succeeded her father as head of the Alexandrian School. None of her writings survives, but, in light of the available evidence, it has convincingly been argued that, starting from a Pythagorising Ptolemaic background, she renewed philosophy in Alexandria by introducing Plotinian-Porphyrian Neoplatonism to the mathematically centred curriculum of the School.¹⁵ Both
pagans and Christians attended her lectures, an openness which is compatible with Porphyrian
universalism and which sets the context of Synesius’ own synthesis. An illustrious representa-
tive of Alexandria’s long-standing scientific tradition and a true “heir of Plato and Plotinus”, Hypatia must have been a major influence on Synesius. This is also attested by the enthusiastic
way he addresses her, as “mother” and “sister” and “teacher” and “benefactor”, describing her as “the genuine leader of the mysteries of philosophy”.

Synesius’ writings also betray the influence of Plotinus and Porphyry; Iamblichus is clearly
less important. Synesius’ Neoplatonism is reverent of the Pythagorean tradition, which flour-
ished in Alexandria from the first century BCE to the second century CE. His philosophical
theology is indebted to the Chaldaean oracles, the Hermetic corpus and the Orphic texts,
while, in his writings, the imagery of Greek mythology is entangled with echoes from Gregory
of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen and even with Gnostic hints. It is impossible to know the
extent to which this material was related to Hypatia’s teaching, but the fact that no other teacher
is mentioned for Synesius supports this hypothesis.

Synesius’ writings also testify his scientific interests following Hypatia’s lead. Letter 15 (c.
402) contains the first extant description of a hydrometer (an instrument used to measure the
density of liquids), while his treatise To Paeonius (On the Gift) was composed on the occasion
of the offering of an astrolabe to the official (comes) Paeonius. In this work, which he sends
to Hypatia for feedback (Letter 154), Synesius acknowledges her contribution to his own
innovative conception of the astrolabe. Within this framework, he argues for astronomy as
a springboard or passage to “secret theology” but also for the close relationship between
philosophy and politics. Both ideas are reminiscent of the thesis he defends in Dion. The
former view is a Pythagorising Platonic and Ptolemaic adaptation of Plato’s legacy (Republic,
Timaeus), while the latter is also relevant to the historical context as well as to Synesius’
own aspirations at a time when philosophers were invited to play a much more active role
in public affairs. The passage to “secret theology” is comparable to the closing lines of
Letter 139 (to Herculan), where we find a paraphrase of Plotinus’ last words meant as an
exhortation to philosophy. This quotation shows Synesius is familiar with Porphyry’s Life of
Plotinus, while, in light of Synesius’ Hymn II, 88, where gonos ho prōtōgonos designates the
Son, it is clear that the letter’s expression to prōtōgonon theion refers to Intellect. The use of
the Orphic divine epithet prōtōgonos reveals something about the character of the “secret
theology”, meaning perhaps Plotinian-Porphyrian metaphysics read into authoritative texts
such as the Orphic poems or the Chaldaean oracles and, possibly, harmonised with Christian
doctrine. Concerning philosophy and politics, Synesius’ may have seen a stronger connec-
tion between the two than the one posited by his teacher. In Letter 81, he reminds Hypatia
she had nicknamed him “a good for others” (allotrian agathon), thus alluding to his tendency
to engage his mighty acquaintances to the benefit of those in need. He seems proud of this
designation, passing over the possible tacit implication of his being a benefit to others and
not to himself as well, as would perhaps have been the case had Synesius been more of a
philosopher and less of a politician.

Indeed, Synesius started his political career immediately after his studies in Alexandria. He
served as a member of the council of Cyrene and, subsequently, he successfully represented his
homeland in the court of the Emperor Arcadius (395–408). Two of his prose works, On Kingship
and On Providence (or The Egyptian Tale), are connected with his experience in Constan-
tinople, echoing imperial rivalries and the danger represented by Gainas’ complot against the
throne. While being firmly anchored in the historical context, On Kingship should at the same
time be situated within the framework of late antique kingship literature tracing its origins
back to classical authors through the Neopythagorean treatises On Kingship.
On Providence, on the other hand, is more philosophically orientated. Synesius uses political allegory as an opportunity for ethical and metaphysical analysis. On the political level, the rivalry between the ministers of Arcadius, Aurelian and his brother Eutychianus is depicted as the battle between Osiris and Seth–Typhon in the Egyptian Thebes, the Goths being represented as Scythians and Synesius himself as a philosopher supporting the imperial Osiris. The Egyptian Tale evokes Plutarch’s Isis and Osiris, although the scope of the two works is very different. On the philosophical level, divine providence is manifested through the activity of the lower gods, who endorse this task by necessity. Within this cosmic framework, humans are invited to choose the right orientation, avoiding the attacks of humble material demons, an idea which evokes Porphyrian views and which we also find in the Hymns. The emphasis on the choice of orientation is reminiscent of the central claim of Plotinus’ Enneads 4. 8 On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies, where the hypostatic Soul’s necessary descent by divine ordinance sets the framework of the individual soul’s free choice to descent, through falling prey to the traps of this world, or to ascent, through turning its gaze upwards towards Intellect. Like Origen, Synesius, who generally avoids dualism in favour of Plotinian monism, thinks that some souls are assigned a better lot than others, the former being more similar to Osiris and the latter to Seth. The assertion that base passions are stirred by demons also recalls Evagrius, the Christian ascetic, and so does the proposed antidote, the reinforcing of the rational soul. Yet, whatever similarities may one discern between On Providence and Christian literature, On Providence remains a pagan work lacking the slightest reference to any belief peculiar to Christianity.

Does this reveal anything about the author’s religious identity? Interestingly, in one of his Hymns, Synesius alludes to his religious activity during his time in Byzantium. In this context, he mentions the “effective gods” (theoi drastères), who are subordinated to God in the same way in which sacred ministers (hieroi propoloi) obey a King (anax). This sounds more like pagan henotheism rather than Christianity. His pilgrimage to Athens mentioned in Letter 136 could also have had a religious motivation too, although he does not seem to appreciate the ritualistic approach of the Athenian School, which he judges as inferior to Hypatia’s wisdom.

The middle period: philosophical prose

After three “dreadful” – as he complains – years (397–400 or 399–402) in Constantinople, where he was even threatened by necromantic magicians (psychopompoi goètes), Synesius returned to Alexandria to spouse a wealthy Christian (c. 403/4), and then to Cyrene (c. 404), where he organised the city’s defence against invasion. Some of his most representative writings date from that period. It has been proposed that Synesius undertook his scholarly activity at times of political disengagement, but this cannot be confirmed. Rather, he tells us that, to him, “life was books and hunting”, as if politics were but an unpleasant duty from which he would escape as often as possible. He combined his two main interests, books and hunting, by composing – in the manner of Xenophon – a book On Hunting (Cynegetica), now lost. It seems that, like some early poems which have not been preserved either, On Hunting was judged as too light and was not well received by the most demanding among Synesius’ readers, philosophers “babbling about inconclusive syllogisms (asullogistoi sullogismoi)”. In another early work, Praise of Baldness (c. 402), Synesius humouristically defends his own hairlessness by refuting Dio Chrysostom’s In Praise of Magnificent Hai. The sphere is a perfect divine form, and a bald head is more reminiscent of the sphere than a hairy one. So a bald head is superior to a hairy head. For its light and playful character, which gives us a glimpse of the young Synesius’ cheerful spirit, this treatise already testifies to its author’s classical erudition and philosophical training. Porphyry’s On Statues, of which a few fragments survive, may have been
among Synesius’ sources: the references to the portraits of the Gods, especially to the symbolism of Silenus’ bald head, and to the Eleusinian mysteries, as well as the role attributed to the seminul logo within this context, are all reminiscent of On Statues,66 where Porphyry also alludes to the Platonic association of the sphere and of the spherical head with the cosmos.68 Praise of Baldness became so popular as to be refuted by another Praise of Magnificent Hair (fifth–seventh c.), whose anonymous author – perhaps a sophist – adopted, however, a much more serious approach to the topic.49

On Dreams (c. 404) is the most prominently pagan work of Synesius, who presents its thesis as his own innovative contribution to philosophy. We are told that, like Julian’s Hymn to the Mother of Gods, On Dreams was composed “in a single night or rather, at the end of a night” without interruption,51 under some kind of divine inspiration.52 Synesius sent it to Hypatia so that, “after himself”, she may be “the first Hellene to read it”.53 The topic must therefore have been relevant to Hypatia’s area of competence and philosophical interests. It is noteworthy that Synesius identifies himself as a Hellene: if the term Hellen does not simply mean “pagan”, its use could imply that it was possible for someone to be Christian and at the same time Hellene in a sense transcending ethnic identity to indicate the commitment to the values of philosophical Hellenism englobing Christianity as well as other tendencies or “ways”. The treatise deals with the origin of dreams, attributing them to the power of phantasia (situated between intellect and sense perception), and using this assumption to explain their prophetic character as well as their role in the ascent of the soul understood in a Plotinian/Porphyrian manner. The connection between phantasia and prophecy goes back to Middle Platonic readings of Plato’s Timaeus 70e–72d.55 Plutarch of Chaeronia, for instance, associates the imaginative (phantastikon) faculty of the soul with dreams.56 Synesius’ pneuma phantastikon is indepted to Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s discussion of phantasia (as regards, for instance, the distinction between higher and lower phantasia) and, especially, to Porphyry’s theory of pneuma as an intermediary substance which, acting like a vehicle (ochèma, skaphos) of the soul, enables the soul’s association with the body, and on which the images of phantasia are impressed. Being the bearer of base passions and desires, the pneuma is, according to Porphyry, the anima spiritualis to which the effectiveness of theurgy is limited and which is most probably dissolved together with the irrational soul after natural death.58 In Synesius, however, the pneuma (pneumatikè psuchè as distinct from πρώτε ψυχή), which, dwelling in the brain, has an almost Stoicising material aspect,59 is somehow immortalised by being dragged upwards towards Intellect.60 This happens when, through virtue, this subtle body is refined and linked with the higher soul, which, by choosing to turn and gaze upwards (metanoia, “repentance”),61 becomes identified with Intellect. Otherwise, the pneuma is dumpy and heavy, sinking together with the soul in the darkness of matter.62 It is not necessary to suppose an affinity with Iamblichus’ ethereal ochèma, which is not subject to destruction or dissolution, or an influence of Plutarch of Athens in order to explain this discrepancy, which may be Synesius’ own contribution to the theory of pneuma enabling the connection with Christian Resurrection.

His Dion dates from that time as well. It was probably composed in 404, while Synesius and his wife were awaiting their first child. In Letter 154 (to Hypatia), he mentions the two works together, attributing On Dreams to divine inspiration and associating Dion with the need to defend himself against human calumny (loidòria anthrôpôn).64 In this work, Synesius celebrates his humanistic ideal of combination of the active and the contemplative life,65 while arguing for philosophy as the copistingone of paideia in the wake of Plato’s Republic.66 As an orator converted to philosophy, Dio Chrysostom becomes the model of Synesius’ ideal.67 Paideia, with a focus on rhetoric, is a preamble to philosophy and is related to the “love of letters” (philologia) and human-orientated, whereas philosophy unites us with the divine: it is described as a “sacred and secret chant” (melos hieron kal aporrhèton) of Apollo leading the Muses.68 In Letter 105, Synesius...
uses the same terms, *hieron kai aporrhèton*, to describe “what is commonly referred to as Resurrection” (*tēn kathomiloumenēn anastasin*):69 the Christian belief is revisited in terms of philosophical ascent, through the association of the Resurrection body with the *pneuma*.70 The connection of philosophy with Apollo displays Pythagorean overtones,71 while also recalling Plato (*Apology, Republic, Laws*) and Plutarch’s interpretation of the Muses.72 Together with Dio, Plutarch of Chaerona has, indeed, a special place in Synesius’ thought.73 Synesius’ definition of the philosopher is a paraphrase of the musical definition of the just man in the *Republic*,74 while we also find in *Dion* an echo of the notion of *systèma* in Hellenistic pseudo-Pythagorean literature.75 To those who censure his interest in Homer and in rhetorical figures,76 Synesius answers that philology and philosophy are not rivals but rather complementary, the former corresponding to our nature as living beings and the latter to our higher self identified with Intellect, an approach he may have inherited from Porphyry,77 and which is best expressed in his composition of metaphysical hymns. Furthermore, Synesius criticises those who put their trust in “songs and sacred symbols” (*ôidai kai hiera sumbola*),78 opting for these barbarous means instead of the Hellenic ideal of science (*epistèmè*) and of discursive reasoning (*logos*) considered as the neighbouring area and the path (*diexodos*) leading to Intellect.79 As in *On Dreams*, here as well, Synesius is committed to Plotinian/Porphyrian ascent through turning upwards in contemplation of Intellect. In the context of divine impassibility (*apatheia*) and virtue (*aretè*) as a condition for human moderation (*metriopatheia*),80 his words sound like a Porphyrian criticism of Iamblichus’ theurgic approach (insisting on the impassibility of the divine and on ascent through virtue only).81 But Synesius is rather seen as referring to Christian monastic practices:82 Christianity should also adopt the ideal of Greek *paideia*. The philosopher is not yet a bishop, but Christianity already appeals to him.

**Philosophy and priesthood**

Synesius was elected bishop of the Pentapolis (a group of five cities including, among others, Cyrene and Ptolemais) with the support of Patriarch Theophilus (384–412) at some point between 407 and 411.83 He was ordained in 411 or in 412 CE.84 As we learn from *Letter 105* (to Euoptius), along with other reasons (being married, the lack of leisure and of political ability, moral inaptitude), the incompatibility of Synesius’ Neoplatonic views, including the eternity of the cosmos and the preexistence of the psyche,85 with the doctrine of the Church explains his reluctance to accept the ecclesiastical office. He finally took up the bishopric on the condition that he would remain married and that, although, in public, he would cherish myths (*philomythôn*), in private, he would pursue philosophy (*philosophôn*).86 The association of his preaching with the love of “myths” shows that Synesius probably considered the accounts of the Old and the New Testaments as just another mythological universe which, like the Graeco-Roman one, could be interpreted allegorically. This would be a point of conflict with Porphyry, who disapproved of Christian allegoresis.87 The distinction between, on the one hand, Synesius’ personal beliefs as a Neoplatonic philosopher and, on the other, his public speech focusing on the Christian “myths”, could be taken to support the view according to which the acceptance of the episcopate represented a politically motivated concession to the rising power of the new religion, being rather irrelevant to the true religious identity of Synesius, who, in his heart, remained a Platonist devoted to the Porphyrian *religio mentis*.88

However, judging from his two *Homilies*, Synesius’ public speech was not limited to simply repeating the “myths” of the Church. Rather, it alluded to the philosophical Christianity of the *Hymns*. Thus, within the framework of an allegorical interpretation of a Psalm, the first *Homily* evokes the Platonic notion of *logos*, urges for moderation (which, in *On Dreams*, purifies the *pneuma*), mentions the Plotinian ascent to Intellect (*eis noun*), and even the perfection of gnosis
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(teleiôsis gnôseôs) revealed by the Old and the New Testaments. The second *Homily*, where Jay Bregman has seen the trace of Hermetism, is especially reminiscent of the Chaldaean oracles, of Plotinus’ metaphysics of light and, perhaps, of the role of light in Gregory of Nyssa’s mysticism as well.

Despite the freedom to build bridges with Platonism, Synesius was aware of the practical difficulties involved in combing philosophy with the bishopric. Nevertheless, to the extent that such enterprise was compatible with the ideal he defends in *To Paeonius* and in *Dion*, he was convinced that, although a life devoted to philosophy is always superior, the fact that virtue resides in pure intention (*prohairesis*) allows even for priesthood to become not “a decline from the realms of philosophy but a step upwards to them”. The role of *prohairesis*, an originally Aristotelian notion, as well as the allusion to ascent through the term *epanabasis*, are reminiscent of Plotinian-Orphic Platonism and Christianity anticipates Synesius’.

The Hymns

Synesius’ amalgamation of Christianity and Platonism, considered as the highest and most comprehensive manifestation of Hellenism, is best expressed in the *Hymns*. It seems that Synesius’ poetic activity antedates his embassy to Constantinople, extending to the years of the episcopate. In *On Providence*, he describes himself as a philosopher-poet “singing to the lyre in the Dorian manner, which he thought was “the only one” allowing for gravity of character (*ethos*) and expression (*lexis*). Following Porphyry, Synesius takes philosophy and poetry “to be sharing the same temple” (*sunnaoi*) in the sense that they aspire to the divine in different though interconnected ways. To him, the *Hymns* are a bloodless sacrifice, *thûma anaimakton*, reminiscent of the offering of Plato’s *Timaeus* to Athena and bridging the Platonic philosophers’ *noera thusia* for the soul’s liberation from passions with the Christian priests’ *thusias anaimaktos*. The *Hymns* promulgate a Neoplatonic interpretation of Christian orthodoxy through classical and archaic Greek as well as Chaldaean imagery. They enclose three levels of meaning, with Christianity being the intermediary stepping-stone to philosophical truth. In other words, Synesius’ nine *Hymns* invest Plotinian-Orphic Neoplatonism in a Christian garment woven from an eclectic variety of threads. Much ink has been split over the material that Synesius blends together in these majestic metaphysical poems, which undoubtedly constitute his *chef d’oeuvre*: classical poetry, from Homer and archaic lyric to Mesomedes, Greek philosophy, from Heraclitus and Parmenides to Plotinus and Porphyry, Orphism, Chaldaism, Hermeticism, Gnostic echoes, the Gospels, the Cappadocian Fathers (especially Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen) – all these are woven together into Synesius’ Platonic reading of Christianity. The *Hymns*’ Doric language guarantees the solemnity appropriate to the topic, which, as we learn from a 13th-century manuscript in Mount Athos (*Athus Vatopedinus 685*), concerns “the Holy Trinity and various Christological feasts”. A liturgical use should be excluded, but God the Son and His divine hypostasis within the Holy Triad are, indeed, central to the *Hymns*, while, *Hymn VI (VII)* celebrates the Epiphany and *Hymn VIII (IX)* the Ascension.

The aspiration for ascent to God is the Platonic core theme of the *Hymns*. The metaphysical framework of Plotinian *epistrophè* (reversion to the source) is set in *Hymn IX* (I), the earliest and “most classical” among the hymns, in which Synesius borrows not only from Plotinus, Plato, and Empedocles but also from Sappho, Anacreon, and Pindar, to elaborate a protreptic to philosophical poetry. By the “three-stemmed power” (*trikormbon alkan*), which evokes the “flowers of light” (*anthea phôtos*) of *Hymn I (III)* 140 and the “flower of fire” of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, Hypatia’s young disciple refers to the Trinity in terms (68–70) drawn from the
geometrical representation of the hypostases as homocentric circles of light from light (phôs ek phôtos) in Plotinus' Enneads 4.3.17.12–32, a passage to which the formulation of the Nicene creed is also indebted. The following lines allude to the unity and multiplicity of Intellect (Nous), which, according to Plotinus, is both one and many, “like faces which are many on the outside but have one head inside”, and which Synesius identifies with the incarnate Son, mentioning also the Plotinian/Porphyrian role of rhôpetè (93: rheponti desmê) in the association of soul and body. The last part is dedicated to the reverse movement of ascent (103: anagêgios alêk) to Intellect (115: eîbas nouv keleuthôn) as preparation for union with the Father (133: ammigeisa patri), Plotinus’ One.

Within this framework, unlike Porphyry, who had raised specific philosophical objections, Synesius has no difficulty with accepting the Incarnation: through the Soul’s necessary descent, Intellect does in some way “assume a mortal body” (VIII 15: broteon féron demas) by being “poured” as it were on Earth “through a mortal womb” (VI 19: broteas apo nêdous). Jesus of Solyma (VI 4), son of the Virgin of Solyma (XIII 11–12, 29–30), becomes the archetype of Man ascending towards his higher self to be identified with the Paternal Intellect. Standing in for the single head of Plotinus’ many-faced Intellect, He is “god” (theos) and “deceased” (nekus) and “king” (basileus) (VI 25–32), as the gifts of the Magi (incense, myrrh, gold) also indicate: “deceased” as a soul turning its gaze downwards towards matter, a “god” and a “king” (also axax in VI 7; 40) as God the Son identified with divine Intellect considered as the “second King” of the pseudo-Platonic Second Letter 312 e–313 a. God the Father too is described as a King (axax or basileus) in the Hymns,111 echoing Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s identification of the Second Letter’s “first King” with the One. Thus, like Numenius, Synesius identifies the First and the Second King of the Letter with God the Father and God the Son. Yet, in Synesius’ case, the Christian God the Son is the incarnate Logos. Of course, the idea of a God having a son living among men was not unknown to pagans: Heracles, son of Zeus, and Pythagoras, son of Apollo, were the most prominent examples. Thus, Synesius endows the Son with Heraclean features (XIII 4–6; 13–27), while also identifying Him with Sophia, who is reminiscent not only of Gnosticism but also of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, born from Zeus’ head. Following Luke 24.50–53 and John 20.17 – and not the Acts 1.9–11, which would later become the canonical version retained by the Church – in Hymn VIII (IX), the Ascension (through the harmonious Spheres more pythagorico) is seen in close connection with the Resurrection, which, as noted earlier, Synesius understands in terms of ascent to Intellect.

In Hymn I (III), the Father, the source of wisdom (sophia) and of intelligible light (noeron fengos), bestows His seal (sphâgis), which is the password (synthêmâ) giving access to the sacred path (atapost) that leads to God (528–539). The patrikon synthêmâ is mentioned in the Chaldaean oracles as well, while Porphyry refers to purity (hagneia) involving abstinence from meat as a “symbol (symbolon) or divine seal (theia sphâgis)” in both ritual and “intellectual theurgy”. A parallel occurs in Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), where the light-bearing (phôtagôgos) Lord (Kyrios) is presented as a hierophant (hierophantei) who seals (sphâgizetai) the initiate. In Christian contexts, sphâgis also refers to the baptism, so Clement and Synesius may allude to the Christian baptism. Clement borrows from the imagery of Greek mystery cults, whereas in Synesius’ Hymn III (V) 61, patros sphègis denotes the Holy Spirit, which bestows the divine gifts at the Baptism. Thus, the sphâgis in Hymn I (III) may be related not only to Porphyry’s noetic ascent but also to the Christian sacrament seen as a ceremony purifying the pneuma in the same way in which, according to Porphyry, theurgic rites purify the anima spiritualis. The relation with On Dreams is clear here. By itself, the baptism would be neither necessary nor sufficient for ascent; rather, it marks by ritual the crucial moment of the soul’s noetic repentance (metanoia or metameleia), which, however, can also happen without ritual, and which leads to an
“enthronement in the power of light” (600–601: *thronion phôtos en alkâ*), an image for Resurrection reminiscent of Christian (Gospels, Revelation, Nicene creed) and Platonic (myth of Er) imagery.121 Interestingly, the enthronement evokes the *thrôsis* of pagan mysteries122 but also the *symphônemon* in the apse of Byzantine churches, where, from the fourth century onwards, bishops were enthroned and surrounded by the clergy to symbolise the Christ and the Apostles.123 In this context, the direct connection between Intellect and body (I, 567–568) fits particularly well within a Christian perspective, which, through Resurrection, posits a stronger link between corporeality and the noetic realm than Plotinus did.

Most famously, in the *Hymn*, Synesius elaborates his own version of the Trinity doctrine, which combines ideas from the *Anonymous* *Commentary* of Plato’s *Parmenides* with Chaldaean imagery, and which is reminiscent of Marius Victorinus’ more elaborate Trinitarian speculations.124 Scholars are not unanimous on the authorship of the *Commentary*: Pierre Hadot has argued it should be attributed to Porphyry, but, for all its likelihood, this view has been put into question. Alternatively, the anonymous author has been identified as a Middle Platonist or even as a Christian or a Sethian Gnostic.125 The *Commentary* posits a triad consisting of Existence (*Hyparxis*) as an equivalent of the One,126 Intellect (*Nous*), and the One’s/Existence’s external Power, which is situated between Existence and Intellect, acting as an intermediate. Each of the three terms of the triad is present at each of the three levels, so that an ennead (three successive triads) results. Synesius interprets the *Commentary’s* (first) intelligible triad *Hyparxis-Dunamis-Nous* as the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son respectively, so that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, as in the Nicene *Symbolon* (*ek toû patros ekporeuomenon*). Augustine understands a Porphyrian doctrine related to the interpretation of the Chaldaean Oracles and also known by Lydus127 in a similar way, by taking Porphyry’s three gods, the Father, the Intermediate entity (*horum medium*), and the Paternal Intellect, to be the pagan equivalent of the Christian Trinity.128

Avoiding confusion with the *pneuma-ochêma*, Synesius does not use the Nicene Creed’s term for the Holy Spirit (*Hagion pneuma*), but opts for (*Hagia* *Pnoia*).129 However, in *Hymn* I (III), he evokes the Father as *pneumatoerôn*, “creator of the Spirit” (169). To describe the procession, he does not use the Orthodox terminology of *ekporeusis*, but rather *prothrôsis*130 or (*pro)rheîs131 or, more often, the Plotinian/Chaldaean132 (*pro)chusis* and (*pro)chein.133 Echoing Porphyry’s *medium*, Synesius describes the immaculate (III 64: *achrantos*) *Hagia Pnoia*, the Father’s *boulâ*,134 as the “intermediate principle” (II 97: *mesata arche*; III 54: *mesa*) sharing the throne (III 53: *sunthôkon*) of the Father and of the Son, and as the “centre” (I 99–100; III 65: *kentron*) of both the Father and the Son, thus probably alluding to its middle place in both the first and the third triads. The *Hagia Pnoia* is the Son’s “mother (*matér*),135 sister (*gnôta*), daughter (*thugatêr*)” (II 101–103): “mother” because Intellect/the Son is begotten through the Spirit; “sister” because the Father is the source of both the Spirit and the Son; “daughter” because the Son and the Father are united. Among others, the *Hymn* celebrate the Father as: “One prior to the One” (I 149: *hen henos pros toû noètos*; *agathôn agathon* (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* andPlotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Plotinus’ and Porphyry’s One as *proaiônion* Aiônes (II 65); “Father of the *aiôn*” (II 71) – a designation reminiscent of both the Gnostic *Aiônes* and Pl...
sometimes, together – in the *Hymns*, may pay a tribute to the Pythagorean oath, to which Synesius alludes in the *Letters*, or to Empedocles’ *rhizômata*, substituting the Pythagorean/Empedoclean fourness with the unity of the Trinity. Like the Son, who is begotten by the Father through the Spirit, the Spirit is “God from God” (II 111: *theos ek theoû*), in accordance with the formulation of the Nicene Creed concerning the Son. Once again, Synesius underlines the autonomy and equality as well as the unity of the three hypostases within the Trinity: God is “a Monad (*monas*) albeit a Trinity (*trias*), a Monad that remains (*menei*) and a Trinity” (II 117–119), a statement remarkably close to Gregory of Nazianzus’ Trinitarianism in *Oration* 39, 11. Like Gregory, Synesius defends Trinitarian orthodoxy against Sabellius’ reductionism (*sunhairesis*) and Arius’ division (*dihairesis*), which are both, the Nazianzen notes, equally impious. Synesius’ anti-Arianism in the *Hymns* is also closely connected with his opposition to Eunomius’ Aristotelising views, which Gregory of Nyssa had also famously refuted in his books *Against Eunomius*.

As in *Homily II*, divine light (*phâos* or *phengos*) as opposed to the darkness of matter has a central place in the *Hymns*. Following Plotinus, matter (*hyla*) is generally described as non-being (for instance: I 92: *eidôlocharès*) and primary evil. It is compared to the destructive waves of a perturbed deep sea or even, echoing Plato’s *Phaedo* 90c, to the changing waters of Euripus, which meander the furthest away possible from the “source of goodness” (*agathorhrytos paga*) of IX 129. Earthly life itself to the extent that it bears the darkling mark of matter (I 550–551: *dnoferan kîlidan hylas*) is depicted as a sea. The marine imagery of the *Hymns* recalls especially Porphyry’s allegorical interpretation of the Homeric sea as depicting “the material substance” (*hê ulikè sustasis*), following Numenius. Sometimes, Synesius’ Plotinian monism slides towards an unconscious dualism reminiscent of Gnostic tendencies but also of Middle Platonic antecedents. Thus, in *Hymn* I (III), an active role of enchanting (575–576) and of offering ambiguous gifts (690–691) is attributed to matter, while *Hymn* IX (I) refers to the “voracious bark” of matter, which evokes the “soul-devouring dogs” and the “chthonian dog” mentioned elsewhere in the *Hymns*. However, this does not mean that the cosmos is evil, as the Gnostics believed; rather, the goodness and the beauty of the material universe are celebrated in the *Hymns*: the Incarnation through divine Economy purifies (*ekathèreo*) the Earth, the sea and the air in a powerful image (VI 33–39) reversing the description of the fall of Empedocles’ “exile from the gods”, whom the elements and the parts of the world despise and expel to one another.

The cosmos is not only good but also eternal. The thesis of the eternity of the cosmos, known from *Letter 105* and *On Providence*, is clearly formulated in *Hymn* I (III) 309–332, where it is combined with the Stoicising idea of eternal recurrence (*kuklos aïdios*). The formulation of *Hymn* I (II) 314–315 and 323–325 clearly evokes Plato’s *Timaeus* 38d and 32c. Thus, Synesius endorses the allegorical interpretation of the dialogue, as Porphyry had done against Atticus, and Proclus and Simplicius would later do against Philoponus: the sensible universe is not created by the mythical Demiurge, but has always been, and will always be, as an eternal emanation of the Highest Principle, the One or the Father, through the hypostases of Intellect and Soul. In *Hymn IV* (VI), Intellect orders the cosmos, but in no means does He create it. Thus, as announced in *Letter 105*, Synesius makes no concession to the Christian doctrine of creation, but remains faithful to the orthodox Neoplatonic view, which traces its origin back to Aristotle. Nevertheless, Synesius’ attitude may be seen in connection with his anti–Arian, orthodox stance: Porphyry’s anti-creationist argument according to which the hypostases act by their mere existence involved that, against Arius and in agreement with Athanasius, there could be no moment when the One or God existed without being the Father, that is, without Intellect or God the Son existing as well. Other Christian thinkers opted for an intermediate
solution, by accepting the eternal creation of the intelligible universe while attributing the creation of the sensible cosmos to divine will. But this was a major modification of Plotinus’ system, which Synesius was not willing to endorse.

**Farewell and reunion**

The *Hymns* are perhaps Synesius’ proudest philosophical accomplishment. Yet, his bishopric’s responsibilities and the calamities of the years that followed his consecration would distract him from philosophy. Synesius’ episcopate was marked by difficulties of all kinds – from disputes between bishops as well as between himself and the Roman praeses to troubles caused by the Eunomian heretics and barbarian invasions – culminating in the death of all his three sons within one year (412–413). Along with his correspondence, two reports known as *Catastases* inform us about his activity as a bishop. The second *Catastasis* depicts the dramatic military situation in Libya in 412–413: the text is filled with despair, while, in the closing lines, Synesius, lamenting the end of Cyrene and the loss of Roman glory, imagines his own blood covering God’s altar.

In the midst of distress, Synesius addresses a sorrowful farewell letter to Hypatia from his deathbed in 413. He weeps for being deprived of her most divine soul and forgotten by his fellow students. In light of *Letter 137*, Synesius probably felt excluded from the bond uniting Hypatia and her students as philosophers living “the life of Intellect” (*he kata noûn zōè*). Here, *Enneads* 1.1 On What Is the Living Being and What Is Man but also *Enneads* 6.4 and 5 On the Presence of Being, One and the Same, Everywhere as a Whole stand on the background. It seems that union with Intellect was an actual practice taken very seriously in Hypatia’s inner circle. Porphyry alludes to a similar practice when he emphasises the noetic bond uniting his true self with his wife Marcella. This precious bond between initiates in the “Mysteries of philosophy” had been broken in Synesius’ case: his office’s responsibilities and his final years’ devastating misfortunes had prevented him from the good life of Intellect.

Could there also be a more literal interpretation of Synesius’ chagrin involving lack of correspondence with Hypatia, and, if yes, what could have been the reason for such distancing? Some decades later, the deal (*homologiai*) of another philosopher, Ammonius Hermeiou, with the Patriarch of Alexandria was criticised by Damascius. The two cases are hardly comparable, but Damascius’ reproach shows that a compact with the Church was likely to be negatively judged by fellow Platonists. Given the circle’s commitment to Pythagorean secrecy, could Hypatia have eventually shared the opinion of those philosophers who accused Synesius of not “keeping his mouth shut”? Could this accusation concern the disclosure of Neoplatonic doctrine? Given the school’s tolerant pluralism and Synesius’ faithful commitment to Platonic principles, such scenarios seem rather unlikely. It seems much more plausible that, at the twilight of his life, Synesius hoped to reunite with his teacher in Intellect, thus finding a last shelter against misfortune and pain. Being Intellect involved a powerful communion of souls transcending the limits of space and time, as in the case of Porphyry and Marcella, but also all the restrictions of the human condition, including suffering and natural death. Thus, Synesius could be true to his promise of “remembering the beloved Hypatia even in Hades.” We do not hear from him anymore.

**Conclusion**

At the twilight of antiquity and rise of Byzantium, Synesius bridges the two worlds: in him, the ancient Greek philosopher meets the Byzantine clergyman and student of ancient philosophy, while his work already conveys the close link that united rhetoric, theology, and philosophy in
Byzantine culture. To the extent that it is legitimate to describe Synesius as a Christian Neoplatonist or, rather, as Christian and Neoplatonist, the emphasis should be put on Neoplatonism rather than Christianity. Synesius' writings are eminently Platonic, especially indebted to Plotinus and Porphyry as well as to a long tradition of Platonic philosophical exegesis of authoritative texts such as the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the Orphic theogonies. While testifying to their author's Hellenic *paideia* and rich classical erudition, they hardly display any knowledge of the Scriptures. Synesius is close to Clement's defence of Hellenism and familiar with the Cappadocian Fathers' philosophical Christianity, but never does he subordinate philosophy to divine Revelation. On the other hand, like Marius Victorinus, he remains faithful to the Platonising Nicene Creed, defending Trinitarian orthodoxy against Arianism and Sabellianism. Although he is not prepared to make any concession altering the Plotinian emanation system to accommodate Biblical beliefs, such as the temporality of the cosmos, yet, by advocating Platonism under a Christian mantle, and through his Platonic allegorical interpretation of Christianity, he defends Christian orthodoxy: in his *Hymnus*, the metaphysical poetry of the calibre of a Parmenides or an Empedocles meets Early Byzantine hymnody.

The discrepancies between Synesius' philosophical theology and the *dogma* of the Church, as expressed in *Letter* 105 and exemplified in his work, do not undermine his Christianity. Rather, they reshape Christian identity, by enhancing its philosophical foundations and by showing the remarkable flexibility of the boundaries set by the *Symbolon* of Nicaea in 325. As Synesius himself seems to admit, his subtle Platonic synthesis was by nature esoteric and exclusive. As such, it was hardly meant to be adopted as the official teaching of the Church. However, his enterprise reveals the universalising potential of Christian orthodoxy, which can even become “a step upwards to philosophy”, while, at the same time, anticipating a long series of Byzantine thinkers, from Leon the Mathematician, Michael Psellus and Ioannes Italos to Georgios Akropolites and Georgios Gemistos Plethon, who, while being Christian, thought it was possible to philosophise in a Neoplatonic mode, “without the Christ” (*choris Christoû philosopheîn*), and yet in agreement with the Christ, as Hypatia had once taught.

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I am grateful to Mark Edwards for his editorial feedback. Our discussions of Synesius over the years have been a source of inspiration. All shortcomings are mine.

**Notes**

1 Synesius, *Letters* 1, 2: σύνναοι.
2 For recent overviews, see Toulouse 2016 (with exhaustive bibliography); Bregman 2015; Seng and Hoffmann 2012. I borrow the expression “Philosopher-Bishop” from Bregman 1982. Synesius of Cyrene is to be distinguished from Synesius the Alchemist, author of a commentary on Ps.-Democritus' dating before the destruction of the Serapeium in c. 390; see Lacombrade 1951: 64–71; Letrouit 1995: 47.
3 For a summary of the different views, see Toulouse 2016: 658–662.
4 See, for instance, Bregman 2016.
7 On this hypothesis, see Lacombrade 1978, IX.
8 Synesius, *Letters* 7; *Letters* 75.
10 Pindar *Pythians* 9. 6 sq.
11 *On Empire* 3, 2–4.
12 Evagrius, Church History 1.15. According to Cameron and Long 1993, he was baptised in 401 (after returning from Constantinople); according to Roques 1987, in 404/3.
13 Letters 66, 365: ἀπόφρους Ἐκκλησίας. For the traditional view, see Bregman 1982. Bregman 1992 points out the role of Hermetism and Gnosticism as links between Neoplatonism and Christianity.
15 On Hypatia, see Watt’s recent reconstruction (2017). Marrou 1963 insists on her scientific achievements. It is significant that both her father (Theon Math. On Ptolemy’s Almagest 807, 4–5: τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἑκατάρην μου ἱππατίκη) and Synesius call her a “philosopher”. Lacombrade 2001 depicts her as neo-Cynic and neo-Pythagorean Platonist. On the special place of Porphyry (as opposed to Iamblichus) in Hypatia’s teaching, see already Bidez 1913: 194; Lacombrade 1951: 49; Bregman 1982: 22; Watts 2017. Cameron and Long 1993: 50–52, have proposed a possible connection with Iamblichean Neoplatonism, but without firm evidence; see also Tanaseanu-Doebler 2008: 184. Feke’s recent monograph (2018) sheds light on Ptolemy’s philosophy of mathematics, which may have played some role in Hypatia’s version of Plotinian–Porphyrian Neoplatonism, since she had edited and commented upon Ptolemy’s Almagest and Handy Tables, probably in connection with her father’s projects. See Bernard 2015: 423–424; Cameron 2016: 191; Watts 2017: 30–31.
16 Simmons 2015; Armstrong 1984.
17 Socrates, Church History. 7, 15, 1.
18 Synesius, Letters 16, 2–4: μήτερ καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ διδάσκαλε καὶ διὰ πάντων τούτων εὐεργετική.
19 Synesius, Letters 137, 8–9: τὰς γνησίας καθηγεμόνος τῶν φιλοσοφίας ὀργίων.
20 Synesius, To Paeonius 4, 15–16.
21 Synesius, To Paeonius 4, 5–10.
22 Synesius, To Paeonius 2.
23 One would, for instance, recall Theo of Smyrna’s On Mathematics Useful for the Understanding of Plato (c. 100 CE).
25 Hypatia herself offered her advice to the Prefect Orestes. Such connections could turn out badly, as in the case of Hypatia’s politically motivated murder by an enraged Christian mob (March 415) or as of Longinus’s execution by Aurelian (273) following Zeno’s revolt.
28 On the Orphic Πρωτόγονος, see Fr. 12, 121, 123, 125, 126, 141, 143, 241 and Vest. 65 Bernabé. For a similar hypothesis concerning the reinterpretation of the Orphic Πρωτόγονος, see Gigi Piccardi 2009.
29 The Plotinian philosopher contributes to the well-being (εὐεργετική) of fellow human beings and of the cosmos through the cultivation of his/her higher self, thus being a benefit to his/herself as much as to others. See Remes 2008.
30 Synesius’ circle included Aurelian, the Prefect of the East (to whom S. addresses Letters 31 and 35 and whom he mentions as a “friend and consul” in Letter 61), Aurelian’s brother Caesarius, and Gainas the Goth. See Dzielska 1995: 29–38; Tanaseanu-Doebler 2008: 15–59.
31 Swain 2013.
32 Thesleff 1965; Gangloff forthcoming.
33 Lozza 2016.
34 Origen, First Principles 2, 9.
35 I thank Mark Edwards for giving me access to his unpublished manuscript on the problem of evil in antiquity, which includes a discussion of On Providence.
36 Synesius, Hymns I (III) 449–469. The “King” evokes the pseudo-Platonic Second Letter 312e–313a, and its Middle and Neoplatonic (Plotinian and Porphyrian) interpretation, on which see Plotinus, Enneads I 8, 2; V 1, 8; VI 7, 42; cf. also II 9, 9; III 5, 8; V 5, 3; Porphyry, Philosophical History Fr. XXI 332e–333b; Origen, First Principles 2, 9.
37 Synesius, Letters 136. See Roques in Garzya 2000: 397–398, n. 17; Kalligas forthcoming. I thank Paul Kalligas for making his text available to me prior to its publication.
38 Synesius, On Dreams 4, 4.
41 He mentions his wife in *Hymns* VII (VIII) 32–41.
45 See Plotinus, *Enneads* IV,3,10–11.
47 Porphyry, Fr. 352, 18–20 Smith.
48 Plato, *Timaeus* 33b; 44d.
49 Edited by Miller (1840). See also Aujoulat in Lamoureux 2004: 33–46.
50 On this work, see Russel and Nesselrath 2014.
51 Plotinus also composes his works in a similar way, “continuously as if he were reading from a book”; see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 8, 4–12.
54 On this aspect, see Gertz 2014.
56 Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 383 F–384 A.
62 In Synesius, *On Dreams* 7, 3, this view is presented as an exegesis of Heraclitus’ 22 B 118 Diels-Kranz. See also 22 B 77 and B 117. Compare with the interpretation of B 77 (and B 62) in Porphyry, *Antro* 10.
63 For a similar hypothesis, see Deuse 1983: 218–230. *Contra* Deuse: Chase 2005, who also draws attention to St. Augustine’s parallels (the Resurrection body as “corpus spiritale”). Watson 1983–1984 sees a Porphyrian origin of St. Augustine’s Resurrection doctrine. This seems to be the case for Synesius too, although Synesius and St. Augustine ignored each other’s existence. Tanaseanu-Doebler 2014 supposes an Iamblichan influence on Synesius’ views on divine divination.
66 On the role of *paideia*, see Op de Coul 2012.
67 On Dio in Synesius, see Seng 2006.
68 Synesius, *Dion* 4, 5; 5, 1.
70 For a comparison between Synesius’ and Gregory Nyssen’s “intellectual” approach to Resurrection as “restoration of our initial status” (*apokatastasis*) within the framework of the fourth century, see Dimitrov 2014: 535–537.
On Apollo and Pythagoras, see Viltanioti 2015: 82–84, 181–189.


Compare Synesius, *Dion* 5, 1 with Plato, *Republic* IV 443c–e, on which see Viltanioti 2015: 145 sq.


See Viltanioti 2019.

Synesius, *Dion* 7.1.

Synesius, *Dion* 8, 1–2.

Synesius, *Dion* 6, 7. As opposed to Stoic *apatheia*. Yet, in Plotinus and Porphyry, *apatheia* acquires the meaning of “liberation from paths”.

See Viltanioti 2017b.


On the eternity of the cosmos, see also *On Providence* 127c–d, 128 Terzaghi. The official Christian view according to which the soul is created by God and immortalised by God’s grace had not been crystalised yet. For instance, Origen supposed a preexistence of the soul within a prior intelligible creation, whereas Methodius of Olympus argued for the soul’s creation after the body. So Synesius’ view was not opposed to any official doctrine of the Church. See Marrou 1963: 146; Bregman 2015²: 532.


See Viltanioti 2019.

See also Tanaseanu-Doebler 2008: 286.


Synesius, *Letters* 147, 12–18.


See Rist 1975; Dal Toso 1998; Peroni 1997; Coakley 2018.

Cherriss 1930; Danielou 1944; Rist 2000. On Gregory’s Porphyrianism (with a focus on logic), see Edwards 2019: 105–108.


Synesius, *On Dreams* 18, 113b–c, p. 105 Terzaghi. See also *Hymns* VIII (IX) 1; IX (I) 5.


Synesius, *Hymn* I (III) 10; Plato, *Timaeus* 21a; 26e.


Gregory of Nazianzus, *Patrologia Graeca* 37, c. 1027, 1227.


Συνεσίου ἐπισκόπου ὤμοι ἔμμετροι εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν τριάδα καὶ εἰς διαφόρους ἑορτὰς δεσποτικὰς. On the manuscript, see Lacombrade 1978: 11, 29–31.


*Chaldaean Oracles*, Fr. 34, 2; 37, 14 Des Places.

Plotinus, *Enneads* VI 5, 7, 10–11.

Plotinus, *Enneads* I 1, 3, 22; II 2, 4, 7; III 2, 4, 38–39; III 3, 4, 37; IV 3, 17, 25; IV, 8, 5, 26; VI 7, 3, 29. Porphyry, *Sentences* 3, 3; 4, 3; 4, 4; 28, 5; 30, 12; 32, 140; 37, 42; 37, 45. See Plato, *Phaedrus* 247b.


Viltanioti 2017b. Porphyry believed the Christ to have been most pious and thus immortalised: Porphyry, *Philosophy from Oracles* Fr. 345; 345 a; 345b; 345c; 346 Smith.

On these kinds of death see Porphyry, *Sentences* 7; 8; 9; 23; 28; Viltanioti 2018.

See earlier, n. 36.

Synesius, *Hymns* I (III) 8, 24, 144, 271, 375, 450, 467, 479, 493, 514, 548, 568, 593, 698, 723; II (IV) 265; V (II) 67; VII (VIII) 33.

Numenius, Fr. 21 Des Places = Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I 303, 7–304, 7 Diehl.

See also Bregman 2015²: 529 n. 24.

Lacombrade 1978: 21; Bregman 2015²: 530. On Heracles and the Christ, see also Simon 1955: chs. 2, 3.
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115 Synesius, *Hymns* I (III) 157, 205, 403, 529, 535; II (IV) 10; IV 11; V (II) 30; VI 15.
116 See especially *Hymns* IV (VI) 5–12.
117 *Chaldaean Oracles*, Fr. 109, 3 Des Places. See also Fr. 2,3 Des Places; Synesius, *Hymns* I 620; 628.
118 Porphyry, *On Abstinence* II 44.3.
119 I borrow the term from Bregman 2015: 534, n. 36.
120 Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* XII 120, 1.
122 On *thronós*, see Edmonds 2006.
123 According to Germanus I of Constantinople (c. 650–733), the bishop’s ascept to the *synthronon* symbolises the Son fulfilling Divine Economy and blessing the Disciples. See Germ. I. *On the Mysteries* 26, 1–6. This is close to Synesius.
126 The equation of the One with *Hyparxis* is hardly reconcilable with the One’s transcendence, but this is precisely the charge raised against Porphyry by Damascus criticising his predecessor’s interpretation of the *Chaldaean Oracles* (Damascus, *First Principles* I 86, 3–15 = Porphyry, Fr. 367 Smith). As Andrew Smith notes, the discrepancy may be due to the fact that Porphyry is doing his best to accommodate the pre-Plotinian material of the *Oracles* with Plotinus’ metaphysics; see Smith 2015: 333. Yet, Porphyry attributes *hyparxis* to the One in his *History of Philosophy* as well: see Cyril, *Against Julian* I 32 c–d, 552 B 1 – C8 = Porphyry, Fr. 223, 17 Smith. The implication may be that the One possesses existence in an absolute manner and more fully than anything else. On this problem, see also Edwards 1999: 79; 83.
128 Augustine, *City of God* 10. 29, 1–3 = Porphyry, Fr. 284 a Smith: “Praedicas patrem et eius filium, quem vocas paternum intellectum seu mentem, et horum medium quem putamus te dicere spiritum sanctum, et more vestro appelas tres deos”.
129 Synesius, *Hymns* II (IV) 75; 98; III (V) 53; 64; V (II) 32.
130 Synesius, *Hymns* II (IV) 123; 137; IX (I) 63.
131 Sen. *Hymns* I (III) 713; II (IV) 203; 295; IX (I) 70.
132 Plotinus, *Enneads* V 2, 1, 15–16; *Chaldaean Oracles*, Fr. 56, 3; 218, 2 Des Places.
134 Synesius, *Hymns* II (IV) 96: γόνιμον βουλαί; 163, 225; III (V) 4–5: ἀρρηταὶ πατρὸς βουλαὶ ἐπισείραν ἅριστον γένναν (the Christ as *Logos* *spermaticos*); IV (VI) 6: βουλαὶ πατρικὰς ἄφραστος ωᾶς; V (II) 59.
135 If *boulai* is translated as “will”, then Synesius would appear to distance himself both from Plotinus’ non-deliberative procession due to the One’s superabundance of power and from Athanasius’ Nicean position according to which the Son is the product of the Father’s nature and not of His will (θέλημα). It would therefore be preferable to avoid confusion by translating *boulai* as “decree”, in accordance with God’s royal status in the *Hymns* (above nn. 36, 106) and with Plotinus’ *Enneads* IV 8, 5, 10–17, where the procession is described as a law of nature (φύσεως νόμος) or as a divine order (θεοῦ καταπέμψαμα). Synesius is borrowing (πατρὸς) βουλὴ from the *Chaldaean Oracles*. See Fr. 37, 1; Fr. 37, 3 Des Places: πατρὸςάν γάρ ἐν ἑν τε λέες τε (intermediate between the Father and the telos); Fr. 77, 2; 81, 2; 107, 4 Des Places. Βουλαίς is also an epithet of Zeus (*Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* 124.7).
136 Cf. Marius Victorinus, *Against the Arians* 1, 50–51.
137 Porphyry, Fr. 232 Smith = Proclus, *Platonic Theology* I 11, pp. 51, 4–11; See also Porphyry, Fr. 223, 7 Smith.
138 Porphyry, Fr. 223, 8–9 Smith.
139 *Chaldaean Oracles*, Fr. 18, 1 Des Places.
140 *Act.* I 3, 8 (281, 10–282, 6 Diels) = 58 B 15 Diels-Kranz: οὐ μά τὸν ἀμετέρα κυριαλα παραδόντα πτερακτῶν, παγάν άνεράσιον φύσεως ρόμοματ’ ἠρίσεν.


**Scholarly Literature**


Synesius of Cyrene


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