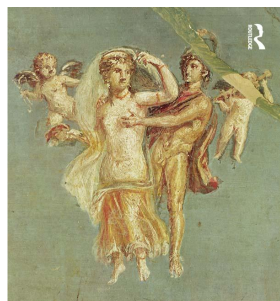
This article was downloaded by: *10.3.97.143*
On: 05 Dec 2023
Access details: *subscription number*
Publisher: *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Ancient Philosophy of Religion

Graham Oppy, N. N. Trakakis

Pseudo-Dionysius

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch20
Kevin Corrigan, Michael Harrington
Published online on: 31 Jul 2013

How to cite :- Kevin Corrigan, Michael Harrington. 31 Jul 2013, *Pseudo-Dionysius from:* Ancient Philosophy of Religion Routledge
Accessed on: 05 Dec 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

20

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

Kevin Corrigan and Michael Harrington

For many centuries the four major works and ten letters that form the *Corpus Dionysiacum*[1] were thought to be by St Denys the Areopagite, a member of the Athenian Areopagus converted by St Paul (Acts 17:34), just as their author represents them to be. Doubts about the authorship were raised as early as 532 by a Synod in Constantinople after a pro-monophysite group had claimed support for their views in the corpus, and later still by Peter Abelard (1121), Lorenzo Valla (1457) and John Grocyn (1501), but they were first widely published by Erasmus in 1504. Hardly anyone doubted a generally Platonic background to the corpus, although some, like Luther, thought it "pernicious": Dionysius "Platonizes more than he Christianizes" (1888: 562). The Neoplatonic character of parts of the corpus was definitively demonstrated in 1895 by Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr (independently): Denys' presentation of evil as a *parhypostasis*, or by-product of reality without genuine existence on its own account, was dependent on Proclus' *De malorum subsistentia*.[2] In fact, the corpus employs language and quotations from Hellenic authors stretching back through Proclus, Iamblichus and Plotinus to Aristotle, Plato and Parmenides. We will probably never know the identity – or gender – of the real author (although many candidates have been proposed[3]), but we can date the public circulation of the corpus approximately to 518–28 since there are references to it in the treatises written by Severus of Antioch in his dispute with Julian of Halicarnassos (which were translated into Syriac in 528 by Paul of Callinicus), since these important works by such a resourceful and mysterious author would hardly have gone uncommented on for long, and since the

1. Hereafter abbreviated as follows: *On the Divine Names* (*DN*), *Mystical Theology* (*MT*), *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (*EH*), *Celestial Hierarchy* (*CH*), and *Letters*. For Greek text (page and line numbers) see Dionysius (1990, 1991). For translation, see Dionysius (1987). For the ordering of the works and letters, see Hathaway (1969).
2. See *DN* 713D–736B.
3. See Hathaway (1969: 31–5), for a survey.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

corpus reveals a thorough knowledge of Athenian Neoplatonism and of elements of Christian liturgy thought to be current in the late fifth century.[4] So St Denys or Dionysius the Areopagite, the supposedly ancient apostolic authority, became the modern Pseudo-Dionysius, perhaps of Syrian birth, misleadingly – and wrongly – labelled as late as 1997 as a 'ruthless' usurper of late Neoplatonic philosophy.

Pseudo-Dionysius' contribution to the philosophy of religion, however, is more original and subtle than some modern assessments have supposed. Originality is, after all, a modern notion. 'To introduce new things' (*kainotomein*)[5] could be a verb of abuse in late antiquity, not a recommendation. Moreover, to borrow from earlier traditions is not to eliminate creativity; charges of syncretism or hybridism often presuppose a standpoint of doctrinal purity that can be incapable of crossing religious boundaries. Dionysius transforms the whole of pagan Neoplatonism (from Plato and Plotinus to Proclus) into a new Christian form, cutting right across the major issues that framed his or her own time: first, the Council of Chalcedon in 451, by answering definitively the question whether Christ had one nature or two,[6] had only exacerbated the conflict between partisans for either side; and, secondly, Justinian's closing of public schools to non-Christians in 529 effectively put an end to living conversation between Christians and others. Dionysius' pseudonym not only gives him impeccable apostolic credentials. It also permits him: (i) to stand outside the monophysite controversy altogether, since the original Denys had died long before it began, and yet at the same time to incorporate language from both sides of the controversy that nonetheless transcends it;[7] (ii) to provide a bridge between Christianity and Hellenism that actually foregrounds the problem of their encounter since the pseudonym derives from a passage in the Acts of the Apostles where Christianity and Greek philosophy/religion are in conflict, yet in living contact; and (iii) to wrap his own identity within that of a mysterious intermediate figure who represents the instantaneous translation of one tradition (Greek philosophy) through a two-way intermediary (Denys) into another (Judaeo-Christianity/apostle Paul and Timothy). Dionysius hides his own identity just as he insists mysteries must be concealed from those who would not understand them (*CH* 140A–B). This subtle pseudonym therefore marks an

4. See Rorem & Lamoreaux (1998: 9ff.).
5. Cf. *DN* 68C; Dionysius 1990: 143,3–7.
6. "… one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, acknowledged to be without confusion … without separation in two natures, since the difference of the natures is not destroyed because of the union, but, on the contrary, the character of each nature is preserved and comes together in one person and one hypostasis …" (*Definition*, Council of Chalcedon).
7. For example, on the one (monophysite) side, as God made man, Christ gave us "a new theandric activity" (*Letters* 4, 1072C; 1991: 161,9–10); and, on the other (Chalcedonic) side, see Dionysius' use of 'unconfused' terminology (see *Definition* in note 7) as in Christ being formed out of love for humanity "by a complete and unconfused humanization" (*EH*, 44C; 1991: 93,16–17).

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

important synchronic moment in the history of the philosophy of religion and of inter-confessionalism.

This intermediary function of the pseudonym also indicates the way the author sees his own task within the corpus and provides an insight into some of the simultaneous transformations at play within it. On one level, Dionysius represents his teaching as a transmission by, first, St Paul and, then, Hierotheus through himself to Timothy. Hierotheus has been thought to be "part of the overall fiction" (Dionysius 1987: 69 n.128), but Dionysius tells us that Hierotheus wrote the *Elements of Theology*, which is the title of one of Proclus' most famous works. Timothy, on the other hand, is identifiable as the recipient of two letters from St Paul and traditionally thought to be the Bishop of Ephesus. Dionysius therefore represents himself as a medium through whom Christian teaching and the Hellenistic wisdom subsidiary to it are transmitted to ordinary Christians like Timothy. On another level, this transmission is to represent how the Trinity or Thearchy (God-beginning), revealed in Scripture and Christ, reaches down in creation and sustenance into all things, without departing from itself, to draw all things back through the various hierarchies of Law (in the Old Testament), the church and sacramental life (in the orders of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*), and the whole of angelic creation (in the *Celestial Hierarchy*) to the 'luminous darkness', beyond discourse or reason, of the Source and present Ground of their existence.

On yet another level, this chain of transmission both embodies and transforms many of the principles of classical Neoplatonism to entirely new purposes. The hypostases (or levels of being) and triads of related terms (such as abiding–procession–conversion/procession–abiding–conversion or again being–life–intellect) are fundamental to Neoplatonism as a means of expressing the ontological derivations and relationality of all beings. All things abide in their cause, flow out of it, and yet return to it.[8] Or – a variation – all things flow out of their cause, become themselves by abiding in their cause, and return to their cause in love and yearning to become more themselves and more than themselves.[9] Or again, within any entity (for example, Intellect as that which includes all intelligible things), there is a triadic internal relationship in which a first moment of unrestricted being is mediated through the outpouring of life into a final moment of fully realized self-thinking intellect and all three are linked together in a dynamic two-way synergy. Here in Dionysius we meet these triads and many more (e.g. in *CH* 208B–D and *EH* 500C–509A, in relation to the sacraments, one of the most famous traditional triads – purification, illumination and perfection). In Dionysius, however, these abstract terms are given concrete reference. They become actual

8. Cf. "Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and converts to it" (Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 35). For different triads, see Wallis (1995: 132–3).
9. For this triadic variation in both Dionysius and pagan Neoplatonism, see Schäfer (2006: 55–74). For being–life–thought, see the still classical work by Hadot (1960: 107–41); for Dionysius see *DN* 816Aff.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

orders of individual/specific living beings ranging from angels to priests, monks and catechumens. They also become definite characters in a living conversation faithful to the spirit of Plato's dialogues. Just as, according to Proclus, Socrates in Plato's *Parmenides* can approach the unity of Parmenides' thought only through the medium of Zeno's less unified thought (*in Parmenidem* 700, in Proclus 1987), so too Timothy – who had found Hierotheus' work to be over his head because of its "comprehensive and unitary enfoldings" (*tas synoptikas kai heniaias … synelixeis*) (*DN* 681B) – needs Dionysius to unfold Hierotheus' thought into a more accessible form (681C). Dionysius' choice of the word *synoptikos* is precise. Socrates uses it in his argument to Glaukon in *Republic* book 7 of the comprehensive, all-round vision to which the dialectician finally attains in the "study" of the Good (*Republic* 537C). As Glaukon is to Socrates, so is Socrates to the Good. And as Aristodemus to Socrates, and Socrates to Diotima, so is Diotima a medium for Socrates in relation to the Beautiful in the *Symposium*. In Dionysius, then, as in some of Plato's most influential dialogues, actual characters help to create a linked universe. Mediation separates and explicates, but also lifts up the ordinary through the less ordinary to what is beyond both.

RELIGION: GOD, THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, THEURGY

Dionysius does not have a notion of religion as such. This is to say, religion is a term derived from Latin with no exact Greek equivalent. The approximate terms Dionysius employs (*threskeia*, worship; *theologia*, theology; *hierourgia*, holy work; *leitourgia*, liturgy; *theourgia*, theurgy) involve a 'theology' of lived experience that does not separate philosophy, practice, prayer and community. Equally, Dionysius does not divide life up into its various domains (social, political, philosophical, etc.) and then add 'religion' as another category. The 'religious' pervades all other categories from the beginning. Philosophy is "divine" (*DN* 684B), involving "the received knowledge of divine things", "purity of mind", "accuracy of exposition", analytic discernment and the unpacking of the implicate, compressed order into a rational, discursive examination of individual detail (684C–D).

Dionysius' theology builds on earlier forms but goes beyond them. As in Plotinus, God's unrestricted existence precedes any determinate essence. However, while Plotinus characteristically describes his God as a One that is beyond even Being, Dionysius' One is the Trinity that is at once unrestricted Being and yet beyond any determinate being (*hyper-ousia*) (cf. *MT* 997A–B; 1991: 141,1, 142,4). It is even 'beyond God' in the sense that God is manifested to us in any determinate way (such as 'providence' or 'goodness', for instance).

This permits Dionysius to develop a subtle positive (kataphatic) and negative (apophatic) theology. With Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, he holds that while we know nothing of the "hidden, beyond-essential God", we can by Scripture (the "holy oracles"), through the overflowing generosity of the Trinity, develop a

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

kind of language or grammar of speaking about God. This language would allow us to take account of all the scriptural evidence of God's manifestation throughout history and also to take seriously the major problems confronting language and thought when we deal with such mysteries as the Trinity or Incarnation. Dionysius envisages this generosity as an outpouring of God's creative and sustaining power at all levels of creation, reaching down as a form of discourse or explication (*logos*), corresponding to the order of his various works (some lost or never written) into a multiplicity proportionate to each level of descent and then rising to greater and greater unity where language falters until having "passed up and beyond the ascent it will turn silent completely" (*MT* 1033c). Alongside our affirmations, therefore, Dionysius insists that none of our conceptions (*ennoiai*) are applicable to God, especially negative or privative conceptions (just as Basil and Gregory had argued against Eunomius' position that 'Unbegotten' was the only proper name for God).[10] Our negations of God are not privations:

> What has actually to be said about the cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all things. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.
> (*MT* 1000b; 1991: 143,2–7; trans. from Dionysius 1987)

Negation in this sense is not the absence of a predicate or a substitution of negative for affirmative images, as if one were to substitute 'God is not life' or 'God is a rock' for 'God is life'. Metaphorical utterances can be simultaneously affirmed and negated in so far as they together convey the failure of discourse to grasp what is beyond discourse. So when Dionysius says that dissimilar similarities are more appropriate symbolic names for God than more conventional titles (*CH* 137b–141d), he does not mean that to call God a 'worm' is more literally true than to call God 'good' but rather that the psalmist (Psalm 22:6; cf. *CH* 145a) who uses such language subverts our conventional tendency to think that we know what we mean by traditional epithets and so hides the sacred, yet points to it anew in a subversive way. Affirmation and negation together push our language to its breaking points, to reveal the limitations of all literal and metaphorical discourse in relation to God, who transcends both.[11]

At the same time, reason is not eliminated by theology. Faith grounds philosophical thought. With Gregory of Nyssa, existential faith precedes essential

10. For *agenetos* (unbegotten) against Arianism (and Eunomianism) implicitly, see *DN* 912c–d. For Basil and Gregory generally as well as on *ennoiai*, see Ayres (2004).
11. Compare *Letters* 6, 1077a; 1991: 164,3–8. See also Turner (1995: 19–49).

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

knowing and yet simultaneously informs it, holding together pagan and Christian yearning in what we might call their 'affective' approaches to mysticism. Hierotheus, Dionysius tells us in *On the Divine Names*, has been enlightened either by his own research or by "more mysterious inspiration" from elsewhere (an intertextual memory of Simmias' conjecture in the *Phaedo* [85c–d] that all knowledge is provisional like a "raft" for sailing the seas of life, "having learned either from oneself or from another" until one finds something better), "not only learning but also experiencing divine things", Dionysius continues (*pathein ta theia*; *DN* 648B – a phrase from Aristotle [fr.15 Rose], St Paul [Hebrews 5:8] and Plato [*Phaedrus*, 238c5–6]; "For he had a sympathy with such matters … and was perfected in a mysterious union with them … independent of any education" (*DN* 648B). Sympathy and affective mysticism, however, do not obliterate human reason, for Dionysius immediately tells us that he wants to present "the blessed visions" of Hierotheus' "most powerful *reasoning* (*dianoia*)". Demonstration and teasing out the implications of an experience or an argument go hand in hand with emotional aptitude, theological passion and ordinary practice. Some scholars have accordingly sought to identify the erotic and emotional strands of such an approach with an anti-intellectualist position. In reaction, others have re-emphasized that Dionysius' affective mysticism occurs entirely within an intellectual tradition.[12] Dionysius' language favours neither option exclusively. This is perhaps not only because mind and ordered feeling go together in the Platonic–Aristotelian tradition,[13] or because mind and heart are roughly coextensive in biblical literature as well as in the Christian ascetic and theological tradition, but also because these categories are anachronisms that cannot be used to characterize the past without distortion.

Iamblichus adopts the word theurgy, 'god-work', together with theology, 'god-word', to describe the inmost reality of contemplative *practice*, on the basis of a hidden sympathy or interconnectedness between material things and the sacred, divine significances resident in them by virtue of divine power itself. He denied that pure human thought or contemplation could bring about union with the divine. What was crucial was the divine gift as well as the performance of certain ritual actions or theurgy, 'god-work', in the belief that one could attain to the divine through divine *philia* in the first place and by means of the incarnation of divine forces themselves in material objects, statues or human beings, as well as by means of the power mirrored everywhere in the universe and in the natural sympathy of all parts, and not just by talking about the gods (*theo-logy*) or by looking at them (*theoria*).

While Iamblichus is clear that all principles of inspiration come from above (*De mysteriis* [hereafter *De myst.*] 3.7–8), human theurgists nonetheless order the

12. For both tendencies, see Turner (1995: 47).
13. This is perhaps why a treatment of pleasure only comes into focus in *Republic* book 9 at the culmination of the arguments of books 1–9 and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* X as a similar culmination of the arguments to that crucial point.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

powers of the universe by investing themselves with "the hieratic role of the gods" (*De myst*. 4.2; Iamblichus 2003: 184,9–10).[14] This last is not a Christian prerogative for Dionysius. The orders of the Celestial and Ecclesiastical hierarchies have their own places 'in proportion to their capacity', as the Neoplatonic dictum has it, but theurgy is primarily God's work in nature and history, not our work. Theurgy complements theology: "The theurgies are the consummation of the theologies" (*EC* 432B), that is, the actual works of God in the New Testament perfect the theological foreshadowings of the Old. Speaking about God, therefore, thinking and reasoning one's way through divine manifestations in nature and community, and celebrating sacramental mysteries are all theurgical acts, not appropriations of divine powers, but forms of actually being made like God or divinization (cf. *EH* 376A1–2; 436B) and means of singing or 'hymning' the actual working (*pragmateia*) of God that makes our substance and life as like to the Good as possible (*EH* 436C).

Consequently, prayer is neither coercive power nor manipulation, but the primary form of free address to any free Other:

> [W]e must begin with a prayer before everything we do, but especially when we are to talk of God. We will not pull down to ourselves that power which is both everywhere and yet nowhere, but by divine memories and invocations we may commend ourselves to it and be joined to it. (*DN* 680D)

Iamblichus too – like Origen and other Church Fathers – had held that prayer changes us, not the divine, but in Dionysius there is no question of investing oneself with any divine prerogative.

Dionysius, in fact, brings new tensions to his theology/theurgy. Created beings are related hierarchically or mediately to God, yet while God establishes the hierarchies, God is immediately related to everything created. All viewpoints somehow have to be held together (on hierarchy, see immediately below). Furthermore, in late Neoplatonism, Iamblichus and Proclus had introduced new Christian-sounding theological triads such as faith–good hope–love as well as a divine providential eros for everything emanating from the One.[15] Dionysius goes beyond this to suggest that God's love for creation actually has an *affect* within God by analogy with our own experience of love. In Iamblichus, "the divine is not brought down into the signs of divination" (*De myst.* 3.18) and "the divine is exempt from external bewitchment (*akelēton*) or affection or constraint" (1.14). For Dionysius, by contrast, God's love is so real that it becomes (as it were) "outside of itself", "is

14. In *De myst*. 4.2, it is not entirely clear whether this refers to pneumata that have no reason of their own (2003: 183,1–14) or to theurgy as a whole (*ibid*.: 184,1–9).
15. See Wallis (1995: 154–5).

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

charmed (*thelgetai*)[16] by goodness, affection and love" and *is* "led down … to dwell in all things" without simultaneously departing from itself (*DN* IV, 13). To suggest not only that we suffer divine things, but also that the Trinity does so in its own hyper-essential way is to go beyond anything in previous thought.

HIERARCHY

Each of Dionysius' two treatises on hierarchy is in some way a pioneer. *On the Heavenly Hierarchy* was not the first Christian work to discuss the nature of angels, but it was the first to provide a complicated, specific and exhaustive account of the ranks within their hierarchy, although it would soon be followed by a competing account by Gregory the Great. The discrepancies between the two would later be noted and resolved by, among others, Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 108) and Dante (*Paradiso* canto 28). Dionysius' second hierarchical treatise, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, was not the first treatise to deal with liturgical theology, having predecessors in Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem and Theodore of Mopsuestia, as Paul Rorem (1993: 118–21) has noted, but its complete and systematic approach to the Christian rites has no extant model.

On the Heavenly Hierarchy answers many minor questions about the angels, such as: what does the word 'angel' mean (ch. 4)? Why are names for particular ranks like 'angel' (ch. 5) and 'power' (ch. 11) sometimes used to describe the whole heavenly hierarchy? Why are human bishops sometimes called angels (ch. 12)? Why are human beings sometimes said to interact directly with higher ranks of angels, skipping over the lower ranks of the angelic hierarchy (ch. 13)? How many angels are there (ch. 14)? What is the meaning of the various symbols used to describe them (ch. 15)? But, beyond answering these subordinate questions, the treatise may be said to have two purposes as a whole. The first is the more famous purpose of organizing into nine ranks the various terms used apparently of the angels in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, grouped into three sets of three: seraphim, cherubim and thrones; dominions, powers and authorities; and principalities, archangels and angels (summarized in ch. 6 and explained at length in chs 7–9). The second purpose is to clarify the nature of mediated contact with God, primarily among the angels, but also among human beings.

Mediated contact with God is necessary because not all beings are of a single rank. They differ in rank as an image of the difference in activities exercised by God in them (508c–509a). His activities are three – purification, illumination and perfection – and so their ranks will likewise be ordered in groups of three. The higher ranks of angels hand down the activities of God to the lower ranks in a completely

16. This is perhaps a memory of Agathon's *Eros* "enchanting the mind of all gods and human beings" (*Symposium* 187e4–5).

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

immaterial manner. The highest rank of human beings – whether they are called theologians, apostles or bishops – also receives these activities in an immaterial manner, "from intellect into intellect" (376C), being worthy, as Dionysius says, of "thoughts that are the equal of those belonging to the angels" (868C). At this point, the nature of the transmission changes. The theologians do not hand down the divine activities intellectually because human beings, or at least the vast majority of them, "cannot extend themselves to intelligible contemplations without mediation (*amesos*), but need an elevation that is their own and natural to them" (140A). The theologians provide this elevation in two ways: by writing the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and by establishing the liturgical rites of the Church. These texts and rites perform the same divine activities that are present in the minds of the angels, but this time they act "in the diversity and multiplicity of divided symbols" (376B).

One might assume that treatises such as *On the Divine Names* and the *Symbolic Theology* would address the first of these two symbolic forms of mediation: the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. And, in a limited sense, this is true. The treatises on naming explain the different ways in which scriptural language can and does address the divine, but the context in which these names can be meaningful is liturgical. The Scriptures do not speak "from intellect into intellect", but in the spatial and temporal diversity of the liturgical rite. Their language is diversified by being spoken over the course of time by one person to another across a space. Only in this way can the Scriptures become the "elevation" that is natural to human beings. Both Scriptures and rites as forms of mediation constitute the subject of the second of the two hierarchical treatises, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

Dionysius does not claim to give advice about what should be done in these rites. He presents his text as a description of the already-existing rites of the Christian Church. He selects for special discussion the rites of baptism (ch. 2), the Eucharist (ch. 3), consecration of the chrism (ch. 4), ordination and activity of deacons, priests and bishops (ch. 5), ordination of monks (ch. 6) and burial (ch. 7). Each rite receives an introduction, then a more or less literal description of what bodily actions take place over the course of it, and finally a contemplation of its meaning. This contemplation often has two parts: an exoteric one for the uninitiated, and an esoteric one for initiates.

There has been some question among scholars as to whether Dionysius' selection and discussion of the rites is a work of description or creation. René Roques has suggested that, by omitting those aspects of the rites that do not suit his Neoplatonic conceptual structure, Dionysius is presenting a system that "does not correspond to the living reality of the church" (1954: 199). Roques directs his argument primarily against the triadic structures of *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which seem more to be constructed by Dionysius than to be found in the existing Church hierarchy. While his triad of clergy – bishops, priests and deacons – does roughly map onto a division described in other texts of the time, his triad of laity – monks, faithful and the impure – does not seem to correspond to any historical formal division in the Church.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

If these triadic structures sometimes feel laid down with a heavy systematic hand, it is also true that the treatise has its decidedly non-systematic side. Dionysius includes the adverb 'reasonably' (*eikotōs*) in the arguments he makes in *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* with a frequency unmatched by any other text of his corpus. The term in its various forms has a long history in the Platonic tradition, beginning with Plato himself, who used it to qualify the reach of the arguments in his *Timaeus* and the *Critias*. In both dialogues, the 'reasonable' (*eikos*) is opposed to the 'precise' (*akribēs*). The speakers in the dialogues, Timaeus and Critias, make arguments that are reasonable but fall short of precision or necessity.

Dionysius uses the term not so much to qualify his arguments, but to qualify the rationality of the rites themselves. It is reasonable that the hierarch be consecrated while holding the Scriptures on his head, because the Scriptures contain everything we can know about God, and the hierarch is set in charge of providing that knowledge (513c). Is it possible to imagine a church where hierarchs were legitimately consecrated without holding the Scriptures on their heads? Yes. Dionysius' justification for this action does not then make the action necessary, but reasonable. The rite conforms to a certain degree of rationality, but it is not governed by reason. In other words, the rite cannot be deduced from a set of rational presuppositions. It must be given within a tradition.

The restriction of human knowledge of God to the context of rites that are rational only in a limited sense, and that are material and so confined to the lower levels of the hierarchy, has made some scholars wonder whether the hierarchical treatises are compatible with his treatises on naming. *On the Divine Names* seems to provide a purely rational means of ascent to God through the simple interpretation of names, while the *Mystical Theology* seems to break with the hierarchic structure altogether in describing a human ascent to God that goes beyond both the senses and the intellect to union with God himself.

It was Jean Vanneste (1959) who answered this question most forcefully for twentieth-century scholarship, dividing the Dionysian corpus into so-called 'theological' and 'theurgical' works, and suggesting that the two categories described mutually exclusive paths to God. The theological works, as the etymology of the name suggests, describe a work of reason (*logos*), ascending through the various forms of name towards a mystical encounter with God (*Theos*). The theurgical works, on the other hand, describe a work of bodily action (*ourgos*), not necessarily a rational action, performed within the institutional structure of the hierarchy so as to gain some contact with God, or benefit from God. The tension between the theological and the theurgical paths is the tension between the rational and the irrational, the immediate and the mediated, the personal and the institutional. This characterization of theurgy as irrational has its roots in the scholarly mood generated by various works of Eric Dodds, who describes the development of liturgical theology in the third century CE as the demise of classical rationality. This strict separation of rational mysticism from irrational liturgy has been criticized by a number of more recent authors, among them Gregory

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

Shaw (1995) on behalf of Iamblichus and Alexander Golitzin (1994) on behalf of Dionysius.

It must be said that the distinction between *On the Heavenly Hierarchy* and *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* on the one hand, and the remaining major works of Dionysius on the other, is to some extent suggested by Dionysius himself. He treats *On the Divine Names*, the *Mystical Theology* and the apparently unwritten *Theological Representations* and *Symbolic Theology* together, as having a single subject matter: the naming of God (1032D–1033D). The two hierarchical treatises are not included in this organizational scheme, but form their own pairing based on their distinctive subject matter: the ranks of created beings below God.

On the other hand, it is not clear that the works are separated by the mediated or unmediated character of the encounter with God they describe. Each hierarchy, Dionysius says, "sacredly enacts the mysteries of its own illumination in ranks and in hierarchic knowledge, and is likened to its own principle, as much as is permitted" (165B). How the problem of mediacy and immediacy arises depends on how we interpret the 'in', when Dionysius says that the action of illumination and the likening to God occurs "in ranks and in hierarchic knowledge". An immediate contact with God would seem to require that the aspirant depart from his own rank and ascend to the rank of God. Such contact would be ruled out by Dionysius' claim that likening to God occurs 'in' ranks, and not outside them. It may be, however, that we draw this conclusion only if we do not think of 'likeness' as the Neoplatonists did. When we look at likeness in a very generally Neoplatonic manner, we see that where two things already of the same rank become like each other, then the same thing is present immediately in both, and the question of mediation does not arise. The union of a lower rank with a higher rank, on the other hand, has a different character. The lower participates immediately in the higher, but in such a way that its participation constitutes an image of the higher, and so is mediated by its very distance from the higher. Only in such a way is its character as an image safeguarded. Dionysius shows this concern to preserve the character of the image with his constant use of "as much as possible" and "as much as is permitted" when referring to the likening of the lower rank to the higher. If this mediation poses a problem, then it is a problem even for the highest rank of angels, who, although they have nothing above them but God himself, nevertheless participate as images of God rather than as God himself. The lower ranks also participate in God himself (immediate participation), but in order to safeguard their character as lower ranks, this participation comes to them through the higher ranks (mediate participation). Neoplatonists as varied as Plotinus (in *Enneads* 1.2.2) and Proclus (in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* 912), would presumably not see this mediated immediacy as a problem.

In another sense, the problem of mediacy and immediacy in the hierarchical works cannot be so easily resolved, but in this case it is a problem for the Dionysian corpus as a whole. It can be found in the so-called 'theological' treatises just as it can in the two hierarchical works. At the beginning of *On the Divine*

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

Names, Dionysius stipulates that he will not "say or conceive anything concerning the divinity that is hidden and beyond being, other than what has been said to us in the holy discourses" (588A). God is beyond what our reason can grasp, and so we should not use reason to discover names for him. We must rely on the names given to us within the historical tradition of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. And yet the divine names or, as Dionysius also calls them, the intelligible names, have as their proper referent the intelligible structures that underlie all created things: being, truth, unity, goodness, and so on. As intelligible and universal, they are accessible not only through the mediation of a particular scriptural tradition, but also to the unmediated use of human reason. Dionysius acknowledges this in practice, if not while accounting for his method, discussing the intelligible names in the language of Greek philosophy and using divine names more common outside the Hebrew and Christian tradition than within it.

The comparable tension in the hierarchical works can be brought out by juxtaposing Dionysius' explicit concern for bodies only as symbols inside the church, with the universal intelligible structure that he says is contemplated through those bodies, a structure that is equally responsible for the bodies outside the church. In other words, the beauty of the intelligible archetypes, explained by Dionysius as the source of the beautiful symbols in the church, is also responsible for the beauty of the world outside the church. Some scholars have resolved this tension by denying its second pole and concluding that Dionysius finds nothing redemptive in the natural world, "an existence entirely sunk in deception and enslavement to the seeming good of the world, the flesh, and the devil", as Golitzin (1994: 158) describes it. This conclusion may resolve a tension that Dionysius himself does not address, perhaps because the tension is bound up so intimately with Christianity itself: the tension between Christ as a historical figure and Christ as a cosmic figure (the *logos* of the prologue to the Gospel of John), between Christ the establisher of the Church and Christ the establisher of creation.

INFLUENCE

The first commentary on the works of Dionysius appeared within a century of the works themselves. This commentary took the form of short paragraphs, or scholia, on particular words or phrases in the original text. The scholia could be as short as one word intended to clarify a term used by Dionysius, or as long as a brief treatise, sometimes going far beyond the context of the original text. In general, the scholia are concerned with showing how Dionysius fully subscribes to the credal statements adopted by the first four ecumenical councils of the Christian Church, while introducing to him a strain of late antique Neoplatonism that does not seem to match perfectly the thought of either Dionysius or the credal statements of the councils. Medieval manuscripts attribute the scholia sometimes to John of Scythopolis alone, and sometimes also to Maximus the Confessor. Although they

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20

may not initially have been written in the margins of a manuscript containing the text of the Dionysius corpus, they soon found their way there, and were transmitted throughout the Middle Ages side by side with the original text.

Each treatise within the corpus exercised its own influence and generated its own set of commentaries throughout the Middle Ages, although in the Latin West the corpus did not begin to exercise a wide influence until Eriugena produced its definitive Latin translation around 860. Perhaps the most influential treatise in both East and West was the *Mystical Theology*, with the limitations it placed on language about God, and its provocative but only briefly described concept of unknowing as the culmination of human interaction with God. Authors influenced by it tended, unlike Dionysius, to enrich the concept of unknowing with language drawn from ordinary human activities. Some, beginning with the Greek scholiast and Eriugena, and continuing most famously with Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, described unknowing as a cognitive activity, a kind of knowing. Others, such as Maximus the Confessor, the Victorine school, and, later, Gregory Palamas and Marsilio Ficino, described unknowing as an affect, akin to or identical with the experience of love.

After it was accepted in the early sixteenth century that the Dionysius of Acts 17:34 did not write the works attributed to him, their influence waned, generating a faint and generally indirect interest among the German Idealists, as well as romantics on both sides of the Atlantic. The corpus resurfaced in the twentieth century, when its pseudonymous character became intriguing rather than repelling for philosophers influenced by 'the death of the author' in literary criticism, and when its description of a God beyond being began to resonate with contemporary efforts to get beyond traditional metaphysics.

FURTHER READING

Andia, Y. de 1996. *L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*. Leiden: Brill.

Andia, Y. de (ed.) 1997. *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident*. Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes.

Ayres, L. 2004. *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Corrigan, K. 2004. *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

Dionysius 1987. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, C. Luibheid (trans.). New York: Paulist Press.

Gersh, S. 1978. *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*. Leiden: Brill.

Hadot, P. 1960. "Être, vie, pensée chez Plotin et avant Plotin". In *Les Sources de Plotin: Dix exposes et discussions*, E. Dodds *et al.* (eds), 107–41. Geneva: Fondation Hardt.

Louth, A. 1989. *Denys the Areopagite*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow.

Schäfer, C. 2006. *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite: An Introduction to the Structure and the Content of the Treatise On the Divine Names.* Leiden: Brill.

Shaw, G. 1999. "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite". *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7: 573–99.

On ANGELS/DEMONS see also Chs 14, 16. On DIVINITY see also Chs 8, 18, 19; Vol. 2, Chs 6, 8. On HIERARCHY see also Ch. 15; Vol. 2, Ch. 4. On NEOPLATONISM see also Ch. 19; Vol. 2, Chs 3, 4; Vol. 3, Ch. 9; Vol. 4, Chs 4, 9. On RITUAL see also Ch. 12; Vol. 4, Chs 9, 20, 21. On THEURGY see also Ch. 16. On TRIADS see also Ch. 19. On THE TRINITY see also Chs 14, 17; Vol. 2, Chs 2, 8, 15; Vol. 3, Chs 3, 9, 17; Vol. 4, Ch. 4; Vol. 5, Chs 12, 23.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 05:37 05 Dec 2023; For: 9781315729633, chapter20, 10.4324/9781315729633.ch20