'Ritual as erotic anagogy in Pseudo-Dionysius: a Reformed critique'.

Alan Philip Darley, University of Nottingham

Abstract.

Martin Luther famously denounced Pseudo-Dionysius as ‘downright dangerous; he Platonizes more than he Christianizes.’ In this 500th year of the Reformation I critically examine Luther’s judgement firstly by exploring the Neoplatonic background to ritual in Dionysius, secondly by presenting a Reformed critique of this background and finally by arguing for a distinctively Christian Dionysius who survives this critique.

Key terms

Pseudo-Dionysius, ritual, anagogy, agape and eros, Neoplatonism, theurgy, Proclus, sacramental theology, Martin Luther, Reformation, theologia cruxis, monophysitism, Syria
Introduction

In Caravaggio’s, *Supper at Emmaus*, the disciples welcome an unknown guest for a meal. Christ is depicted without a beard, so we too do not immediately recognise him, but through the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine the disciples experience the Risen Christ and the artist leaves a space for us to join them in the same experience at the table. Caravaggio’s masterpiece reflects a traditional Christian belief that the previously unrecognised Christ can be encountered through participation in the eucharist, the foremost ‘ritual’ of the Christian faith. This paper explores the theme of ritual through the lens of the late fifth/early sixth century writer, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (henceforth abbreviated to ‘Dionysius’), himself an unknown and controversial ‘guest’ at the Christian table. A young Martin Luther could praise the ‘Blessed Dionysius’ for teaching an ‘ascent by way of denials’ into ‘anagogical darkness’, but after his radical revelation of the meaning of the ‘righteousness of God’ in July 1519, he denounces him as ‘downright dangerous’ because ‘he Platonizes more than he Christianizes.’ In this 500th year of the Reformation I want to reevaluate this judgement by firstly discussing the Neoplatonic background to ritual in Dionysius, secondly by outlining a Reformed critique of this background and finally by presenting an argument for a distinctively Christian Dionysius who nevertheless survives this critique.

1. Neoplatonic ritual in Dionysius.

The unknown author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was first exposed by the humanist scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) as a writer not from the first century, as his name suggested and as was almost universally believed during the Middle Ages, but rather from the late fifth or early sixth centuries. This is evinced by the incontestable dependence of his writings on the Neoplatonist Proclus (412-485), especially the latter’s treatment of *eros* and of evil in *De Subsistensia Malorum*. Valla’s exposé, popularised through Erasmus, made it possible for Martin Luther and subsequent critics to read ‘Dionysius’ as an anonymous Platonist masquerading as a Christian. Consequently historical critics, beginning with H.Koch and Stiglmayer, sought to locate the ritual practices in the corpus within the milieu of Proclean or Iamblichian ‘theurgy’, a form of ritualistic magic which venerated the Chaldean
Oracles as its sacred text. Theourgia carries the double connotation of both ‘divine work’ or ‘making gods’ i.e. divinisation (theosis). Certainly, Dionysius adopts the term a number of times through Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, but both Paul Rorem and Andrew Louth have highlighted the fact that in Dionysius, ‘theurgy’ always refers to God’s work, supremely the work of God in the Incarnation and not to a technique for manipulating gods via ritual (erga) or symbol. Whilst acknowledging Rorem and Louth’s judgment, Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon reply that the concept of theurgy persists in the Dionysian corpus under the synonymous term ‘hierourgia’ (ἱερούργια) i.e. the ritual enactment of divine works. Their point is strengthened by the fact that Dionysius deploys other technical terms specific to the discourse of theurgy such as the divine ‘ray,’ ‘sympathy’ (in reference to ‘Hierotheus,’ possibly a codename for Proclus), and most significantly ‘anagogy’ (ἀναγωγή). The term ‘anagogy’ has both a literal meaning and a mystical meaning. In the Chaldean Oracles ἀναγωγή had acquired a specific reference to the ‘sacrament of immortality,’ a ritual for liberating the soul from its mortal body, described perjoratively as the ‘dung of matter.’

For Dionysius, however, anagogy is tied more closely with the Proclean motif of eros in which the ‘elevative’ cause (anagogou) ‘draws the reverting existence upwards to what is more divine.’ A striking example is the rite of anointing, the true meaning of which is hidden from all but those ‘Divine artists’ and ‘lovers of beauty,’ who, like the heavenly charioteers in Plato’s Phaedrus, ‘gaze solely on conceptual originals. [They] refuse to be dragged down’ toward the realm of ‘counterfeits.’ Here the material world, while not quite Chaldean ‘dung’ is to some extent ‘less real’ than the realm of Concepts. In Plato’s myth the fall of the charioteer caused imprisonment for the soul in the ‘living tomb’ of the body, like an oyster in a shell, but Dionysius chooses to draw out the positive value of the material world from Proclus’ anagogical schema. Here Universal Beauty is recollected in the earthly particulars and beautiful sights and fragrances become theophanies of invisible Beauty and holiness. Dionysius reveals his poetic genius when he writes: ‘Matter, after all, owes its subsistence to absolute beauty and keeps throughout its earthly ranks, some echo of intelligible beauty.’ Anagogy is thus for Dionysius an erotic longing to return from the ‘fallen’ embodiment of history and culture to an original state of perfection.
For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. (*The Celestial Hierarchy*)  

This general principle, summed up in the title of the putative book, *The Conceptual and the Perceptible*, has two particular applications. Firstly, it can be applied to the spiritual meaning of Scripture, which depends on its corporeal or ‘literal’ sense, as a stepping stone to the higher truths. The Transcendent One has thought it fitting to clothe itself with things, ‘derived from the realm of the senses’ as ‘sacred veils,’ in order to accommodate itself to human nature and initiate the divine return. Secondly, it is true of the visible words of the sacraments. Dionysius comments that ‘even if it had no other and more sacred meaning,’ the rite of baptism communicates physical cleansing and therefore purification from all evil. In this process it is the hierarch (i.e. the Bishop) who takes the role of a mediator when he ‘lifts into view’ the things praised through the sacredly clothed symbols of the eucharist, the divine symbol *par excellence*, which, like the *Chaldean Oracles* connects anagogy with ritual. It is no accident that Dionysius prefers the term *synaxis* for the eucharist since it denotes a gathering back to unity from the plurality of the material symbols. Consequently, the twin movements of Divine work (*theourgia*) and human re-enactment (*hierourgia*) in Dionysius are not in competition. Both ideas harmonise with the Neoplatonic schema of *monos, proodos* and *epistrophē*: that is to say, all things begin in God, move out from him and then return to him. It is through the Christian sacraments that Pseudo-Dionysius can ‘baptise’ Neoplatonic metaphysics into the Christian faith.

### 2. A Reformed Critique of Dionysius

Taking his cue from Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation*, Anders Nygren in his classic work, *Agape and Eros*, contrasts the soteriology of this analogical *eros* motif based on the ‘Good seeking good for the sake of the Good,’ with the New Testament soteriology of *agape* which, he argues, is based entirely on the ‘spontaneous and unmotivated’ initiative of the Lover and not on any quality intrinsic to the beloved. As Luther puts it:
Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.47

On the Reformed view, human beings in their fallen state are ‘by nature children of wrath’ (Ephesians 2:9), rather than gods with amnesia. God’s agape is demonstrated in that ‘while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ (Romans 5:8). The problem of the human condition is thus not an ontological one, nor even an epistemological one, but primarily a moral one.48 It cannot therefore be remedied by theurgic rites since salvation is οὐκ εἰς ἐργασίαν (Titus 3:5).49 It is founded instead on the ‘righteousness of God by faith’ (Philippians 3:9) understood as an unmerited gift.50 If eros spirituality is anagogic, agape spirituality is katagogic. It reveals a kenotic descent to live with sinners. ‘No one has ascended to Heaven, but he that came down from Heaven, even the Son of man who is in Heaven.’ (John 3:13).51 Reflecting on this insight Luther writes in a letter to George Spenlein:

Beware, my brother, at aiming at a purity which rebels against being classed with sinners. For Christ only dwells among sinners. For this he came from heaven, where he dwelt among saints, so that he might also sojourn with the sinful. Strive after such love, and thou wilt experience his sweetest consolation.52

It might be countered that there is a ‘katagogic’ element also in Neoplatonic ‘love for humanity,’53 but this appears to be largely the result of cross-fertilisation with Christianity54 and Nygren insists that its character remains essentially appetitive. As Plotinus puts it on his death bed, ‘I was waiting for you, that you might help to bring the Divine in me to the Divine in all.’55 Eros yearns for the divine in man, making it essentially self-love in comparison with agape. This explains why anagogy is for Plotinus a self-reflexive process. He speaks of ‘ascending to himself.’56 By contrast the Reformed understanding of the Gospel safeguards the Creator/creature distinction, which as Aquinas observed is also a logical necessity.57

However, Nygren’s thesis that agape is entirely unmotivated can be criticised as a half truth characteristic of voluntarism. If God chose to act in a loving way out of an arbitrary will how could we be sure that he might not choose differently tomorrow?58 John gives us more confidence when he explains that God is love (1 John 4:16), i.e. God does not love sinners out of naked will, a ‘liberty of indifference’, but rather his
will is grounded in his Nature, as Wesley poetically hymned it: ‘Thy nature and thy name is Love.’ 59 Indeed it is telling that Nygren criticises the Johannine writings for not measuring up to his schema, 60 conceding that Johannine Christianity, ‘creates a spiritual environment in which there would be some points of contact for the otherwise alien Eros motif.’ 61 The use of bridal imagery in Scripture for the relationship between God and his people suggests another such ‘point of contact,’ 62 especially in Song of Songs which to the mainstream Biblical commentator portrays an analogous relationship between human eros and divine agape which is absent from the grace/nature dualism of Nygren’s thesis. 63 Even Paul at times uses agape in the context of ‘longing’ in Philippians 4:1 where he twins ἀγάπης τοι with ἐπιθυμήται (beloved and longed for) and 2 Timothy 4:8 where he speaks of believers ‘loving (ἡγαπηκός) his appearing or conversely of Demas who deserted Paul, ‘having loved (ἀγαπήσας) this present age.’ Although human beings are ‘children of wrath’ (Ephesians 2:9) from a fallen perspective, it remains true that the gift of the imagio dei (not meritorious) is not annihilated by the Fall. 64

**The Christian Dionysius**

In this final section then I hope to disclose a Christian ‘Dionysius’ who still shines through his Neoplatonic vestures.

Dionysius had appeared on the scene in Syria in 533 when Severus of Antioch (465-538) on behalf of the monophysites cited his work (in particular Epistula 4 regarding ‘one theandric nature’) as an authority in their favour. 65 There is a cumulative case for the author of the Dionysian corpus being a Syrian bishop, 66 probably from Edessa, 67 which was a centre of monophysitism 68 owing to his ambiguous Christology and his specific knowledge of ceremonies from the Syrian tradition, 69 including the singing of the ‘hymn of universal faith’ during eucharist. 70 Rosemary Arthur opines that Epistle 10 reflects a background of persecution of the monophysites characteristic of 521-531AD. 71

But however one may judge the Christology of the monophysites and even if Dionysius is to be located amongst their number, he clearly belongs to an ostensibly Christian community and not to a pagan one. 72 Dionysius presupposes and
specifically refers to the historical Jesus as God incarnate in a number of passages of Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, Celestial Hierarchy and the Divine Names. Epistles 3 and 4 reference the Incarnation, the Virgin birth and the miracle of walking on water. Epistle 7 relates the eclipse at the time of the crucifixion. Epistle 8 describes Jesus’ gracious parable of the Prodigal Son, his grace towards the Samaritans and his words from the Cross which he calls ‘the expiation for our sins.’ Celestial Hierarchy refers to the nativity narrative and the passion of Gesthemene. Ecclesiastical Hierarchy references his bodily resurrection as a basis for rejecting the doctrine that bodily existence will be dissolved, which stands in stark discontinuity with the Chaldean Oracles doctrine of the body as ‘dung.’

Martin Luther is surely wrong then to pronounce that ‘nowhere does he (Dionysius) have a single word about faith or any useful instruction from the Holy Scriptures.’ The entire Corpus Dionysiacum is saturated with Biblical citations and allusions from at least 54 of the canonical books. Rather than someone who merely quotes a few strategic ‘proof texts’ to give an illusion of orthodoxy, Dionysius strikes us as someone genuinely committed to its authority. Ecclesiastical Hierarchy situates his theology in the context of a community which, after the pattern of the Jewish synagogue, gives public readings from ‘the sacred tablets.’ The sacred scriptures are ‘enlightening beams,’ moulding those being illuminated for Divine worship, beginning with the catechumens who are ‘incubated’ by the ‘paternal scriptures.’ It is by means of the Scriptures that we are kept in salvation since ‘in thus preserving the Scriptures we also are preserved.’ Reading and singing the Scriptures wards off the powers of evil and delivers those who are possessed.

Dionysius’ great treatise on The Divine Names commences with an appeal to holy Scripture, explaining that natural reason is inadequate to reach that Transcendent One who ‘alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is.’ Since Dionysius has just referenced Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in the opening words of this treatise, it is likely that in these words he is echoing Paul again who cites what seems to be an apostolic axiom just two chapters later:

μάθητε τὸ μὴ ύπέρ ἄ γέγραπται φρονεῖν
Indeed this revelation is not only a logical requirement for the knowability of God, but something which has graciously happened in reality, since the Source ‘has told us about itself in the words of Scripture’. In order for their writings to become ‘the Word of God’, the Scripture writers needed to operate by a ‘power granted by the Spirit. Consequently, in theological disputes about the nature of the Trinity, God’s omniscience, or the believer’s identification with Christ in baptism, it is to the Scriptures that Dionysius appeals as ‘the standard, rule and light’ for leading one to the truth. These texts demonstrate that Dionysius’ commitment to the Christian revelation has surpassed the ‘rational’ theology of Plato which initially had no concept of special revelation and also the later Iamblichean and Proclean Platonism, which, perhaps to compete with the Church, substituted the putative ‘revelations’ of the Chaldean Oracles and the writings of Plato for the Christian Scriptures.

Dionysius therefore defends himself against critics, such as one ‘Apollophanes’, who accused him of ‘making unholy use of things Greek to attack the Greeks’. Dionysius responds that the sense of Scripture is more important than the letter or sounds used and that a dynamic equivalent, even if it is borrowed from the glossary of Greek philosophy should be used if it conveys the sense more effectively. For example, the Greek term *eros* is not ‘counter to Scripture’ since:

In my opinion, it would be unreasonable and silly to look at words rather than at the power of their meanings. …for this is the procedure followed by those who do not allow empty sounds to pass beyond their ears, who shut them out because they do not wish to know what a particular phrase means or not to convey its sense through equivalent but more effective phrases. People like this are concerned with meaningless letters and lines, with syllables and phrases which they do not understand, which do not get as far as the thinking part of their souls, and which make empty sounds on their lips and in their hearing. It is as if it were quite wrong to explain “four” by “twice two,” “a straight line” by “a direct line,” “the motherland” by “the fatherland,” or to make any sort of interchange among words which mean exactly the same thing. This apologetic accounts for Dionysius’ transformation of pagan terms such as ‘theurgy’ into a vehicle for expressing the incarnation, the divine ‘ray’ to describe
Jesus, or ‘anagogy’ for the spiritual journey into invisible truths foreshadowed in the sacraments. Dionysius is defending a principle which Mark Edwards has called the ‘translatability of revelation,’ which is hardly surprising for one, who (like Origen), preferred the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. This was just as well, since his own writings were to be translated from Greek, first into Syriac and later into the Latin of Hilduin, Eriugena and Saracen in their passage into the West. Nor was Dionysius the first Christian to express his faith using Platonic categories. This had already become the mainstream tradition of the early fathers from Justin Martyr onwards whose aim was not so much ‘synthesis’ as contextualisation of the gospel. Even in the time of the Biblical writers themselves, St Paul commends the same strategy of ‘becoming all things to all people.’ He recontextualises, for instance, the Greek verb καταργεῖν (literally ‘to perform sacred rites’) to convey the ministry the gospel and the writer to the Hebrews appropriates the Platonic language of shadows and ideas to speak not of two worlds but of two covenants or dispensations. Kierkegaard might have called this a ‘non-identical repetition’; Origen called it ‘spoil the Egyptians’ i.e. exploiting pagan terms for Christian ends. Origen goes on to give the example of the philosophical term ἀσωματόν (incorporeal) as a synonym for the Biblical term ‘invisible’ (Colossian. 1:15-16.). He is also the source of Dionysius’ contention that the Greek terms eros and agape can be used interchangeably. But it remains a moot point whether these different phonemes have an identical or similar sense to each other, or whether they imply conflicting worldviews, since there is always a danger that things are not only lost in translation, but also added.

Luther’s condemnation of Dionysius centres on his Mystical Theology: ‘I exhort you to detest as a veritable plague this Mystical Theology of Dionysius and similar books.’ Similarly, the ‘Mystical Theology of Dionysius is pure fables and lies.’ This is chiefly because, according to Luther’s post-conversion view, the mystical theologians presumed to know the Uncreated Word in contemplation before they had been purified by the sufferings of the Incarnate Word. They sought a ‘theology of glory’ rather than a ‘theology of the Cross.’ In line with the writer to the Hebrews, the Book must be sprinkled with the Blood. Therefore, ‘let us rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified.’ These are warnings which would be well taken against the dangers of mysticism, but in targeting his
condemnation on the *Mystical Theology*, Luther by-passes important sections of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (even though he was aware of this work\textsuperscript{123}) such as the following passage in which Dionysius affirms the *katagogy* of the incarnation and the Cross:

Similarly, in my view, one may explain that rite at the purifying baptistery when the hierarch pours the ointment in drops to form a cross. He thereby shows to those able to contemplate it that Jesus in a most glorious and divine descent willingly died on the cross for the sake of our divine birth, that he generously snatches from the old swallowing pit of ruinous death anyone who, as scripture mysteriously expresses it, has been baptised “into his death”, and renews them in an inspired and eternal existence.\textsuperscript{124}

Although placed in the context of ritual, this explanation reveals that underpinning the ritual is a profound Christology of the believer’s identification with Christ in his death (recalling *Romans* 6:4). The significance of the ‘triple’ immersion is further disclosed in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2 as representing the three days and nights in which Christ was in the tomb, portrayed by the baptismal font.\textsuperscript{125}

The Christian foundation of the rituals is also revealed in the creed-like text of *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3, (440C-441B), introduced as an invocation of ‘what the hierarchs, those men of God, praise and celebrate, following the Scriptures,’\textsuperscript{126} and therefore probably derived from the liturgy of the Syrian community of which the author belonged.\textsuperscript{127} This, we might say, is the ‘Gospel according to Dionysius,’ a presentation of salvation history which denounces the destructive effects of sin in uncharacteristically strident language:\textsuperscript{128}

From the beginning human nature has stupidly glided away from those good things bestowed on it by God. It turned away to the life of the most varied desires and came at the end to the catastrophe of death. There followed the destructive rejection of what was really good, a trampling over the sacred Law laid down in paradise for man. Having evaded the yoke which gave him life, man rebelled against the blessings of God and was left to his own devices, to the temptation and the evil assaults of the devil. And in exchange for eternity he pitiably opted for mortality. Born of corruption it was only right that he should leave the world as he entered it. He freely turned away from the divine and uplifting life and was dragged instead as far
as possible in the opposite direction and was plunged into the utter mess of passion. Wandering far from the right path, ensnared by destructive and evil crowds, the human race turned away from the true God and witlessly served neither gods nor friends but its enemies who, out of their innate lack of pity, took the cruellest advantage of its weakness and dragged it down to the deplorable peril of destruction and dissolution of being.\textsuperscript{129}

In contrast to the merely epistemic gap between Creator and creature located in pagan philosophy, this text at least emphasises the \textit{moral} nature of the Fall and consequently the undeserved nature of God’s ‘love for humanity’ (\phi\lambda\alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\alpha).\textsuperscript{130} which he goes on to declare made it possible for us ‘to escape from the dominion of the rebellious, and it did this not through overwhelming force, but, as scripture mysteriously tells us, by an act of judgment and also in all righteousness. Beneficently it wrought a complete change in our nature.’\textsuperscript{131}

This text is certainly not incompatible with a Lutheran understanding of the ‘righteousness of God’, especially as he stresses the need for regeneration through unmerited love, recalling the Pauline text, \textit{Titus} 3:3-5.\textsuperscript{132} Indeed the ‘famous teacher’ referred to earlier in \textit{Ecclesiastical Hierarchy} 2 is probably Paul rather than Hierotheus,\textsuperscript{133} because of the allusion to \textit{Romans} 5:8,\textsuperscript{134} which we recall is one of Nygren’s key texts for contrasting \textit{eros} and \textit{agape}. The use of this text in \textit{Ecclesiastical Hierarchy} indicates, at the very least, that the distinction between \textit{eros} and \textit{agape} in Dionysius is less pronounced than Nygren claims. Pagan \textit{eros} is appropriated but transformed through its encounter with Christian \textit{agape}. Here we can identify in Dionysius a form of prevenient grace, for although the goal of hierarchy is union with God \textit{via} ‘the doing of sacred acts,’ it is quite clear that the ‘starting point’ for these acts is to be open to ‘the divine workings of God’\textsuperscript{135} (\textit{theourgia} in the Dionysian sense of God’s own works), which begins with divine regeneration, recalling \textit{Titus} 3:5 (\pi\alpha\lambda\gamma\gamma\epsilon\nu\sigma\iota\alpha\varsigma).\textsuperscript{136}

In the realm of the intellect, as our famous teacher has said, it is love of God which first of all moves us toward the divine; indeed the first procession of this love toward the sacred enactment of the divine commands brings about in unspeakable fashion our divine existence. And divinisation is to have a divine birth. No one could
understand, let alone put into practice, the truths received from God if he did not have a divine beginning..\textsuperscript{137}

Though Luther associates Dionysius with extraordinary mystical experiences and visions in contrast to encountering God through the ordinary means of grace in Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the Word of God,\textsuperscript{138} he fails to notice that Dionysius commends all three. \textit{Ecclesiastical Hierarchy} treats the ‘illumination’ (\textit{φωτισμός})\textsuperscript{139} of Baptism in chapter 2; chapter 3 treats the ‘synaxis’ (or eucharist), followed by other rites of chrism, ordination and funeral rites (chapters 4-7) and we have already commented at length on the transformative power of Scripture for Dionysius. Just as Luther treasures the Scriptures as ‘the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ was wrapped and laid,’\textsuperscript{140} so too, Dionysius commends the sacred truths of Scripture hidden in the ‘sacred veils’ of human language and culture.\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{Conclusion}

To summarise our argument, we have seen that, although from a Reformed perspective there are aspects of ritual as erotic anagogy in Neoplatonism which are contrary to the Gospel, at least as understood within the Reformed tradition, notably salvation as an ascent to forgotten divinity, the manipulation of the divine through theurgic techniques and the downplaying of matter, Dionysius himself begins to break away from these tendencies, deploying and transforming Neoplatonic language to contextualise a distinctively Christian message.

As we return then (in good Neoplatonic fashion!), to Caravaggio’s masterpiece, we conclude that, while Dionysius clothes himself in Greek philosophy, Luther was too hasty in dismissing him as ‘more of a Platonist than a Christian.’ Instead, it is pre-eminently through his portrayal of the sacraments (which Luther also commends as means of grace) and the authentically Christian theology which underlies them, that the language of pagan Neoplatonism is transfigured so that the ‘beardless’ Christ continues to be recognised in and through the mysterious ‘veils’ of the pseudonymous Areopagite.
Bibliography.

Aquinas, Thomas,

- *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, translated by Anderson, James F., Indiana, University of Notre Dame, 1956
- *Summa Theologicae*


Balthasar, Hans Urs Von


Campbell, Thomas L. *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, University Press of America, 1981


Descartes,


Edwards, Mark Julian. *Origen against Plato*, Ashgate, 2004


Klitenic Wear, Sarah and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*, Ashgate, 2007

Koch, H.


Louth, Andrew

- *Denys the Aeropagite*, Continuum, 1989
- “Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite” in *Journal of Theological Studies* 37.2 1986, p.434

Luce, A.A. *Monophysitism Past and Present: A Study in Christology*, London, SPCK, 1920

Luther, Martin

- *To George Spenlein, Augustinian in Memmingen, 7 April 1516* in E.G.Rupp, E.G. and Benjamin Drewery eds., *Martin Luther: Documents of Modern History*, London: Edward Arnold, 1970


Mang, Cyril A. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: Sources and Documents*, University of Toronto Press; 2nd revised ed., 1986

Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia MG 4.136B*


Origen,


Perl, Eric D. *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, SUNY, 2007


Psellus, PG CXXII, 721D


- Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (EH)
- Epistles (Ep)
- Divine Names (DN)


Rolt, C.R. *Dionysius the Areopagite, The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, SPCK, 1940


Wand, J.W.C. *A History of the early church to AD 500*, Methuen, 1982


**Note on the Contributor.**

1Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms* I, 119.
2Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, 336-337.
4For example Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* (henceforth *ST*) 3, q. 44, a.2, ad 2 where Aquinas refers to Dionysius as an ‘eyewitness’ to the eclipse at the time of the crucifixion, following Pseudo-Dionysius, *Epistle* (henceforth *Ep*) 7, (1081A).
5*Divine Names* (henceforth *DN*) 4, 11-18. All translations are from Luibheid in Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius, Complete Works* unless otherwise indicated.
6See *DN* 4, 18-35.
7‘Among the Greek theologians there is Dionysius. They boast that he was a disciple of Paul, but there is no truth to this.’ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* 1-5, 235.
8Koch, “*Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita*” 1-276.
9Stiglmayr, “‘Der Neuplatoniker Proclus’” 253-273; 721-748. See also Hathaway, *Hierarchy*.
10Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 1, 9; II, 11; 7:2-6. θεουργός is a term coined by the Chaldeans. It is found as a *hapax legomena* in *Chaldean Oracles*, ‘The theurgists are not counted into the herd of mean subject to destiny.’ See Lewy, *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* 212, 461. The *Chaldean Oracles* were written in the late second century by Julian ‘The Chaldean’ and his son Julian, surnamed ‘The Theurgist.’ Ibid, 3-4. Proclus, *Republic*, II, 123, 13.
11‘Not only is he [man] god, but he also creates gods.’ Asclepius 23-4; Psellus, *PG* 132X, 721D. See Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 107.
12Ecclesiastical *Hierarchy* (henceforth *EH*) 3, (429C); 3, (432B); *EH* 3, (436C); 3, (440B-C); 3, (441C-D); 3, (445B-C); 4, 12, (484C-D).
13‘The latter transformed the very term ‘theurgy,’ for example, from a Chaldean and Iamblichean objective genitive, i.e. works addressed to the gods, to a subjective genitive suggesting God’s mighty acts, especially in Christ.’ Rorem, ‘Iamblichus’ 456; Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius* 52, n.10. Out of 25 occurrences, nine refer to the Incarnation. Andrew Louth, “Pagan Theurgy”, p.434. See *EH* 3, (429C); 3, (432B); 3, (441C).
15Kiltenic Wear, *Dionysius the Areopagite* 99ff.
17*DN* 2.9, (648B). See Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 65, n. 121 and Dodds, “ ‘Theurgy’” 292. συμπεράνθης is used in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, props. 28; 34;140; 209. Though there is a Biblical precedence for this term in *Hebrews* 4:15.
18See Emery, “Commentaries of Denys” 240 n.59. This seems plausible given the coincidence of the well established dependence of Dionysius on Proclus, with a reference to a work allegedly composed by Hierotheus called *Hymns of Yearning* (εορτικοὶ ημέραι) in *Divine Names* 4, (713B ) and given the identical title of another alleged book by Hierotheus, *Συμπεράνθης θεολογική* with the classic text of Proclus. Hierotheus is described as a hymnwriter and a mystic in *DN* 3.2 (684A); which parallels the life of Proclus himself who was a prolific hymnwriter and mystic according to the biography of his student Marinus, ‘his hymns were often composed at night, or early in the morning, sometimes as the result of a dream.’ See introduction by Morrow to Proclus’ Commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides*, xiii. In turn Proclus credits the source of some of his belief in triads as arising from certain ‘theologians..in song.’ Proclus’ *Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, tr. Morrow, Book 6, 1090, 438. This would then render ironic his claim in *DN* 3.2, 681A that ‘it would have been quite an injustice to my teacher and friend if I were to put forward as my own the renowned contemplation and revelation of someone who next to the divine Paul, has been my elementary instructor.’ See also Hathaway, *Hierarchy* pp. 15, 26, 28. However, Hans Urs Von Balthasar is unconvinced by this theory on the grounds that Hierotheus’ *Elements* is described as an exposition of Scripture (*DN* 3.2, (684)), but this is not clear from the text. See Balthasar, “*Glory of the Lord*” 157 n 32.
19For other technical terms see Kiltenic Wear, 99ff.
20The literal meaning derives from the Greek ἀναβάω, (aor. αναβαων)‘to lift/lead up.’ Scripture uses this verb literally in *Luke* 2:22 (αναβαων; *Acts* 9:39 and *Acts* 16:34. It is the antonym of καταβάων, ‘to go down’ (*Acts* 9:30).
Theurgy helps the discover the understanding of 'On the Sacraments of the revealed place, the praise not of the clever and the worldly wise but of the unrestricted tendency' to 'strain also find fault with 'Origenist spirituality' (from which Dionysian spirituality derives) for what he calls its Go humbled and who has come down to an understanding of himself, for there he d...51

Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 46:9-10; 43:1-5; 9:1-12. The Greek term translated 'sacrament' in Dionysius is the Greek term translated 'sacrament' in Dionysius is Theurgy helps the pneuma to reascend. Porphyry, Auxiliaries 180-181.

EH 4 (476A)

See also EH 1, (376B-C) where the less corporeal oral tradition is argued to be superior since it is analogous to the level of the celestial hierarchy in which angelic intelligences communicate immaterially 'from mind to mind.'

Plato, Phaedrus, 250.

'These divine beauties are concealed. Their fragrance is something beyond any effort of the understanding and they effectively keep clear of all profanation. They reveal themselves solely to minds capable of grasping them.' EH 4, (473B). See also CH 1, (121D); Sammon, God Who is Beauty; Perl, Theophany. On spiritual fragrance see Origen, Song of Songs Commentary, Book 2.9, pp.159-162 and Homily 2 in Song of Songs Commentary, pp.285-286;

CH 2, (121C-D), c.f. Origen's discussion of matter in On First Principles, IV, 4, 5-6.

EH 1, (376D)

CH 1, (121C-D)

EH 2, (397C).

See Origen, Commentaire Sur Saint Jean, 3 (13), XVII. 101, 84.


DN 1.4, (529B).

EH 1, (376D)

CH 1.2, (121C).

The Greek term translated 'sacrament' in Dionysius is 'teletas' signifying a 'means of perfecting'.

EH 1, (397B); EH 3 (445A).

either the elevation or uncovering of the elements. See Campbell, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, 154.

CH 1.3, (124A); EH 3, (445A).

EH 3.3, (429A); c.f. DN 1 (640D-641A); (649B-652A).

DN 1, (640-641; 649-652). This is the true significance of the 'divine return to the primary things' which is 'the goal of his procession toward secondary things.' EH 3, (429B). Later, Hugh of St. Victor will say of the sacraments: 'If, therefore, God creates and the priest sanctifies, man seems to do more than God, which would be altogether absurd and inappropriate, if God did not also do what man does.' On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis) Bk. 1, part 9, 159.

Rupp, Martin Luther: Documents, 29.

DN 4, (708B)

Nygren, Agape and Eros, p.75; pp.681-691. Mark 2:17; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:3-4; 1 John 4:10; Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

Luther, The Heidelberg Disputation, 29.

Luther, Selected Psalms, 110-111;

εἰκ τῶν εὐσεβῶν (Ephesians 2:9).

Luther, Career of the Reformer IV, 336-337.

On this text Luther writes: 'no one arrives at the understanding of divinity but he who has first been humbled and who has come down to an understanding of himself, for there he discovers the understanding of God at the same time.' Luther, First Lectures on the Psalms I, 119. From a Catholic perspective, Balthasar can also find fault with 'Origenist spirituality' (from which Dionysian spirituality derives) for what he calls its unrestricted tendency' to 'strain “upward.”' This has an inevitable effect on the evangelical theme of “descent” – that of God into flesh, even to death on the cross, the descent into hell, the admonition to take the lowest place, the praise not of the clever and the worldly wise but of the humble, to whom God’s secrets shall be revealed – in short, what is implied by the via crucis is bound to be somewhat neglected.’ Balthasar, Origen, xiv. See also Ephesians 4:9.

Luther, To George Spenlein, Augustinian, 8
53 EH 3, (429B); DN 4, (708A).
54 ‘those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs,’ Plato, Republic 7, (517) although the release prisoner does ‘pity’ those still in the cave (516).
56 Plotinus, Enneads, 1, 6, 9; IV, 7, 10, (my emphasis); Porphyry, Life of Plotinus, 23. See Lewy, Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy, 488.
57 ‘And from this it is clear that God cannot make God. For it is of the essence of a thing that its own being depends on another cause, and this is contrary to the nature of the being we call God. For the same reason God cannot make a thing equal to Himself; for a thing whose being does not depend on another is superior in being, and in other perfections, to that which depends on something else, such dependence pertaining to the nature of that which is made.’ Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Bk. 2, c.25, (17-18). A Christian case for theosis is usually argued from texts such as 2 Peter 1:4; John 17:20-23 and 1 John 3:2.
58 EH 3, (429B). In the developed form of voluntarism encountered in Descartes the absolute omnipotence of God which can change laws of logic results in Descartes’ problem of the ‘malevolent demon’ of radical scepticism. Descartes, Letter 2 to Mersenne, 261 and Meditation 1.
59 Wesley (1742), ‘Wrestling Jacob’, 616.
60 Nygren, Agape and Eros, 146-159.
61 Nygren, Agape and Eros, 159.
62 Jeremiah 3; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1-3; Mark 2:19-20; Ephesians 5:27. Revelation 19:8; 21:2 refer to the church as the bride of Christ. The union of Christ and the saints is ‘the marriage supper of the Lamb’ (Rev. 19:9).
63 Nygren puts it starkly, ‘Luther, however, has taken seriously the fact that Christian love is by nature wholly other than human love.’ See Nygren, Agape and Eros, 726.
64 See Genesis 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9
65 In a report entitled, Innocenti Maronitae epistula de collation cum Severianuis habita.cited in Sammon, God Who is Beauty, 89. Riches points out that the citation from Severus is different to the reading as it has come down to us, possibly glossed by John of Scythopolis, which speaks instead of ‘new theandric activity.’ See Riches, Ecce Homo, 103. See also Roques, L’Univers Dionysien, 311; Klittenic Wear, Dionysius the Areopagite, 2; Frothingham, Stephen Bar Sudhaili, 3.
66 Since Dionysius himself rebukes a priest in Epistle 6 and the monk Demophilus in Epistle 8, Rosemary Arthur concludes, contrary to widespread opinion, Dionysius could not have been a monk himself at the time of writing as this would be contrary to his own principles. See EP 8, (1088C); EH 5.7, (508C). See Arthur, Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist, p.158.
67 The 6th century cathedral at Edessa before it was destroyed in 525AD had nine steps in three groups of three leading to the altar, representing the ninefold order of angels. See Arthur, Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist, 13; Mang, Art of the Byzantine Empire, p.59 and is also found in the pseudonymous Book of Hierotheus, also from Edessa in the 5th century which speaks of the nine orders of angels in a triadic descent. See Frothingham, Stephen Bar Sudhaili.
68 Primary sources include The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite and The Edessene Chronicle. See Baynes, Byzantium, 213-214. See also Frothingham, Stephen Bar Sudhaili, 3.
69 Ecclesiastical Hierarchy describes in detail the rites of illumination (baptism), synaxis (eucharist), anointing with oil, consecration of holy orders and funeral rites. Istvan Perczel has put forward a promising theory that the author was an ‘Origenist’ See Perczel, “The Earliest Syriac Reception” 27-41.
70 EH 3. 425C; 3. (436C); Louth, Denys the Areopagite, chapter 1; Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 348-349; Frend, Rise of the Monophysite Movement; Wand, History of the early church, 258f.. But see Campbell, Dionysius the Areopagite, 146.
71 EP 10, (1117C) cited in Arthur, Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist, p.68. Severus, along with over 55 monophysite bishops was sent into exile for his beliefs. Ibid, 321.
72 This is not to deny however that pagan thought, particularly the monism of Neoplatonism may have strongly influenced the peculiar character of this Christian heresy. See A.A. Luce, Monophysitism, 17.
73 EH 3, (432D); (441A); (444A); EH 4.3.10 (484A-B); EH 5.4 (512B-C)
74 CH 4 (181B-C); 7, (209B).
75 DN 1.1 (592A); DN 2.3 (640C); DN 2.6 (644C); DN 2.9 (648A); DN 2.10 (649A).
76 EP 7, (1081A)
77 EP 8, (1096B) citing 1 John 2:2.
78 CH 4.4 (181B-C)
inescapability of this task of putting non

106

100

Proclus, Platonic Theology I.1; In Timaeus, III.63.24; In Cratylus 101.3. See Dodds, Elements of Theology xii.

The Chaldean Oracles were written in the late second century by Julian surnamed ‘The Chaldean’ and his son Julian, surnamed ‘The Theurgist.’ See Lewy, Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy, 4-6. ‘These Chaldean Oracles claim to contain the doctrines which the gods disclosed to the two Julians. They are revelations which the Theurgists have written down. Accordingly, the Neoplatonists who believed in the legitimate character of the inspiration frequently quoted the Chaldean Oracles as utterances of the gods themselves and did not mention quite so often their Chaldean hypotheses who, in their opinion, had only played a secondary part.’ Ibid 6.

101

EP 7.2

Aquinas commenting on this passage illuminates it as follows: ‘For it is irrational and improper, as I believe, that a person does not keep in mind the power of the intention, i.e. that which someone intends to signify through the name, but only the words themselves.’ In librum Beati Dionysii 376.

102

EH 3.11 (408C)

104

EH 3 (492C; 432B; 441C).

105

EH 1, (372B); DN 3, (680C). Julian, Orationes V, 172D, refers to a ‘seven-rayed god’ (ο επικοστις) who causes the soul to ascend. See also Plotinus, Enneads, V,1,7; Proclus, Republic 1,152,14; 1,178,17; In Tim, III, 82, 11. Plato, Republic, 533D. See Lewy, Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy p.186, 208, 60.

106

Edward, Origen against Plato, 56. See also Linbeck, “Scripture, consensus and community” 86-87. ‘The inescapability of this task of putting non-Christian thought to Christian uses needs to be emphasised. Even
theologians who want to be entirely Biblical cannot avoid it. Luther, despite his detestation of Aristotle, continued to employ, often quite consciously, the Ockhamist Aristotelianism in which he had been trained, and there is not a little Platonism in Calvin’s thought.’

109 See Théry, *Hilduin, Traducteur de Denys*
110 *Contra Boersma, Heavenly Participation* 40ff.
111 1 Corinthians 9:22.
112 Romans 15:16; ερωτογγυς in Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* 327.
113 Hebrews 10:1
114 Origen, *Letter to Gregory* 211.
115 Origen’s *First Principles* contains a striking parallel with Dionysius’ argument. ‘Therefore, everyone who is concerned with truth should be little concerned with names and words (c.f. 1 Tim. 1:4), because different nations have different customs about words. And he should pay more attention to what is meant than how it is expressed in words.’ Origen, *On First Principles*, IV, 3, 15, p.204.
116 After an extended discussion of this question he concludes: ‘It makes no difference, therefore, whether the Sacred Scriptures speak of love (eros), or of charity (agape), or of affection; except that the word ‘charity’ (agape) is so highly exalted that even God Himself is called Charity, as John says.’ Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, Prologue 2, p.32. See also the discussion in Dawson, “Allegorical reading” 38-43.
119 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 287; *Table Talk*, 112.
120 These terms are coined in Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* e.g. 20-21.
121 Hebrews 9:19.
122 Luther, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 109. Rosemary A. Arthur agrees with Luther: ‘Paul’s crucified Christ, whose blood redeems us, the Second Adam whose obedience makes up for the disobedience of the first Adam, is absent from Dionysius’ theology.’ See Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist* 94.
123 Luther, *Explanations of the Ninety Five* 119.
125 *EH* 2. 7
126 *EH* 4, (440C)
127 ‘the author seems to be paraphrasing the account of salvation history found in his community’s anaphora or Eucharistic prayer.’ See Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius* 220, n.95.
128 See also *DN* 8, (897A) and *EH* 7, (561D)
129 *EH* 3 (440C-441A)
130 *EH* 3 (441A)
131 *EH* 3 (441B)
133 Against Rorem’s view that the teacher refers to Hierotheus in Rorem (ed.), *Pseudo-Dionysius, Complete Works* 200, n.20.
134 Campbell, *Dionysius the Areopagite* 117 (following Stiglmayr).
135 *EH* 2, (392A)
136 And Dionysius again: ‘Benificently it wrought a complete change in our nature.’ *EH* 3, (441B).
137 *EH* 2, (392B)
138 Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 15-20* pp.166-167; Vol. 54, *Table Talk*, p.112.
140 Nazareth, “Luther’s Sola Scriptura” 60.
141 *DN* 1.4, (529B)