Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Eastern Orthodoxy: Acceptance of the Corpus Dionysiacum and Integration of Neoplatonism into Christian Theology

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Abstract

This essay will argue that the heritage of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite represents the most living and widespread influence of Neoplatonic ideas in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. First, the attention will be given to the influence or placement of the Dionysian corpus in the midst of the cultural formation of Byzantine imperial Christian identity. This cultural pattern is still an important element of the mindset of Eastern Orthodoxy and, as a living experience of this tradition, it still constitutes a vibrant representation of the essentially Neoplatonic mentality. Second, the significance of Dionysian understanding of celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies will be briefly addressed in view of their impact on metaphysical stratification of the world, theurgical connotation of church liturgy and clerical structuring of priestly ranks as the most characteristic elements inherited from Neoplatonism and expressly present in Eastern Orthodox spirituality.

Keywords: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Eastern Orthodoxy, Neoplatonism, Christianity and Greek philosophy

The significance of later Neoplatonism on syncretically conveyed development of variety Islamic forms of mysticism, Jewish Kabala, late Patristic and Medieval Christian theology and mysticism, Platonism of Nicholas Cusa (1401–1464) and Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), and as such on early Renaissance, and Protestant mysticism of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) is usually underappreciated by modern scholarship. In some recent studies this tendency started to change that allows us eventually to come to a more accurate picture of intellectual development where Neoplatonism continues to embrace to some degree and have influenced basically most of religious traditions within Judeo-Christian and Muslim world and some contemporary religious philosophers.[1] For instance, its profound impact, often in mediated form and sometime directly, on a number of Russian religious philosophers is tremendous. Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) is a good example. Laying aside the differences of Muslim, Jewish and Christian theologies in themselves and with each other, Neoplatonism provided a unifying understanding of God as essentially a transcendent being, the notion of the divine, a sacred and orderly designed universe, openness and hiddenness of God or intricate interplay of cataphatic and apophatic way of human approximation to God that were uniquely implemented in Abrahamic monotheistic religions.

The role and place of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in this process, in relation to Christianity, cannot be ignored. The author of this corpus of mysterious origin certainly is not the only—and by far not the first—Christian theologian who would demonstrate significant reliance in his theology on Hellenistic philosophy. Starting with Clement of Alexandria (*c*. 150– *c*. 215) and Origen (*c*. 185– *c*. 254) many philosophical aspects of Middle Platonism entered Christian theological discourse through the process of creative adaptation. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century clearly shows his familiarity with the philosophy of Plotinus (204/5–270, the founder of Neoplatonism); however, the direct use of Plotinus finds rather limited application in his theology. Nobody in preceding Patristic tradition can supersede Pseudo-Dionysius in the degree and open implementation of Greek philosophy, especially of the later Neoplatonism. Precisely, the reliance on Proclus (410/412–485), whom Pseudo-Dionysius sometime closely follows, in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* helped to prove the pseudonymous nature of his writings and date them.[2] The sophisticated

[1] See for example, R. M. Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition*, Brown Judaic Studies, 69 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); H. J. Blumenthal and R. A. Markus, eds., *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* (London: Variorum Publications, 1981); Kevin Corrigan, *Reading Plotinus: A Practical Introduction to Neoplatonism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005); Majid Fakhry, *Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: One World, 2002); R. Baine Harris, ed., *Neoplatonism and Contemporary Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002); Dominic J. O'Meara, ed., *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1982); Niketas Siniossoglou, *Palto and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[2] See, Hugo Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895): 438–54; idem, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in Seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen*, (1900); Josef Stiglmayr, "Der Neuplatoniker

and complex use of Greek philosophy in preceding Patristic tradition after acceptance into it of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* significantly facilitated incorporation of unadulterated and unfiltered elements of later Neoplatonism in some expressions of Christian spirituality. Neoplatonic elements became so deeply incorporated into the practice and theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church that over the centuries they became considered as authentic elements of Christian tradition. The process of appropriation of Pseudo-Dionysian heritage took place to such a degree that for most Eastern Orthodox believers it would be almost unacceptable to acknowledge any direct and basically unaltered influence of Neoplatonism as a part of their tradition. Some scholars even today would attempt to interpret the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius as genuinely Christian.[3] This perception is not necessarily surprising as to some degree through the complicated process of re-interpretation these Neoplatonic influences became sort of Christianized. Nevertheless, this "baptized" form of Neoplatonism never eradicated the key elements of strongly hierarchical and fixed delineation of metaphysical structure of the world (both angelic and human), unbridgeable ontological differentiations, and theurgical understanding of sacramentalism.

It is also important to point out that prior to Pseudo-Dionysius, with some exception for Gregory of Nyssa, direct influence of precisely Neoplatonic tradition on Christianity has had a very limited effect.[4] The Platonism of the Patristic writers of the third and fourth centuries predominantly comes from Plato himself, Middle Platonism, Philo of Alexandria (*c.* 15 BCE–45 CE), and the ideas of Origen; in other words, it comes from pre-Plotinian sources. It was not until Augustine (354–430) and Boethius (*c.* 480–*c.* 524) in the West and Pseudo-Dionysius in the East that Plotinus, and in the case of Pseudo-Dionysius, also Iamblichus (*c.* 250–*c.* 330) and Proclus (especially Proclus), acquired a prominent position in Christian thought. If Augustine valued Neoplatonism as the way for intellectuals to come to the truth of Christianity, Pseudo-Dionysius enthusiastically incorporated this tradition as a part of his Christian discourse. He does not hesitate to include passages from Proclus verbatim into his works and, to a great extent, appropriate Neoplatonic discourse and terminology. Pseudo-Dionysius demonstrated not only first hand knowledge of Neoplatonic texts, but also his acceptance of this tradition as being congenial with Christianity. In other words, Pseudo-Dionysius is both Neoplatonic and Christian at his core, or more precisely Neoplatonic Christian.

Proclus als Vorlage des sog. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895): 253–73, 721–48; etc.

[3] Alexander Golitzin, *Et Introibo Ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita: With Special Reference to Its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchikon Idruma Paterikon Meleton, 1994) and revised version of this book, Alexander Golitzin with the collaboration of Bogdan G. Bucur, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

[4] Here I tend to agree with John Rist, although, he should more thoroughly examine influence of Neoplatonism on Eusebius of Caesarea, especially in *Demonstratio Evangelica* 4. See his excellent overview of Neoplatonism and Christianity: "Basil's 'Neoplatonism': Its Background and Nature," in *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic*, ed. Paul Jonathan Fedwick (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), 137–220; idem, "Plotinus and Christian Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 386–413.

To acknowledge essentially Neoplatonic character of Pseudo-Dionysian theology would be nothing more than to postulate well-established fact. It is not the objective of this essay to attempt to re-establish this fact, but rather to trace how some Dionysian Neoplatonic elements in Christianized form impacted the development of Christian tradition, especially Eastern Orthodoxy, and to demonstrate the still existing presence of this influence, even though the predicate "Neoplatonic" is usually omitted, but the nature of Neoplatonism is still there.

To provide the complete and detailed account of the transmission of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* filtered through the centuries after this corpus was written would require a multivolume book. This essay will concentrate on a few of the most significant contributions of Pseudo-Dionysius to the development of the Eastern Orthodox worldview. First, the attention will be given to the influence or placement of the Dionysian corpus in the midst of the cultural formation of Byzantine imperial Christian identity. This cultural pattern still proved to be an important element of the mindset of Eastern Orthodoxy and, as a living experience of this tradition, it still constitutes a vibrant representation of the essentially Neoplatonic mentality. Second, the significance of Dionysian understanding of celestial and ecclesiastical (human) hierarchies will be briefly addressed in view of their impact on metaphysical stratification of the world, theurgical connotation of church liturgy and clerical structuring of priestly ranks as the most characteristic elements inherited from Neoplatonism and expressly present in Eastern Orthodox spirituality.

I

The role of Greek philosophy, Hellenistic culture, and Christian tradition finds interesting symbiosis in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian theology is a complex one. Modern scholarship has no general consensus on this issue. Needless to say, such a consensus is absent from Patristic writers themselves. Their attitude toward pagan philosophy and culture diverged greatly. One thing that is evident is that by the time when the works of Pseudo-Dionysius were introduced various philosophical traditions were eclectically represented in the form of later Neoplatonism.[5] Eclecticism of philosophical and popular elements intertwined together were a common feature of the culture at large. Starting with Iamblichus predominantly speculative and contemplative reflection that is so well attested in Plotinus and most other great Greek philosophers who preceded him was complemented with incorporation of traditional pagan ritualism as the part of philosophical enterprise. Many Greek philosophers prior to the fourth century were rather skeptical about popular religion, while some of them even openly denied existence of gods, which is not surprising that many of them were expelled from their cities for alleged impiety and atheism. The best value of popular religion and belief in gods were seen only as good imperative for commoners that helped to keep social

[5] The first firm date when we know about the existence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is 528. See Paul Rorem and John Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

order and morality, but not actual truthfulness of traditional stories about gods. Iamblichus changed all of it. If Porphyry was somewhat doubtful about the benefits of such an approach, post-Iamblichian development of Neoplatonism, especially in the context of the rising power of Christianity that began dominating religious affairs in the Roman Empire, ignored his concerns. The understanding of theurgy in speculative and practical sense became one of the important themes in Neoplatonism and we find interesting application of theurgy in Pseudo-Dionysius, which will be addressed later.

As far as the use of philosophy is concerned, for Greek speaking Christians the word "philosophy" itself, which means "love of wisdom," does not connote any pejorative sense. It is often taken in its literal meaning, of course, under the search for wisdom they understood divine wisdom that comes from Christian revelation as it is expressed in Scriptures and tradition. Moreover, for Late Antiquity Christians, who, along with their non-Christian contemporaries, would understand philosophy as a search for the true knowledge of things eternal and divine, philosophy would represent a way of life and the content of basic human knowledge. In this sense, in both Christian and non-Christian perspectives, it would not greatly differ from what could be understood as the quest for perfection, virtue, self-control, happiness, and knowledge of God, where the name "philosophy" becomes applicable to the Christian religion itself. Likewise, uncovering of the highest meaning of the Scripture is true philosophy. For example, Gregory of Nyssa easily speaks about "the philosophy of the Song of Songs," or "philosophy in Ecclesiastes."[6]

If the application of the word "philosophy" in Patristic tradition is rather favorable, the situation changes when Church fathers speak about "philosophers." "Philosophy" would connote a more positive meaning, while "philosophers" would be referring, often in the pejorative sense, to the outsiders and pagans.[7] However, as everything was said and done, Patristic apologetic tradition starting with Justin in the second century and going well into the fifth, especially in Eusebius of Caesarea (*c.* 260–*c.* 340)[8] and Theodoret of Cyr (*c.* 393–466),[9] is not all that negative about the content of Hellenistic philosophy. In other words, there is some sense of acknowledgement that pagan philosophers (of course, not without errors) were able to disclose the natural knowledge of God. This cautious endorsement of Greek philosophy that might have some true insights that are independent of biblical revelation, however, is nothing compared to the reliance on later Neoplatonism we find in Pseudo-

[6] *In Cant.* 1; GNO 6:17.10–11 and 22.8.

[7] Angelo Di Berardino and Basil Studer, eds., *History of Theology*. Vol. 1 *The Patristic Period* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 312–13.

[8] Eusebius is mostly known and celebrated in Christian tradition as the father of Church history. As the result of his Semi-Arian inclinations his other literary endeavors that are enormous are rather shelved and ignored. Eusebius, actually, is one of the most learned scholars and apologists of his time, who in his encyclopedic knowledge, according to Quasten, was probably superseded only by Origen (*Patrology*, 3:311). He is, however, less creative and original than Origen, but his treatises on *Preparation for the Gospel*, *The Proof of the Gospel*, along with *Theophany*, the last one survives only in Greek fragments and Syriac translation, are the most laborious works of Christian apologetics.

[9] See his *Cure of Pagan Maladies*.

Dionysius. Besides, the anonymous author of the corpus, as it can be argued, does not even try to hide his sympathies.

If the discovery of the influence that Proclus had on Pseudo-Dionysius by Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr[10] had a revolutionary impact on modern scholarship, it is hard to imagine that in a time when the intellectual scene of pagan philosophy was dominated by Neoplatonism and Neoplatonic schools at Athens and Alexandria were still functioning or only recently put out of business,[11] the explicit use of Neoplatonic materials by Pseudo-Dionysius could go unnoticed by contemporaries. Apparently, nineteenth century critics of Dionysius did not read one passage in the *Prologue* to this corpus, now attributed to John Philoponus (d. *c*. 580),[12] where the similarity of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* with Proclus was already clearly stated. John Philoponus bluntly denies that the author of such works of great theological integrity who places himself in the midst of the solar eclipse at the time of Christ's death, the Dormition of the Mother of God, and presents himself as correspondent with the apostles would not be authentic. For Philoponus it was not Pseudo-Dionysius who borrowed from Proclus, but the other way around. It was pagan philosophers, especially Proclus, who used certain concepts of Dionysius without giving him proper credit.[13] Discovery of Dionysian dependence on Proclus that came as a surprise to modern church historians was a known fact in late Antiquity. The influence of Neoplatonic philosophy in Dionysian theology was not the fact that ancients were ignorant of as early enthusiasts of this corpus tried to overcome in the process of acceptance of these works.

It also can be argued that, in spite of the dubious nature of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, its Neoplatonic content, in Christianized form, actually helped to pave a way for its acceptance. There is a certain logic in attributing these highly philosophical and deeply theoretical treatises to the pen of Dionysius the Areopagite, not necessarily as a pretentious forgery, but as a literary device.[14] Dionysius the Areopagite is the most prominent character in the New Testament who is unique at his conjunction between Jerusalem and Athens or between the apostle Paul and Greek philoso-

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[10] See footnote 2.

[11] Neoplatonic school at Athens was closed in around 529 by Justinian, while Neoplatonic school in Alexandria in restructured and Christianized form survived until Muslim conquest in 641.

[12] See Beate Regina Suchla, "Die Überlieferung des Prologs des Johannes von Skythopolis zum griechischen Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum: ein weiterer Beitrag zur Überlieferungsgeschichte des CD," *Nachrichten der Akademie Der Wissenschaften in Göttingen: I. Philologisch-Historische Klasse* (1984), 4:176–88.

[13] PG 4:21.

[14] This practice was not uncommon for late Antiquity. For example, Iamblichus published his famous treatise, *De Mysteriis*, where he argues with his mentor Porphyry under the name of the Egyptian prophet Abamon, while his authorship was well attested by Proclus and probably by Porphyry himself. The reason why Iamblichus did it might be that out of courtesy to his mentor he did not want to appear to argue against him openly. There is also whole tradition of Hermetic and Pythagorean literature, which attributed respectively to Hermes and Pythagoras, while their readers were well aware that it is very unlikely that either of these authors actually wrote these works, however, they still were considered to be authentic as being authentically inspired by Hermes and Pythagoras. See Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, "Introduction," in *Iamblichus: De Mysteriis* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), xxix–xxxii.

phy—a Christian student of philosophers and the apostle. In this regard, this attribution could be nothing more than a symbolic gesture of great phenomenological significance, to demonstrate the essential truth of both traditions as having been derived essentially from the same divine source, which to some degree was confirmed by the authority of the apostle Paul in his sermon of "Unknown God."[15] Was not this tactic much different from what other apologists did (however, for different reasons) in their attempt to demonstrate the antiquity of Christian truth by suggesting that Plato and other Greek philosophers borrowed their ideas from Moses?

Christianity from its early times did not really feel itself in total opposition to, nor was it entirely ostracized from, the Hellenistic culture. Greek language of the New Testament itself is a good testimony that, from the beginning, Christianity was situated in the Hellenistic world. Thus, it is not surprising that the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* used so laboriously and deliberately scriptural, patristic and philosophic materials mingled together in order to demonstrate that better than anything else this might confirm the congenial identity of those materials with the ultimate source of the truth, or at least they were considered to be congenial to his mind. With the *Corpus Dionysiacum* we might be dealing not so much with the direct attribution of the corpus to the Areopagite, but a metaphorical one, with the purpose of demonstrating in its content and theoretically justifying the essential congeniality of the Christian message and Neoplatonic philosophy. This approach might explain the initial popularity of these works among some groups of Christian intellectuals in spite of obvious concerns about the authenticity that had already been voiced in the six century. If this assumption is accurate and attribution to the Areopagite was symbolic, then it is the irony of history that later this pseudonymity, taken literally, helped first to secure the subsequent survival of the corpus and later to brand it as the most successful forgery.

Sophisticated incorporation of Neoplatonic elements into a Christian context would serve as an important component in securing the ultimate transition from the Old Way, with all its aspirations and customs dear to the heart of the educated Hellenized person, to the establishment of the New Way of imperial Byzantine Christian identity. It is, perhaps, why some Christian intellectuals, like John Philoponus, so easily ignored the suspicious origin, and explicitly Neoplatonic orientation, of the corpus; it gave them a legitimate excuse to preserve the best of philosophic tradition as a reflection of their cultural mentality, within Christian cloth. The *Corpus Dionysiacum* introduced and, by attribution to the apostolic times, justified the validity of Christian faith in accord with the cultural norms that would characterize a person as civilized. As such, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is the foundational work for finalizing the formation of what could be called civilized (either Greek or Latin) Christian identity; the identity that to the mind of the ancients would comply with the cultural standards of Hellenistic antiquity and the uninterrupted succession of Christian tradition, where any tension between being both a true citizen of the Roman Empire and a Christian were disappearing. The attribution of the corpus to Dionysius the Areopag-

[15] Acts 17:22–31.

ite is an emblematic act in itself. Under the name of this person, the Byzantines could perceive a symbolic reconciliation between Athens and Jerusalem in a mutually inclusive Christian Greco-Roman identity.

With all the pros and cons, in spite of its obvious pseudonymity, the obscurity of the origin, explicit use of Neoplatonic materials, and controversial theological statements, doubts about Dionysian corpus proved to be unable to compete with its philosophical appeal and mystical attractiveness. As a result, in spite of all odds, as Pelikan remarks, "Dionysius was rescued and given the position of what we must, somewhat anachronistically call an 'apostolic father.'"[16] Among other factors, the recognition of the apostolicity of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* might be an important legitimate excuse for some Christian authors like John Philoponus, Sergius of Resh'aina (d. 536), John of Scythopolis (early 6th cen.), Maximus the Confessor (*c*. 580–662) and many other, to express more openly their Neoplatonic tendencies and philosophic interests. As Ronald Hathaway observes,

> The four treatises and *Letters* of Pseudo-Dionysius possessed philosophic authority for later philosophers. They were not studied by men like Sergius of Reshaina, Eriugena, Aquinas, or Nicolas of Cusa merely because they possessed apostolic authority or were treated as near-Scripture by ecclesiastical authorities, although this contributed immeasurably to the propagation of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* and to the safety of those who used it in Christian countries.[17]

Pseudo-Dionysius would serve as a secure shield for what could be viewed as a questionable intellectual enterprise as well as the stimulus for such an enterprise. At the same time the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is the work of Christian author, who could be a convert from intellectual paganism or Christian interested in philosophy. His familiarity with Christian scriptures, regardless of the method of his exegesis, and preceding Patristic tradition is apparent and significant. No doubt those factors also were important for the acceptance of the documents.

Another important point of connection between later Neoplatonism and emerging imperial Christian identity that was significantly reinforced by Pseudo-Dionysius is the superessentially divine understanding of cosmic harmony and mystical unity with the One or God. In Neoplatonism and in Christianity we encounter the essential expression of monotheism, if, as Armstrong remarks, "One is prepared to admit that there can be more than one kind of monotheism."[18] Therefore it is not that surprising to see significant influence of Neoplatonism not only on Christianity, but also on Muslim mysticism and on the Jewish Kabala; in other words, on other monotheistic religions.

[16] Jaroslav Pelican, "Introduction," in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 21.

[17] Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius. A Study in the Form and Meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 21.

[18] A. H. Armstrong, "Plotinus and Christianity," in *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Charles Kannengiesser (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 124. For an example of discussion of the supremacy of the One and existence of multiplicity of gods who derive their existence from the One see Plotinus, *Enn*. 2.9.9.27–44.

The theme of divine unity in ontological, metaphysical, spiritual, and monotheistic form is the basic element that philosophically penetrates all aspects of Dionysian theology. On the one hand, Pseudo-Dionysius syncretically and genuinely incorporates a non-Christian approach to gods as divine powers, energies, qualities, or, in other words, intelligible and visible manifestations that are essentially grounded in the One with the notion of the Christian God and his attributes. His language is so richly filled with divine terminology that it still shocks modern Christian readers. However, viewed in his historical context, the abundance of divine terminology is rather a common stylistic feature in Late Antiquity, both in Christian and non-Christian literature. On the other hand, the divinely and triadically structured universe of Proclus, with multitude of intelligible gods, intellectual gods, supercelestial gods, the gods to whom the cosmos is assigned, angelic choruses, good daemons, heroes, etc.[19] in Dionysius becomes the hierarchical universe of the One ultimately transcendent, triune God, the triadic angelic and ecclesiastical (human) orders. In this cosmic view of soteriological unification lies one of the main influences of later Neoplatonism on Pseudo-Dionysius, and from Pseudo-Dionysius on Eastern Orthodoxy. In later Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius there is no unmediated participation between the lowest orders with the highest, each rank of the cosmic structure being confined to its ontological status, and at the same time, paradoxically, the whole universe is divinely unified, or as Iamblichus puts it, "enveloped by the divine presence."[20]

II

Any discussion of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and its influence on Christian theology cannot avoid addressing its exposition of the angelic world. Needless to say, Dionysian classification of angelic beings became the classical standard for Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Pseudo-Dionysius certainly was not the first to talk about angelic ranks in Christian theology and it is possible to find in the Bible almost all of his nine angelic groups mentioned individually. However, as John Meyendorff observes,

> It is evident that the structure itself of the Dionysian angelic world has no foundation in Scripture. Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and the author of the book called *Apostolic Constitutions* mention the whole series of nine Dionysian appellations, but in different order. A certain tendency toward the classification of angelic beings no doubt existed, but Dionysius gave it a systematic form and a metaphysical foundation.[21]

His enneadic arrangement of the heavenly realm (three ranks with three classes each) is important for Dionysius in order to maintain a balanced representation of the metaphysical and cosmic order. Therefore, brief references to these angelic types

[19] *In Parm*. Pref. 1.

[20] Iamblichus, *DM* 1.3; Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 12–13. See also, Proclus, *In Tim*. 2.64D.

[21] John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), 102. For the reference in Cyril, see *Myst*. 5.6; in Chrysostom, see *Gen*. 4.5; also see *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.

in Scripture are sufficient for him to construct a Christian-looking edifice around an essentially Neoplatonic worldview,[22] where the lack of detailed information about angelic diversification works to his advantage. It allows him to structure angelic formations in the order that best suit him.

Compared to humanity and the rest of creation, the celestial realm of angelic beings is closer to God, more divine, and superior to human beings in their ontological status and metaphysical role.[23] They are both celestial powers and ontologically personal beings. As messengers of God's revelation and divine knowledge, they have advanced ontological positioning and a higher level of participation in God.[24] Angels play a considerable part in God's intervention in the universe. Particular angels are assigned to guard particular nations, just as Michael is the guardian angel of the people of Israel.[25] The revelation of God comes to humankind only through angels: "No one ever has seen or ever will see God in all its hiddenness."[26] It is true for both the Law of Moses, which was mediated to Israelites through angels, and, paradoxically, even for the mystery of Christ's philanthropy toward humankind.[27] Thus, Pseudo-Dionysius combines the biblical understanding of angels as God's messengers with the Neoplatonic view of the subordinative and descending cosmic order. Unmediated divine revelation from God to a human being is not really possible in the Dionysian system, which makes his Christology ambiguous. Thus, the primary role of the celestial hierarchy is to communicate the message of God throughout their ranks to humanity.[28]

Angels do not have equal access to divine revelation and participation in God.[29] Only the first rank of seraphim, cherubim, and thrones enjoys direct immediacy with God.[30] From them, the divine revelation is communicated to the second rank of angels and from the second to the third, and only then to human beings. This chain of communication is reminiscent of the Neoplatonic way of procession, only ontologically it does not correspond to the Proclian cause-effect relationship,[31] but it

[22] Cf. Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: G. Chapman, 1989), 37.

[23] *CH* 4.2 (180AB); *EH* 4.3.5 (480B); *Ep*.8.2 (1092B).

[24] *CH* 5.

[25] *CH* 9.2.

[26] *CH* 4.3 (180C); Patristische Texte und Studien 36:22; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 157.

[27] *CH* 4.3–4. Cf. Gal 3:19.

[28] *CH* 13.4 (308B).

[29] *CH* 8.2 (240C).

[30] *CH* 7.1 (205B).

[31] For Proclus, everything that exists proceeds in a vertically descending direction from a single first cause—the One. The One through emanation causes into existence the Intellect where the Intellect is the effect of the One and has direct participation in the One. At the same time, the Intellect has lesser power than the One and not equal to it. The Intellect in its turn causes the Soul where Soul is the effect of the Intellect and participates in the Intellect, but does not participate directly into the One, and so on. The cause-effect relationship corresponds to an ontological transmission of power from one thing to another. The producer is always superior to the product. The cause-effect relationship also explains the diversity of the world and assigns to each existent its proper place, at the same time it shows unifying interconnection. The idea of generation through emanation is not original to Proclus. It is a common feature of Neoplatonism. Proclus gives it very developed ontological and metaphysical form. Where Pseudo-Dionysius differs from Proclus is that, arguably, he does not have descending ontological causality while maintaining similar to Proclus principle of ontological metaphysical stratification. All existing beings for Pseudo-Dionysius are not the product of emanation from each other, but were created by God. God is not sim-

reflects the descending order of participation from higher beings to lower ones. Nevertheless, this participation through the intermediaries of hierarchical ranks is an actual participation in God. Because God causes all groups of beings, in this descending chain of participation, all beings through "dissimilar similarities"[32] are ultimately partaking in the same single Cause. It is a structured collaboration, or synergy, between God and created beings.[33] Here Neoplatonic understanding of the return is combined with ascending mysticism of Christian tradition.

A strong sense of cosmic order in Pseudo-Dionysius is projected to a similarly strong, however, ontologically more flexible,[34] understanding of social or human order, which is, as anything else in Dionysian theology in its ideal form, is sacred and represented by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Both celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are closely connected in their purifying, illuminating, and perfecting ministries. The sacramental system of the Church is presented in his treatise on *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* as an indispensable link between the invisible and eternal reality with the visible and transient reality of our world. It is probably why sacraments constitute the first order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Everything we see in the church is a symbolic representation of invisible reality that is mysteriously present there. The liturgical aspect of his theology is significant. The whole universe for him is a liturgical act and a divine theurgical work. Therefore, the role of theurgy in Pseudo-Dionysius, like in later Neoplatonism, finds intricate development.

To the popular perception, theurgy (θεουργία) is often seen as a form of white magic or other "hocus pocus" tricks. For later Neoplatonism this term would signify a more existential and important form of human-divine interaction. In Iamblichus, an understanding of theurgy could be described "as the often involuntary manifestation of an inner state of sanctity deriving from a combination of goodness and knowledge in which the former element prevails."[35] Thus, in later Neoplatonism the practice of theurgy introduces a stronger sense of human dependence on gods, who alone establish, through proper rituals and actual divine symbols, theurgic union. In other words, the initiative of theurgical engagement comes always from above. In Harl's witty observation, theurgy "implied a pagan version of grace because the theurgist, through sacred symbols revealed by appropriate sacrifices and rituals, achieved communion with the divine."[36] For Proclus the higher theurgy, which goes above Iamblichus's ritual theurgy, employs the power of faith.[37]

Pseudo-Dionysius uses the term "theurgy" and its cognates forty-eight times, which by two occurrences supersedes even extensive application of this terminology

ply the first cause in the list of many, but the only cause of everything.

[32] *CH* 2 (137D).

[33] *CH* 3.2 (165B).

[34] Angels of any rank and class cannot change their ontological status, while humans can progress through the ranks of human hierarchy.

[35] Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993): 116. Cf. Iamblichus, *DM* 1.12.

[36] K. W. Harl, "Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth- and Sixth- Century Byzantium," *Past and Present* 128 (1990): 12. Cf. R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2 ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 121–22.

[37] See Laurence Rosan, *The Philosophy of Proclus: The Final Phase of Ancient Thought* (New York, NY: Cosmos Greek-American Printing, 1949), 215.

in Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*.[38] Prior to Pseudo-Dionysius, theurgical terminology is not found in Christian literature, and even later its use is rather scarce, if not totally absent. There is no question that the language of theurgy was adopted by Pseudo-Dionysius from Neoplatonic sources.

If overall, Pseudo-Dionysius did not express significant influence on the development of liturgical texts, his influence on a theurgically connoted interpretation of liturgical drama is tremendous. It is true, as Andrew Louth points out, that most theurgical language in Pseudo-Dionysius appears in the context of Christ's Incarnation as the most significant soteriological event of direct divine interaction.[39] However, Dionysian theurgical terminology is not limited to his Christology alone. The first rank of angels receives the knowledge of theurgy directly from God,[40] and communicates it to the lower ranks of beings,[41] church sacraments have theurgical significance,[42] liturgical doxology and prayers are hymns of theurgy,[43] about the Creed Pseudo-Dionysius says, "To me it seems that this song is a celebration of all the theurgy on our behalf."[44] In addition to that, Pseudo-Dionysius masterfully incorporates the concept of theurgy in a scriptural exegetical pattern. Christian scripture as the manifestation of divine *oikonomia* is the work of theurgy as well. From Scripture (in this instance, perhaps from the Gospels) we learn about the "human and theurgical (θεουργίας) works of Jesus."[45] Moreover, the Scriptures "which God himself handed down . . . reveal to us all that we can know of God, all his works [i.e., theurgy, θεουργίας] and words and manifestations, every sacred word and work, everything, in short, which the divinity has so generously wished to pass on to the human hierarchy, every sacred thing done and said by God."[46] The whole economical aspect of God's providence in the world receives theurgical appropriation. This scriptural pattern, through sacramental participation, becomes representative of the Dionysian favorite triad of purification–illumination–perfection that consummates human approximation to communion and union with God:

> From scripture it has been shown that the sacred divine birth [i.e. the sacrament of baptism] is a purification and an illuminating enlightenment, that the sacraments of the synaxis [i.e. the Eucharist] and of the myron-ointment [the precise nature of this sacrament is unique to Pseudo-Dionysius] provide a perfecting knowledge and understanding of the divine workings [i.e., theurgy, θεουργίαν] and that it is through this that there is effected both the unifying uplifting toward the divinity and the most blessed communion with it.[47]

[38] *De Mysteriis* seems to be the only work where Iamblichus uses this terminology; however, he justifiably receives credit for introduction of ritualistically oriented theurgical content into Neoplatonism.

[39] Andrew Louth, "Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 434. Cf. Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy*, 87–88.

[40] *CH* 7.2.

[41] *CH* 13.4; *EH* 5.1.2; 5.1.4.

[42] *EH* 2.2.7; 2.3.8; 3.2; 3.3.15; 5.1.3.

[43] *EH* 3.3.4; 3.3.10.

[44] *EH* 3.3.7 (436C), Patristische Texte und Studien 36:88; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 218.

[45] *EH* 3.3.4 (429C); Patristische Texte und Studien 36:83. Cf. *DN* 1.4 (592B).

[46] *EH* 5.3.7 (513C); Patristische Texte und Studien 36:113; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 242.

[47] *EH* 5.1.3 (504BC); Patristische Texte und Studien 36:106; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Com-*

In its Iamblichean sense, refined by Proclus, theurgy in pseudo-Dionysius is closely correlated with the ultimate goal of every rational being striving for union with God, a goal that was appropriated both in terms of mystical contemplation and ritualistic significance. Again with the help of Proclus, the contemplative aspect of theurgy in this regard is conceptually reconciled with both the contemplative philosophy of Plotinus and the preceding Christian mystical writers, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius. In this sense, Iamblichus's theurgical orientation and essential unity of the cosmos is intricately modified in the Dionysian vision, which both approximates it more closely to the ultimate ideal of Neoplatonism—process of the return and the union with the super-transcendent One, and, at the same time, expresses it in Christian terms.[48]

Moreover, bishops (as leaders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy) are invested with the mystery of theurgy.[49] Through the ministry of bishops, "It makes known the works of God [i.e. the theurgy, θεουργίας] by way of the sacred symbols and it prepares the postulants to contemplate and participate in the holy sacraments."[50] In such a strong sense of hierarchical order, still closely observed in Eastern Orthodoxy, the role of the bishop plays a significant part. Pseudo-Dionysius, naturally, was not the first to introduce the highly respected role of bishop in the Christian Church, but he was the one who theologically reinforced the theurgically oriented sacramentality of the episcopal office, and firmly established the position of bishop not only in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also in his metaphysical representation of cosmic reality. By the virtue of the office, a bishop occupies the most advanced position in human order.[51] The virtue of the office does not negate the virtuous character of the individual who occupies it. Nevertheless, Dionysian emphasis on the metaphysical significance of the office in his perception of perfect order of human society certainly overpowers the emphasis on personal qualities and in some sense is reminiscent of Augustine's teaching on divine grace that is channeled through properly performed rituals and thus rendering them valid regardless of the character of the person who performs them. The role of the bishop as the main channel of mediation of anything divine that comes to other ecclesiastical ranks significantly helped to cement already elevated position of episcopal office and enhance even further subordinative nature of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Any decision of a bishop in his diocese receives almost unquestionable authority and this state of things still quite commonly present in the life of the Orthodox Church. Only bishops of the higher rank or a council of bishops can overturn decision made by another bishop. Other priests, monks and laity are simply not in proper metaphysical position to oppose a bishop.

Dionysian hierarchical perspective additionally increased the separation between clergy and laity in liturgical life. Even though the word "liturgy" in Greek means the

plete Works, 235–36.

[48] See Gregory Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 580–81.

[49] *EH* 1.5; 5.3.7.

[50] *EH* 5.1.6 (505D); Patristische Texte und Studien 36:108; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, 237.

[51] The bishop is below the highest rank of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is occupied by sacraments, but his is of the highest position available to human individuals.

"work of the people," in Pseudo-Dionysius it is, properly speaking, exclusively the work of clergy, who, by the nature of their ranks, reflect an advanced knowledge not accessible to simple mortals. "The people" are more like passive bystanders than actual participants, or as Wesche remarks, "the liturgy primarily is a 'show' which one observes, rather than a celebration in which one participates."[52] With a heightened sense of the mysterious nature of liturgical drama as symbolic representation of the heavenly reality, the liturgy itself correlates closely to the Neoplatonic concept of theurgy, where bishops and priests occupy the proper role of Hellenistic hierophants. Consequently, not only does the clergy receive an elevated status, but their liturgical performance does as well.

Liturgical perspective inspired by Dionysian theology contributed in the Eastern Churches to the erection of the iconostasis that separates the altar part of the church accessible to the clergy from the rest of the sanctuary, thus increasing the sense of the sacredness of the action, and remoteness of the laity, from direct participation in it.[53] The mystery of sacred knowledge concealed from the lower ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy will go hand in hand with the mystery of the liturgical performance, where the most sacramental parts of it would be literally concealed or blocked by the iconostasis from the view of the laity and the most important Eucharistic prayers would be recited in whisper. As John Meyendorff observes,

> Only by ascending the steps of the hierarchy by way of initiation does one reach the mystery that remains always essentially hidden. In the absence of an initiation, one possesses only an indirect knowledge through hierarchical intermediaries and symbols. . . . The necessary correctives to Dionysius were fairly rapidly incorporated in the realm of pure theology, but his symbolic and hierarchical conception of the liturgy marked forever Byzantine piety.[54]

As far as experience of the liturgy is concerned in relation to the presence of iconostasis, as Meyendorff notes in another place, "The liturgy, more than ever, continued to be seen as a mystery being *contemplated* with the celebrant making appearances, then disappearing behind the screen and the curtain, with the vision and perspective of Pseudo-Dionysius being confirmed in the legitimacy it received in the sixth century."[55] This interplay of openness and hiddenness of God, important insight of Patristic theology, was, as the result of Dionysian metaphysical speculations, essentially legitimized not only in strict hierarchical segregation of clergy from laity, but also became every Sunday experience of Eastern Orthodox believers.[56]

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[52] Kenneth Paul Wesche, "Christological Doctrine and Liturgical Interpretation in Pseudo-Dionysius," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33 (1989): 73.

[53] There also is the possibility that the practice of building the iconostasis was already developing in Christian tradition before Pseudo-Dionysius. In *EH* 3.3.2 (428C) he mentions beautifully depicted gateways of the sanctuary as sufficient for those who are not yet perfect. The precise meaning of this reference is not clear. It is possible that our author is simply giving theological justification for already existing practice.

[54] Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, 110–11.

[55] Meyendorff, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Byzantine Religious Thought," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993), 80 (emphasis is in original).

[56] Cf. Meyendorff, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Byzantine Religious Thought," 78.

With the full acceptance of the apostolic authority of the corpus, Pseudo-Dionysius becomes an important player in what is considered orthodox development of Byzantine theology. The eight-century Iconoclastic controversy and the fourteen-century Hesychast debates draw upon Neoplatonic Dionysian terminology.[57] Naturally, the world of Eastern Orthodoxy is more complex and cannot be reduced to exclusively Dionysian influence, however, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and its Neoplatonism certainly is a significant ingredient there. At the same time, Dionysian influence should not be seen as the unaltered. As Bernard McGinn correctly observes,

> One measure of the power, or again perhaps of the problematic of his thought, is that there has been very little "pure" Dionysianism in the history of Christianity. From the start his writings were treated much like the Bible itself—as a divine message filled with inner life and mysterious meaning which could never be exhausted, but which needed to be reread in each generation and reinterpreted in the light of new issues.[58]

One of the main Dionysian contributions is not even so much in his philosophical appeal and mystical attractiveness as in his cosmological vision of the universe presented in Christian terms. This worldview, significantly modified and developed by Maximus the Confessor (*c.* 580–662), still constitutes a representation of the worldview of Eastern Orthodoxy, and serves as a silent tribute to the genius of Neoplatonic philosophy.

In the summarizing characteristic of de Vogel,

> 1. East Christians really look up from visible things to the Invisible, which is to them more fully real. Things are for them "images" of a perfect archetype, and "signs" of the presence of God.
>
> 2. Without being disloyal to this world, they truly keep distance from the visible things, penetrated by the conviction that the Invisible is much better.
>
> 3. Platonism which, though the mass of the people do not know it, is perpetually present in their view of man and the world, is truly Christianized in their inner life.
>
> 4. All this is so, not only in the meditations of monks and the theoretical reflections of theologians, but it lives in the hearts of simple people of the country, men and women.[59]

Overall, the influence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is not confined to the Christian East. It became universal. The mysterious content of enigmatically originated works in vicissitudes of history secured for Pseudo-Dionysius almost one millennium of uncontested authority. As Kenneth Wesche remarks,

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[57] Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 160–62.

[58] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 182. This tendency is still not abandoned, see for example, Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

[59] C. J. de Vogel, "Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?" *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985): 47.

[60] Kenneth Paul Wesche, "Christological Doctrine and Liturgical Interpretation in Pseudo-Dionysius," 72.

> In understanding encountered today, one appreciates even more the importance of Pseudo-Dionysius, for he articulates ideas that are very congenial, even if not fully compatible, with Christian philosophy; or he may in fact be directly responsible for, or at least a major contributor to, many of these understandings through the influence he has had on Christian Tradition.[60]

There is no surprise that even today we still have defenders of essential orthodoxy of these documents.

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