

Dionysius the Areopagite
between Orthodoxy and Heresy

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Edited by

Filip Ivanović

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Filip Ivanović

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations for Editions and Collections

| | |
|-------|---|
| CCSG | <i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Graeca.</i> Turnhout: Brepols, 1977-. |
| Diels | <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker.</i> Edited by Hermann Alexander Diels and Walther Kranz. Berlin: Wiedmann, 1952. |
| GNO | <i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera.</i> Series founded by Werner W. Jaeger and Hermann Langerbeck. Leiden: Brill, 1958-1996. |
| LSJ | <i>A Greek-English Lexicon.</i> Edited by Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. |
| PG | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca.</i> Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Migne, 1857-1886. |
| PL | <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina.</i> Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris: Migne, 1844-1864. |
| SVF | <i>Stoicorum veterum fragmenta.</i> Edited by Hans Friedrich August von Arnim (Ioannes ab Arnim). Leipzig: Teubner, 1903-1905-1924. |

Abbreviations for Primary Sources

Aristoteles

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Et. Eud.</i> | <i>Ethica Eudemia</i> |
| <i>Met.</i> | <i>Metaphysica</i> |

Aristoxenus

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>El. harm.</i> | <i>Elementa harmonica</i> |
|------------------|---------------------------|

Damascius

| | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| <i>De Princ.</i> | <i>De Principiis</i> |
|------------------|----------------------|

Dionysius Areopagita

| | |
|-----|------------------------------------|
| DN | <i>De divinis nominibus</i> |
| MT | <i>De mystica theologia</i> |
| CH | <i>De coelesti hierarchia</i> |
| EH | <i>De ecclesiastica hierarchia</i> |
| Ep. | <i>Epistulae</i> |

Euclides

El. *Elementa*

Gregorius Nyssenus

Eun. *Contra Eunomium*

Hyppolitus

Refutatio *Refutatio omnium haeresium*

Iamblichus

De myst. *De mysteriis*

Justinus

II Apol. *Apologia secunda*

Marius Victorinus

Adv. Ar. *Adversus Arium*

Maximus Confessor

Amb. *Ambiguorum liber*

CG *Capita gnostica*

De char. *De charitate*

Myst. *Mystagogia*

QD *Quaestiones et dubia*

Thal. *Ad Thalassium*

Nicomachus Gerasinus

Intro. arith. *Introductio arithmetica*

Theol. arith. *Theologoumena arithmeticae*

Olympiodorus

In Phd. *In Platonis Phaedonem Commentaria*

Origenes

CC *Contra Celsum*

Plato

Crat. *Cratylus*

Parm. *Parmenides*

Resp. *Respublica*

Phaedr. *Phaedrus*

Tim. *Timaeus*

Plotinus

Enn. *Enneades*

Proclus

El. theol. *Elementa theologica*
In Alc. *In Platonis Alcibiadem commentaria*
In Crat. *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*
In Parm. *In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria*
In Tim. *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*
Theol. Pl. *Theologia Platonica*

Seneca

Nat. Quaest. *Naturales Quaestiones*

Servius

Ad Aen. *In Vergilii Aeneidos Commentarius*

Sextus Empiricus

Adv. Phys. *Adversus Physicos*

Simplicius

In Cat. *In Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*
In Phys. *In Physica Aristotelis commentarium*

Thomas Aquinas

In DN. *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositi*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

FILIP IVANOVIĆ

Despite the fact that the general field of Byzantine philosophy and theology still remains somewhat underdeveloped, especially in the Western sphere, the mysterious figure hidden behind the name of Dionysius the Areopagite is well known to both philosophers and theologians, both in the West and the East.

This fame, that goes from the late antiquity, through entire Middle Ages, up to our era is quite a remarkable phenomenon—whether because of his mysterious and still unknown identity or the influence he exerted on thinkers of the period when his authority came second only to Apostles, Dionysius continues to fascinate scholars. We still cannot attribute any known face to his pseudonym, and his writings still provoke debates on their true origin and intention. However, his philosophical-theological system found a receptive audience and became part of the tradition of the Church, while his masterful combination of (Neo-)Platonic teachings and Christian theology testify how philosophy and theology can live together and how the process of continuity and change between pagan thought and Christian faith happened to result in two strong pillars without which Christianity (especially Orthodox) and perhaps the European civilization itself would not be the same as we know it. And this interaction between Greek philosophy and Christian theology found in Dionysius one of its best examples and vehicles.

The very title of this book suggests the controversial character of our author and points to the themes it wishes to explore. In significant part, chapters of this book deal with Dionysius' pagan philosophical heritage, but not only that. The idea of me, as editor, and my colleagues and friends, as collaborators, was to offer a broad insight into a variety of Dionysian themes and to try to determine his place in relation to both his predecessors and posterity. It was obvious from the beginning that such an endeavour would probably demand years of work and could produce volumes of material, so in its final result, this book posits certain points on the map of Dionysius' thought and his relationship to what happened before and after him, without the slightest intention to be final and

definite. It is my belief, however, that we managed to shed some light on at least a few aspects of the Areopagite's work, so to reaffirm his endeavour in reconciling the two great attainments of his age, represented by the ancient philosophical thought and newly revealed faith.

The chapters of the book could easily be read as independent essays on certain themes stemming from the Dionysian *Corpus*. In this sense, they are results of the independent research conducted by their authors. However, I have tried to arrange the chapters in such a manner that they do connect with each other, so that the totality results in a comprehensive study of our general topic, which departs from the very question of the identity of Dionysius (but this time in a new, philosophical approach), travels through his relationship to Platonism combined with his originality (dealing with concepts such as knowledge, deification, theurgy, icon, and others), in order to finish the journey with two chapters that deal with his posterity, one within the very peculiar context of medieval architecture, and second on the Areopagite's relationship to another great Byzantine philosopher and theologian, Maximus the Confessor, who was sometimes pointed to as the one who "baptized Dionysius".

In the end, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the authors of the chapters, not just for their work, but also for their confidence in me as the editor of this volume. Besides being colleagues, they proved to be good friends and serious collaborators.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IDENTITY OF DIONYSIUS
THE AREOPAGITE:
A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

GORAZD KOČIJAČIČ

One of the authors that is mentioned most often and is also brilliantly commented upon by Sergei Averintsev in his *The Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*¹ is Dionysius the Areopagite. This is no coincidence. Dionysius (Denys), or Pseudo-Dionysius, as he is called by the Russian philologist in accordance with the contemporary scholarly convention, has influenced profoundly the spirituality, theology and philosophy in the East and the West, and still represents an intriguing challenge to them.²

Here I would like to present a new, philosophical approach to the question of Dionysius' identity and—let me divulge in advance my hidden agenda—help to rid him of the prefix Pseudo-, and this without underplaying the pseudonymity by invoking literary conventions of antiquity or by pushing him back to the Athens of the first century. This idea—the novelty of my approach—would most probably not have been admired by Dionysius, because while novelty sells today, the author of *Corpus Areopagiticum* displaces us to the spiritual world where the greatest value is the antiquity itself (although, to be honest, he was an extremely daring innovator himself in many regards). Perhaps, he would

¹ Sergei S. Averintsev, *Poetika Rannevizantijskoj Literatury* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977.)

² I allude here above all to the very interesting exchange of thoughts on apophaticism between Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida that started with Marion's chapter on Dionysius in his *Idole et distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), and lasted until Derrida's death. For the still ongoing scholarly *dissensus* on Dionysius, cf. Adolf Martin Ritter, "Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagita und der Neuplatonismus (im Gespräch mit neuerer Literatur)", *Philotheos: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, 4, 2004, 260-275.

have liked the epithet “philosophical” because it was not without reason that Ioannes Scotus Eriugena called him *divinus philosophus*.

I do not want to go into an attempt to define philosophy itself on this occasion, or to determine what makes certain thought a philosophical one. I merely want to stress with this adjective that my approach to the question of Dionysius’ identity will not be committed to the historical-scientific method, but to the sensitivity to—I hope—a different, alien, “crazy” horizon called by Dionysius himself *ἀλήθεια*, the truth. In his *Divine Names* he says:

The man in union with truth knows clearly that all is well with him, even if everyone else thinks that he has gone out of his mind (*ἑξωτερικῶς*). What they fail to see, naturally, is that he has gone out of the path of error and has in his real faith arrived at truth. He knows that far from being mad, as they imagine him to be, he has been rescued from unstable and the constantly changing movement along the multiform variety of errancy and that he has been set free by simple and immutable stable truth.³

From a philosophical approach I shall challenge the fundamental presuppositions of the scientific approach to history that resides in this “multiform variety”: the entire field of history, the common time in which the historical event is inscribed, the basic network of space and time where our historical imagination finds it self-evident what identity is. If I may, I would like to ask you for something difficult. A philosophical approach demands the power of the abstraction of everything that is self-evident—and this precisely because of the openness to *ἀλήθεια*.

It has been said that Bertrand Russell once asked Ludwig Wittgenstein to admit that there was no rhinoceros in the room.⁴ When Wittgenstein refused to believe this, Russell looked under the table and said that he was sure that there wasn’t one. Wittgenstein was devastated. I beg you now, do not push me into that kind of devastation. Try to forget for a moment what such a self-evident identity in history is—and try not to turn your eye to the past while reading my weird deliberations.

³ DN VII.4, 872D-873A. (Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Dionysius’ works in this book are given in Colm Luibheld’s translation.)

⁴ Cf. Brian McGuinness, *Young Ludwig: Wittgenstein’s Life 1889-1921* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89.

History and agapic hermeneutics

Who was in fact Dionysius? This question with its distinction between name and facts, truth and fiction, apparently directs us towards history. I will try to argue here that the appearance is just an appearance: this question introduces us to *ontology*. Scientific recourse to history without the radical ontological turn proves to be here—as also everywhere else—an “errancy”, if I may use the Areopagite’s term. The awareness of the ontological dimension of this question demands a new, still undeveloped but necessary, hermeneutics where we allow the other of the history to speak without putting the answers concerning the fundamental questions of being into his mouth.

The claim for a philosophical suspense of the common horizon of understanding the past when trying to understand a text and its author does, of course, evoke well-known topics of contemporary hermeneutics and its heroes, e.g., Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, but I do not want to apply here the *loci communes* to the question of Dionysius’ identity. My intention is here to make quite a different move. The fundamental concept of the modern hermeneutics derives from—if you allow me to simplify here—the interplay of two different horizons, and this fusion of these horizons allows the creative modification of our own understanding. *I am convinced that the very presupposition of the co-related horizons conceals from us the ontological presuppositions, in which we inscribe both horizons, our own and that of the other.* In our case, these very pre-suppositions are the following: universal time, history, identity in history, chronological sequence of events, etc. The other paradigm of understanding (that I would like to suggest here) consists of our ability radically to question our own ontology which lies at the foundation of this pre-supposed horizon of the very constitution of the historical reality—and that not because of the mere act of scepticism or phenomenological *epoché*, but because of the very self-constructed facticity of the other in history. The reality of the history does not demand the fusion of two horizons but the annihilation of our own horizon and a radical intrusion—which in the logical sense is in fact impossible—of the other: the annihilation of common history, of time somehow already understood, of identity already understood—and the thought of that very annihilation.

Such a thought might be called an *agapic* hermeneutics. The skill of the interpretation lies in the expression of the impossible possibility which is *ἀγάπη*, the radical openness to the other in his/her aloneness. Let me explain what I mean with this.

The question of history in a philosophical sense is connected with *our ontological understanding of the absence in time*.

How does that which I posit as the mode of the being of beings exist? How do beings exist that are not present any more but the existence of which I assume, postulating them on the grounds of some other things—e.g., a text—which enters into the realm of my sensations and/or spiritual perception. In the common-sense meaning of the “past”, in the act of imagination of the being of something that is no more, I return that-which-is-no-more to reality. When I for example think of the author of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, I think of one of those people whom I meet in everyday life, or whom I have met and who have already passed away—as the other of the others. With this return, with my act of memory, I somehow return him to what he was: what he was independently of my memory. But if I reflect this gesture of mine, I see that the absent—despite of the self-obliterating act of imagination that places it in being—remains in itself utterly nonexistent. In the act of historical imagination I am myself bestowing existence on the non-existent. Making the absent present is not merely changing the way of being, but radically moving non-being into being. And yet, this is only possibility of thinking history. The only other possibility is the complete opposite. When I *really think* of the author of this corpus, I think of his hypostasis, regardless of whether I place him in a particular century on the basis of this or that historical lead. I think of him as a totality of beings and the only being itself. He is like me. This is an impossible hermeneutical act: I disappear in him; I am being annihilated. The subject of history demands from me this annihilation. The reality of the historical being is the paralogical synthesis between these two paradoxes: between the non-being made present in my hypostasis and the hypostasis which demands my annihilation in order to be understood. Scientific historiography does not take into account this *paradoxical reality of the historical*; it remains only the constant jotting down, and cataloguing of, the traces that enable this double jump. If the reflection of the paradox is open to the being of the historical itself, historiography is in the strict sense of the word being-less.

Above-worldly pulling together of the othernesses

The table is, I hope not too cryptically, clean. There is only the text by Dionysius left on it. The text that is in us, in me. The text that is—in me—the expression of the being of the other. The only being. The text which, regardless of all my ideas on identity, tells me something that is completely its own.

The text which faces us is the text of the author who identifies himself as Dionysius, the disciple of Paul. In the semantics of philosophical styles, in their scientifically historical syntax, this identification seems impossible. Let us assume for a moment that the texts as traces of the only Being cannot be placed in any context. That Dionysius, in other words, may have known Proclus and other Neoplatonists, and that, in spite of the fact that he had read them, those thinkers were not prior to him but were his contemporaries, enhypostasized in his—the only, incomparable—time. That all the concepts he used to articulate his vision are simply enhypostasized in his Being, and that at the same time they express it.

To put it in more concrete terms: let us see what the text itself reveals by way of understanding of authorial identity. Let us allow the textuality of the corpus itself to construct the ontological identity that it expresses.

First, it seems that Dionysius attempts to maintain the identity of individual beings—and that of his own, too. In his explanation of God's name "Peace", he writes:

"How is that everything wishes for peace?", someone may ask. "There are many things which take pleasure in being other, different, and distinct, and they would never freely choose to be at rest." This is true, different refer to the individuality of each thing and to the fact that nothing tries to lose its individuality. Yet, as I will try to show, this situation is itself due to the desire for peace. For everything loves to be at peace with itself, to be at one, and never to move or fall away from its own existence and from what it has. And perfect Peace is there as a gift, guarding without confusion the individuality of each, providentially ensuring that all things are quiet and free of confusion within themselves and from without, that all things are unshakably what they are and that they have peace and rest. If all moving things wish never to be at rest but aim always for their own appropriate movement, this too is because of a wish for that divine Peace of the universe which keeps everything firmly in its own place and which ensures that the individuality and the stirring life of all moving things are kept safe from removal and destruction. This happens as a result of the inward peace which causes the things in movement to engage in the activity proper to themselves.⁵

Despite the God-given yearning of all beings for identity with themselves, the *Corpus* emphasizes the other *eros* which is in the marked opposition to the first one: the *eros* to return to one's own origin and to unite with it. Many textual references could be made here, suffice it to

⁵ DN XI.3-4, 952BD.

quote the famous passage from *The Mystical Theology* where the author describes Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai:

But then (Moses) ... renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.⁶

This unification is for the author of the corpus *the possibility*: the possibility which could or could not be put into realization. He does not, however, allow any doubt concerning the fact that he, as a link in the hierarchical chain, is heading towards this union. He does not speak about it as about something exterior to his experience, but as about something that is his own most intimate message. In this I see the articulation of his own self-constructed being. The only being—*γίγνεσθαι*, “becoming”—which is referred in the prayer, is not an optional alternative, but the path from the less-real to the more-real, indeed towards Reality itself.

What happens to human identity on this path? Let us listen to the text again: “being neither oneself nor someone else...” The subject of the description of the ecclesiastical, celestial and divine landscapes which lead to union does not have a fixed identity, precisely because it is the subject of narration and at the same time the subject heading towards union: someone who in the ideal sense of the word “completely belongs to the one who is beyond all realities”.

In such a changed horizon there is no unified field of history any more, if we are able to open ourselves to the experience which is expressed in the Areopagite's texts in such a way as to cause us to renounce our own ontological presuppositions. The subject of *περιήγησις*, theologically descriptive narration, places us—by annihilating us as *subiectus unionis*—in the world where our common-sense, or scientifically historical theories of identity do not apply any more.

The fact that the author as the subject of union is not himself or someone else precisely enables him in the mystical inversion to become himself and someone else.

This inversion holds good in Dionysius' world, in the expression of his own experience of being its (meta-)ontological foundation. Let us listen again to the text *The Divine Names*, although we might get confused again by “the excesses of the stylistic exuberance” of the author, “who was really unable to utter even one simple word” (Averintsev):

⁶ MT I.3, 1001A.

And so all these scriptural utterances in a holy way celebrate the supreme Deity by describing it as a monad or henad, because of its simplicity and unity of supernatural indivisibility, by which unifying power we are led to unity. We, in the diversity of what we are, are pulled together into one, and are led into god-imitating oneness, into a unity reflecting God.⁷

The otherness is in Dionysius' view undoubtedly what gives me identity, what tells me apart from the other other. How are we to understand this mysterious *com-plicatio* of the othernesses in "god-imitating oneness, into a unity reflecting God"? Undoubtedly, this "complication" is the disappearance of the othernesses which constitute the identity of beings, separated from their origin. Istvan Perczel argues that this is a case of "clear-cut heretical Origenism",⁸ and refers to the fourteenth anathema of the Fifth Ecumenical Council. But such a claim is too rash.

That here Dionysius uses Platonic terminology, there can be no doubt. But with what intention? The entirety of his works clearly shows us that this "oneness" does not mean the demise of the radical difference which separates all creation from its Principle. The radical destabilization of the identity is taking place beyond the metaphors of the fusion as new identity. Drawing on his own spiritual experience, Dionysius in his own way and using his idiosyncratic terminology articulates the doctrine of deification, *Θέωσις*, which is one of the most fundamental messages of the Eastern Church.

"Our redemption is possible only through our deification" is written in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.⁹ And then: "God came to us in his love towards humanity ... and assimilated us to himself as fire".¹⁰ Ysabel de Andia in her article "Mystères, unification et divinisation de l'homme selon Denys l'Aréopagite"¹¹ comes to the following conclusion: "The new perspective brought by the hierarchies is deification. The very aim of hierarchy is to unify and deify intellects, human and divine... Deification is participation in the divine life, and the transmission of this life is enacted in rites which are hierarchical and symbolical at the same time."¹²

⁷ DN I.4, 589D.

⁸ "Denys l'Aréopagite et Symeon le Nouveau Théologien", in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 347, n. 20.

⁹ EH I. 3, 376A.

¹⁰ EH II.2.1, 393A

¹¹ *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 63, 1997, 273-332.

¹² *Ibid.*, 322.

In one of the crucial passages in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which speaks about this process of deification in an ecclesiological and openly Christological context, we find again the expression “pulling together”, *σύνπτυξις*, *com-plicatio*, which we have already met in the explanation of the divine names:

Indeed the Word of God teaches those of us who are its disciples that in this fashion—though more clearly and more intellectually—Jesus enlightens our blessed superiors, Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God, who is the ultimate in divine power. He assimilates them, as much as they are able, to his own light. *As for us, with that yearning for beauty which raises us upward (and which is raised up) to him, he (Jesus) pulls together all our many othernesses, thereby making our life, disposition and activity something one and divine, and bestowing on us the power appropriate to a sacred priesthood.*¹³

Besides unification with the Origin, deification, participation in the divine life, has the feature of mutual union, community, *κοινωνία*. “The complication of othernesses” in the process of deification enables also the mutual unification of beings that are on their way towards deification, without introducing any kind of chaos which would replace *τάξις*, order. And yet, we should not mitigate the radicalism of Dionysius’ thesis. Although Perczel wrongly connects Dionysius’ doctrine with Origenism, his claim nevertheless reveals the radically a-topical, displaced, understanding of identity in the Areopagite’s discourse on deification. This radically understood *θέωσις*, together with an a-topical identity of the subject of deification, allows the author of the corpus to take over another name which is neither fiction nor historical reality, but expresses his writing out of the factually experienced prolepsis of the eschatological *κοινωνία*.

This destabilisation of identity in the intimate, paralogical “logics” of deification implies the *evacuation* of the text itself written by the subject of *θέωσις*. Usually, the verification of what is written is sought in the experience of the writer. Dionysius’ unhistorical self-identification, grounded in his ontology of deification which annihilates our own ontology, withdraws this certitude.

If Dionysius *is not* Paul’s disciple in “historical” fact, then he *is* Paul’s disciple in the very experience of being deified, which happens on a level of identity transcending every historical ascertainment of identity. When

¹³ EH I.1, 372AB. Our italics.

God is παντόνυμος and ἀνόνυμος—when he has all names and is without any name—then the person who is experiencing the deification is ontologically entitled to take over any name: including the name “Dionysius, the pupil of Paul”. And yet, he remains utterly without a name, and in the gesture of writing, being alien to every historical identity, he invites his reader into that very same mystical *être sans papier*.¹⁴

¹⁴ See also my introduction to the Slovene edition of Dionysius’ complete works: Dionizij Areopagit, *Zbrani spisi*. Uvod, prevod in opombe Gorazd Kocijančič (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2008), 7-147.

CHAPTER TWO

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE THEOLOGIES: THEORIES OF LANGUAGE AND IDEAS IN DIONYSIUS*

PIETRO PODOLAK

The evident dependence of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* on Proclus, the diadochos of the Neoplatonic school of Athens who died in 485, has been used in the past as an argument for demolition of the legend, inherited from the Middle Ages, on the apostolicity of Dionysius. Since today the authenticity of the Areopagite's work can be considered as definitively faded away, the comparison with the Proclian texts constitutes an instrument for comprehension of the Dionysian thought.

The *par excellence* philosophical treatise is entitled *De divinis nominibus*, *περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων*. The form of the title, passed on by manuscripts, is guaranteed by diverse citations within the text, and its authenticity cannot be doubted.¹

What is interesting is that this verbal link is not casual, but corresponds to the title of a Porphyrian work, of which unfortunately only the title itself remained;² it corresponds also to the contents indications that Proclus himself provided regarding the first book of his own *Platonic Theology*,

* I thank my colleague and friend Filip Ivanović for taking the responsibility to translate this chapter from the Italian.

¹ DN I.1, 585B: τῷ συμβρεσπυτέρῳ Τιμοθέῳ Διονύσιος ὁ πρεσβύτερος Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων. Νῦν δέ, ὦ μακάριε, μετὰ τὰς Θεολογικὰς ὑποτυπώσεις ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν θείων ὀνομάτων ἀνάπτυξιν, ὡς ἐφικτόν, μετελεύσομαι. DN I.5, 593AB: καὶ μὴν, εἰ... πᾶσι δὲ αὐτῆ καθόλου ἄληπτος καὶ οὔτε αἰσθησις αὐτῆς ἔστιν οὔτε φαντασία οὔτε δόξα οὔτε ὄνομα οὔτε λόγος οὔτε ἐπαφή οὔτε ἐπιστήμη, πῶς ὁ Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων ἡμῖν διαπραγματευθήσεται λόγος, ἀκλήτου καὶ ὑπερωνύμου τῆς ὑπερουσίου θεότητος ἀποδεικνυμένης.

² *Porphyrii Philosophi fragmenta*, ed. Andrew Smith (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993), fr. 361 (Suda IV.178.19): Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων α'.

the one in which, before the adventurous descent to the dusty steps on which the Athenian scholarch arranged the divinities of the Greek pantheon, he explains the eminently theological goal of *Parmenides* and the common attributes of the gods (their existence, goodness, providence, immutability, science, beauty, etc). That the topic of the first book consists of the treatment of the “divine names”, it is evident also from the *pinax* of the work; moreover, the very words of Proclus, in the privileged place of the opening and conclusion of the book, that inform us how the principle subject of the first part of the work will be precisely the divine names.³

The treatise on the divine names is therefore a direct and declared heir of *The Platonic Theology*, whose first section is recalled in the very title. The complex structure of progressive hierarchization of divinities is naturally simplified in a radical way, and in the end substantially abandoned by the Areopagite, for whom only the first book, the one on the general attributes of divinities, results integrable in the system of Christian theology.

However, it remains legitimate, and even fundamental for the comprehension of the treatise’s sense, to clarify the nature and function of these *θεῖα ὀνόματα*; such nature is, first of all, theological, and as such, for a Neoplatonic thinker such as Dionysius, at the same time philosophical, and intimately connected to the exegesis of Plato’s texts.

In his work dedicated to the examination of relationships between *De divinis nominibus* and Neoplatonic commentaries to *Parmenides*—which is surely one of the most interesting and intelligent contributions on Dionysius—Eugenio Corsini arrived to two fundamental results: Dionysius is to be linked, through the mediation of Proclus and his teacher Syrianus, to the exegetical tradition formed around Plato’s *Parmenides*. So

la fusione delle due ipotesi [del Parmenide] e la loro riduzione ai due momenti, apofatico e catafatico, della conoscenza della divinità deve essere considerata un apporto originale di Dionigi, che raccogliendo e riducendo a sistema tendenze affioranti qua e là nella tradizione filosofica

³ Proclus, *Theol. Pl.*, *pinax* 29, p. 4: κδ'. Περὶ τῶν θεῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ τῆς ὁρθότητος αὐτῶν τῆς ἐν Κρατύλῳ παραδεδομένης; cf. I.1: οὔτε γὰρ νοῆσαι τὸ θεῖον ἄλλως δυνατόν ἢ τῷ παρ' αὐτῶν φωτὶ τελεσθέντας, οὔτε εἰς ἄλλους ἐξενεργεῖν ἢ παρ' αὐτῶν κυβερνωμένους καὶ τῶν πολυειδῶν δοξασμάτων καὶ τῆς ἐν λόγοις φερομένης ποικιλίας ἐξηρημένην φυλάττοντας τὴν τῶν θεῶν ὀνομάτων ἀνέλιξιν; I.29: περὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς ἀγεννήτου τῶν θεῶν ὑπόρξεως καὶ ταῦτα ἰκανά· λείπεται δὲ, οἶμαι, καὶ περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων τῶν θεῶν εἰπεῖν; I.29: τοσαῦτα καὶ περὶ τῶν θεῶν ὀνομάτων ὡς γε πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἐξαρκέσει τοῖς τῆς τοῦ Πλάτωνος θεολογίας ἀντιλήψεσθαι μέλλουσι.

e patristica precedente operò la conciliazione più audace fra cristianesimo e filosofia.⁴

Essentially, according to the same author, “l’unificazione delle due vie, negativa e positiva, nell’unico soggetto è stata forse l’intuizione più feconda dell’Areopagita, e la correzione più originale apportata al sistema neoplatonico”.⁵

Corsini’s thesis, even many years after its publication, seems to impose itself so that for many years the argument has not been dealt with. Only in relatively recent times, a contribution by Salvatore Lilla brought to light the fact that the unification of the first two hypotheses of the Platonic dialogue (that is, the application of apophatic and cataphatic methods) appears also in the commentary to Parmenides, which Pierre Hadot attributed to Porphyry.⁶

Departing from Lilla’s observations and discussing further sources, the first part of this chapter will try to take into consideration three modalities of man’s knowing the divinity (apophatic mode, cataphatic mode, and the application of both) proposed by Dionysius, and to bring to light its traditional character in last analysis.

⁴ Eugenio Corsini, *Il trattato de divinis nominibus dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al Parmenide* (Torino: Giappichelli, 1962), 121.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44. The same conclusions were claimed also by Endre von Ivánka, *Platonismo cristiano: Recezione e trasformazione del Platonismo nella Patristica*. Presentazione di Giovanni Reale, introduzione di Werner Beierwaltes, traduzione di Enrico Peroli (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1992), 181.

⁶ Cf. Salvatore Lilla, “Ps. Denys l’Aréopagite, Porphyre et Damascius”, in Andia, *Denys*, 117-152. The commentary to *Parmenides* contained in the palimpsest of Turin was attributed to Porphyry by Pierre Hadot in *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1968), vol. II. Despite the consensus on the hypothesis of Henri-Dominique Saffrey on the basis of comparison with the text of the *Theosophy of Tübingen* (cf. Henri-Dominique Saffrey, “Connaissance et inconnaissance de Dieu: Porphyrius et la Théosophie de Tübingen”, in *Gonimos: Neoplatonic and Byzantine Studies presented to L. G. Westerink at 75*, ed. John M. Duffy and John J. Peradotto, Buffalo: Arethusa, 1988, 1-20), the attribution to Porphyry is still not certain. See the edition of the text by Alessandro Linguisti (Florence: Olschki, 1995, 63-202) and Gerald Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides* (Bern-Stuttgart-Wien: Paul Haupt, 1999). One should also bear in mind *Il Parmenide di Platone e la sua tradizione: Atti del III Colloquio Internazionale del Centro di Ricerca sul Neoplatonismo*, ed. Maria Barbanti and Francesco Romano (Catania: CUCEM, 2002).

1. The Negative Way

This treatment should start with a remark: with the exception of rare cases, such as, for example, the section of the fourth chapter of *The Divine Names*, which resumes *De malorum subsistentia*, to trace “the source” of Dionysius is an extremely delicate and risky endeavour, since the author shows an exceptional capacity of allusion, rielaboration and combination of a multitude of different texts, and in so doing, reaches an original result.

The difficulty seems macroscopic when one tries to identify the antecedents that Dionysius uses to define his own doctrine of the negative theology. The ineffability of the first principle is in fact an issue that traverses a great deal of philosophy in the imperial and late antique period, especially if with middle Platonic and Neoplatonic mark, and which the historical research has made evident in a mass of critical literature impossible to present in an exhaustive way.⁷

Dionysius, tied to the theme of the *θεῖα ὀνόματα*, defines the ineffability of the first principle as anonymity in a passage to which should be given a closer look:

Realizing all this, the theologians praise it by every name (ἐκ παντός ὀνόματος)—and as the Nameless (ἄνόνημον) One. For they call it nameless (ἄνόνημον) when they speak of how the supreme Deity, during a mysterious revelation of the symbolical appearance of God, rebuked the man who asked, “What is your name?” and led him away from any knowledge of the divine name by countering, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?”. This surely is the wonderful “name which is above every name” and is therefore without a name. It is surely the name established “above every name that is named either in this age or in that which is to come”.⁸

⁷ Just to mention some of the most important works: André Jean Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismegiste*, vol. IV, *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose* (Paris: Gabalda, 1954); Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. II, *The Way of Negation: Christian and Greek* (Bonn: Henstain, 1986); ample collection of texts in Salvatore Lilla, “La teologia negativa dal pensiero greco classico a quello patristico e bizantino”, *Helikon*, 22-27, 1982-1987, 211-279; 28, 1988, 203-279; 29-30, 1989-1990, 97-186; 31-32, 1991-1992, 3-72; Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995); Karen L. King, *Revelation of the Unknowable God* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1995); *Arrethos Theos: L'ineffabilità del primo principio nel Medioplatonismo*, ed. Francesca Calabi (Pisa: ETS, 2002).

⁸ DN I.6, 596A.

The presupposition of the divine unknowability is individuated by Dionysius in the character of superiority to being, proper to the divinity, which is a doctrinal aspect defined in the Areopagite, as in other late Neoplatonists, as an element that results from the exegesis of *Parmenides*.⁹

To review and comment on all the examples of the theme of the divine superiority to substance and its unknowability in thinkers of Platonic mark, is certainly not a task that can be accomplished here. We should limit ourselves, therefore, to the consideration that the superiority of God with respect to the substance is not accepted by the majority of middle Platonist authors, in which prevails the ontological and noetic model of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Even less is this doctrine, in these authors, justified by the interpretation of *Parmenides*, particularly of the first hypothesis of the dialogue.

There remain, however, some exceptions that should be grasped from the poor remains of the middle Platonic works, which allow one to believe that, despite not being the most widespread, the doctrine of the ineffable God as superior to substance was traditional in the Platonic ambit.

Eudorus, Moderatus and Celsus

Two middle Platonic authors, Moderatus and Celsus, appear to be precursors of the first principle as superior to substance; the correct reconstruction of their doctrine has been widely discussed without reaching unanimous conclusions, and in absence of explicit reference to the texts of *Republic* and *Parmenides*, it is better, for now, to put these two authors aside.¹⁰

⁹ Particularly, DN I.5, 593A: "How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being (...) anticipates all things while eluding their grasp?"

¹⁰ Here too we give just the most important bibliography: Festugière, *Le Dieu inconnu*, 18-31; Hans J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Platon und Plotin* (Amsterdam: Schippers, 1964), 252ff; Id., "ΕΠΙΕΚΕΙΝΑ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ: Zu Platon *Politeia* 509b", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 51, 1969, 1-30; John Whittaker, "ΕΠΙΕΚΕΙΝΑ ΝΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 23:2, 1969, 91-104; cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Phys.*, II.281-282 cited also in: Eric R. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One", *Classical Quarterly*, 82, 1928, 129-141.

For Eudorus see Simplicius, *In Phys.*, I.5 p. 181, 28-30 Diels. Eudorus' fragments were edited by C. Mazzarelli in *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica*, 77, 1985, 197-209; 535-555; cf. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato", 138; Festugière, *Le Dieu inconnu*, 22 n. 5; Krämer, *Der Ursprung*, 252; Carlos Steel, "Une histoire de

On the other hand, Celsus provides precious testimony of the theological importance of the intersection between the first Parmenidean hypothesis and *Republic* (509b) in the middle Platonist ambit.¹¹ Particularly clear is the influence of the sixth book of the *Republic*, on the “analogical path” followed by Celsus:

As, then, among visible things the sun is neither the eye nor vision, but that which enables the eye to see, and renders vision possible, and in consequence of it visible things are seen, all sensible things exist and itself is rendered visible; so among things intelligible, that which is neither reason (*οὔτε νοῦς*), nor intelligent perception, nor knowledge, is yet the cause which enables the reason to know, which renders intelligent perception possible; and in consequence of it knowledge arises, all things intelligible, truth itself and substance have their existence (*αὐτῇ οὐσίᾳ τοῦ εἶναι*); and itself, which is above all these things (*πάντων ἐπέκεινα ὄν*), becomes in some ineffable way intelligible.¹²

Apart from the metaphor and analogy of sun, clearly derived from the *Republic*, we also find a preannouncement of the principle by which the cause (in this case the divinity) is superior to the effect produced: a concept that will be of particular importance for the successive

l'interprétation du Parménide dans l'Antiquité”, in Barbanti and Romano, *Il Parménide di Platone*, 19.

For Moderatus see Simplicius, *In Phys.*, 230, 34-231, 2 Diels. The information on Moderatus, if it is not be considered as contaminated with Neoplatonism, anticipates the Plotinian triad: the first One would be nothing else but the One and superior to being; the second One would be of intellectual nature and within the ambit of being, and the third would be animated. Opposed to Dodd's interpretation and to the recognition of a Moderatus' doctrine in Simplicius is Margherita Isnardi Parente, “Supplementum Accademicum”, in *Atti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, IX.VI:2, 1995, 249-311, especially p. 253.

¹¹ To cite just the essential contributions: Heinrich Dörrie, “Die platonische Theologie des Kelsos in ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit der christlichen Theologie auf Grund von Origenes *C. Celsum* 7, 42ff”, *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen: Philologisch-Historische Klasse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 19-55; Michael Frede, “Celsus Philosophus Platonicus”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.36.7, 1994, 5183-5213; Salvatore Lilla, *Introduzione al Medio platonismo* (Roma: Augustinianum, 1992), 79ff. For the relationship of Origen and Plato's *Parménides* see Maria Barbanti, “La teologia di Origene e la prima ipotesi del Parménide”, in Barbanti and Romano, *Il Parménide di Platone*, 249-280.

¹² CC, VII.45. (tr. Frederick Crombie)

Neoplatonism.¹³ It is based on this premise that God, the cause of substance, is to be considered as superior to it and beyond everything. Up to this point the Celsus' treatise would be indebted only to the sixth book of the *Republic*.

In another passage, this Platonic philosopher's exposition becomes far more complex from the viewpoint of the sources:

For not one of us asserts that *God partakes of form or colour*. Nor does He even *partake of motion*, because He stands firm, and His nature is permanent, and He invites the righteous man also to do the same, saying: "But as for thee, stand thou here by Me". And if certain expressions indicate a kind of motion, as it were, on His part, such as this, "They heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day", we must understand them in this way, that it is by sinners that God is understood as moving, or as we understand the "sleep" of God, which is taken in a figurative sense, or His "anger", or any other similar attribute. But *God does not partake even of substance*. For He is partaken of (by others) rather than that Himself partakes of them, and He is partaken of by those who have the Spirit of God. Our Saviour, also, does not partake of righteousness; but being Himself "righteousness", He is partaken of by the righteous. A discussion about "substance" would be protracted and difficult, and especially if it were a question whether that which is permanent and immaterial be "sub stance" properly so called, so that it would be found that God is beyond "substance", communicating of His "substance", by means of office and power (*ἐπέκεινα οὐσία ἐστὶ πρᾶσβεία, καὶ δυνάμει ὁ Θεός*),¹⁴ to those to whom He communicates Himself by His Word, as He does to the Word Himself; or even if He is "substance"...¹⁵

It should be useful to note the correspondence of Celsus' propositions with those of the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*:

¹³ For example, Proclus, *El. Theol.*, VII: πᾶν τὸ παρακτικὸν ἄλλου κρεϊττόν ἐστι τῆς τοῦ παραγομένου φύσεως.

¹⁴ *Resp.*, 509b.

¹⁵ *CC*, VI.64. The propositions coming from Celsus are rendered in italics. The idea that the quotations from *Parm.*, 141e9 and *Resp.*, 509b are not introduced by Origen is confirmed by the fact that the Alexandrian does not seem to be interested in the idea of the divine nature's superiority to substance; on the contrary, Origen does not at all exclude that God is essentially being (cf. Barbanti, "La teologia di Origene", 268). On this see also Salvatore Lilla, "The Neoplatonic Hypostases and the Christian Trinity", in *Studies in Plato and the Platonic Tradition: Essays Presented to John Whittaker*, ed. Mark Joyal (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 135-148.

CC: μετέχει σχήματος ὁ
θεός ἢ χρώματος.

Parm., 137d9: ἄνευ σχήματος.

Ibid.: οὐδὲ κινήσεως μετέχει.

Parm., 139a3: κατὰ πᾶσαν κίνησιν τὸ
ἐν ἀκίνητον.

Ibid.: οὐδ' οὐσίας μετέχει ὁ θεός.

Parm., 141e9: οὐδαμῶς ἄρα τὸ ἐν
οὐσίας μετέχει.

Shortly after the use of *Parmenides*, however, Origen shows in his confutation the debt of Celsus to the passage from the *Republic*, the same that was already used by Moderatus. The conclusions to which Celsus arrived were not those of the total apophaticism, as we will see, for example, in Basilides: his god was, however, ἀρρήτω πινὶ δυνάμει νοητός.

It seems to me that the texts do not leave doubts: Celsus is fully indebted to the tradition that identified the one of *Parmenides* with the Good of *Republic* 509b. This tradition, which prepares the Neoplatonic doctrine of the first principle, and the importance of which is hardly possible to exaggerate, see in the first Parmenidean hypothesis, submitted to a particular interpretation, the doctrine of the absolutely transcendent first principle. We should not be, therefore, surprised to find, in the middle Platonic doctrine and in the successive Neoplatonic evolution, the presence of the propositions from *Parmenides* in a “theological” sphere: it is precisely under the mark of this dialogue that the doctrine of the transcendent and ineffable principle was developed, even though this doctrine was destined to remain minor within the middle Platonic phase.

Now, as it can be derived from these observations, the negative theology is attested, already in pagan context, within the purview of exegesis of Plato's *Parmenides*, and in particular of its first hypothesis; with the Gnostic Basilides, this topic will see its entrance in Christian theology, although with a Gnostic stamp.

Basilides

To retrace step by step all the reprehensions of the apophatic theology in the Christian sphere and with reference to the first Parmenidean hypothesis is not a simple endeavour and cannot be accomplished here. I will therefore limit myself to emphasize that with Basilides, a native of Alexandria and active between 120 and 150 AD, the entrance of the *via negationis* into the Christian ambit happens under the influence of Plato's *Parmenides*.