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Source: *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 98-114

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717171>

Accessed: 30-07-2017 14:43 UTC

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The Mysticism of Dionysius Areopagita: Platonist or Christian?

Dionysius the Areopagite presents his interpreters with a singular problem: no one knows who he was. We know only that the body of works bearing this name appeared around 500 A.D., that they almost certainly come from the area of greater Syria (i.e., including Palestine), and that they met with almost immediate acceptance. Now at last available to us in a critical text (Suchla 1990 and Ritter/Heil 1991) and a comprehensive English translation (Liubheid/Rorem 1987), the texts themselves comprise four treatises: one devoted to the intelligible names of God (*Divine Names*), another to the angels (*Celestial Hierarchy*), a third to the Christian Church in its sacraments and orders (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*), and the fourth to union with God (*Mystical Theology*). Ten epistles bearing on the knowledge of God, Christ, and the interpretation of Scripture round out the corpus. In addition to their obviously—or ostensibly—Christian setting, these works also make clear use of late Neoplatonist thought and language. Beyond these givens, all consensus comes to an end and the debate begins. While everyone in recent decades has agreed that we cannot know the “who” of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, this if anything has rendered the arguments over the “what” of these mysterious writings all the more intractable. In such a case, the confessional presuppositions, personal likes and dislikes, and even I daresay the temperament of individual scholars all have their role to play. Heisenberg’s principle works for the humanities, too.

The latter applies as much to this writer as to anyone else. I should therefore make clear from the outset that what follows is a generally Christian, specifically Eastern Orthodox, reading of the Areopagite. I will add that I think this approach the best one for the following reasons:

- 1) Dionysius’s own background was that of a Greek-speaking Christianity engaged from its beginnings in a dialogue with Greek philosophy, especially Platonism.

- 2) This was the Christian tradition which accepted him as authoritative with remarkably little debate (Stiglmayr 1895, Rayez 1957), though we should note that Bishop Hypatius of Ephesus denied the antiquity of the writings in 533 (Schwartz 4–11; 172–173). John of Scythopolis noted some problems with the reception (Scythopolis 20A–21C), and recent scholarship

has only just turned to examine some other possibilities of the early debate around Dionysius (Evans 1980 and Rorem/Lamoreaux, forthcoming).

3) This (relative) lack of debate was presumably due to the fact that the tradition read him as expressing its own mind, and faith; and that in so persuasive and significant a manner that:

4) It has continued to treasure him ever since – though here the impress of twentieth-century Western scholarship has led some Orthodox scholars to question the Areopagitica (eg. J. Meyendorff 1964, 81–82, 67, 187–192, and Wesche 1989) and others to spring to its defense (e.g. Romanides 1963/64 and Golitzin 1990) – and such, we would hold, is the case because:

5) The traditional reading simply makes the best sense of the corpus. Dionysius is coherent when read in the context of the Eastern tradition in a way that he is not when read outside of it, i.e. particularly when he is seen – as has often been the case – as a sort of pagan fifth-columnist trying covertly to introduce into a Christian setting the essentially incompatible postulates of platonism and mysticism (cf. Hathaway 1969, Brons 1976, and Rorem 1988).

Whether one views the Areopagite as obviously or merely ostensibly Christian will therefore depend largely on one's attitudes to both Platonism and mysticism. If the former means the acceptance of an ontological kinship between the human soul and the divine world such that, as Plotinus puts it in *Enneads* III.4.3: "We are each of us a kind of intelligible world (*kosmos noetos*) . . . abiding Yonder . . . [while] tied to the lower" (Loeb 1967, 148–150), then reality becomes an unbroken continuum of being and the return of the soul to God is identical with its own deepest truth. Where union with God is fully a natural process there is obviously no real need for such Christian appurtenances as creator and redeemer, word and sacrament. And, indeed, according to Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, this was precisely the latter's attitude to the apparatus of contemporary pagan religion (Loeb 1966, 32–34) – though, be it noted, not that of Iamblichus a few generations later (des Places 1966, 51–62 and 72–77, cf. also Rist 1992). If, on the other hand, there is such a thing as a Christian Platonism which, while valuing the pagan philosophy's emphasis on the unseen and the spiritual (rather like Dionysius's alleged mentor, St. Paul himself, cf. II Cor. 4:18), and on the omnipresence of the divine, sets out at the same time to break the "Great Chain of Being" (Lovejoy 60) and insist on the resultant gap between creator and creature, then a Christian Dionysius is at least possible.

This is in fact just what Dionysius does do. On two occasions in the *Divine Names* he specifically sets his face against the continuum of being so dear to late Neoplatonism (Suchla 181:16–21 and 222:6–223:14). There are no intermediate divinities. There is only God, hidden in his transcendent being

and manifest in his providential energies (cf. Suchla 131:7–10, 135:13–136:17, and 187:17–188:10). To be sure, Dionysius uses Proclus’s triad of abiding (*mone*), procession (*proodos*), and return (*epistrophe*) as the framework of his system (Dodds 63, 38, cf. Brons 77, 168ff), but here, too, he works significant changes. God’s procession or “ecstasy” in creating is the product of his love or *eros* (Suchla 188:6 for God’s *ekbasis*, 159:9–12 for *eros*), with which he as well both works to sustain creation and to bring the creature back to himself (Suchla 160–162). That both “ecstasy” and *eros* are in the Areopagite ascribed to the divinity is surely a sign of his Christian inheritance (so Rist 1966 and de Vogel 1981). To borrow René Roques’s phrase, Dionysius’s ecstasies are reciprocal (Roques 1957, 12, 58, xliii–xliv). God goes “out of himself” into diversity and the creature “out of itself” into union. The impelling force in both “downward” procession and “upward” return is the one, divine love. Hence the remarkably consistent use of the passive voice which we find whenever he discusses the process of our return to God, most notably in his description of his master, Hierotheos, “suffering divine things” (Suchla 134:1–2 and 141:11–13). As he puts it in the *Divine Names*, VII, 1: “the greater is not of us, but of God” (Suchla 194:14–15).

This brings us to the question of his mysticism, at least as controversial a term, both in itself and with regard to Dionysius, as Platonism. The difficulties here are both doctrinal and, as it were, operational. Doctrinally, if the word implies a kind of monism akin to Plotinus—although Plotinus arguably advances nothing of the kind (cf. Armstrong 1973)—or to what we find in, say, the *Upanishads* (Mancaro 1966, 117–118), then Dionysius is clearly either a mystic or a Christian, not both. We have just noted that he is not a monist, but does this mean equally that he is not a mystic? Here I would like to borrow from Vladimir Lossky in order to say that Dionysius’s mystical theology is such because it presupposes—rather, insists on—the possibility of a direct encounter with God (Lossky, 57, 8–10). This brings up the operational or descriptive problem. If a mystic is necessarily one who reports “the unpredictable details of a vital experience,” i.e., provides an autobiographical account of special or “para normal” phenomena, then again Dionysius appears to be not a mystic but, as one important scholar has put it, “a theoretician who . . . is more interested in the exact and tight articulations of [his] conceptual structure” (Vanneste 1863, 290).

Yet, as Bernard McGinn has pointed out (1991, xiv), autobiography as a hermeneutical principle guiding the investigation of mysticism is not without its problems. Thus, at this juncture, I should like to make three further points. First, autobiography of the mystical kind is unknown in the Christian East until St. Symeon the New Theologian in the eleventh century, and he is unique. Dionysius’s mysticism cannot be judged by this criterion with-

out falling prey to serious and distorting anachronism. Second, while we do find one significant reference to a personal experience in his corpus—the only one, in fact, which I am certain we can ascribe to the unknown writer himself (as opposed to the various reports of experiences he includes to support his pseudonym, for example the account of the eclipse and earthquake at the time of the Crucifixion in *Epistle VII,2*)—it is, significantly, not so much a report of personal union with God as a testimony to the Eucharist: “. . . the goal and head of every [sacrament] is the imparting of the divine mysteries to the initiate . . . it was this [sacrament] which first gave me to see and, through its ruling light, be led up in light to the vision of the other sacred things” (Ritter/Heil 79:20–80:4). The Eucharist is for Dionysius the key to all the sacraments, to everything in the Christian life. It is the *telele teleton*, initiation of initiations, as he calls it elsewhere (Ritter/Heil 79:3). My third point is therefore that, if we are able to place his mysticism anywhere, that place is within the Church and the Church’s liturgy. Here, too, we find him fully within the Christian and patristic mainstream. To quote once again from McGinn: “. . . these distinctive elements—ecclesiological setting, scriptural matrix, and sacramental practice—constitute the core of early Christianity and are integral to all Christian mysticism . . . especially in its formative stages” (McGinn 64–65).

Ecclesiological setting and sacramental practice are not, however, immediately obvious in what is perhaps the most famous passage from the Dionysian corpus, the ascent of Moses into the darkness of God on Sinai in the *Mystical Theology*. It merits quoting at length.

. . . the divine Moses is bidden first of all to purify himself, and then to separate himself from such as have not undergone it, and, after every purification, he hears the many-voiced trumpets, he beholds many lights lightening with pure and many-streaming rays. Then, when he has separated from the many and from the chosen priests, he attains to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet in these he still meets not with God, for he sees not Him . . . but the place where He dwells. . . . And then, abandoning both the things beheld and those beholding them, he enters into the truly secret darkness of unknowing, according to which he renounces all perceptions open to knowledge and comes to have his being in Him Who is altogether untouchable and invisible and beyond all things, and, belonging to nothing else, whether to himself or to another, he is according to the greater [faculty] united by the cessation of all knowledge to Him Who is wholly unknowable and, by knowing not at all, knows in a manner beyond mind. (Ritter/Heil 143:18–144:15).

In this passage, first of all, union with God takes place according to the three stages which would later become standard mystical vocabulary, especially in the Christian West: purification, illumination, and perfection or union (Louth 1982 and 1989). Dionysius is offering nothing new here. His steps

appear rather to be simply a different nomenclature for what Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) had already described as the perfecting of the virtues (*praktike*), the contemplation of God's will in nature (*theoria physike*), and the vision of God (*theologia*) (cf. Bouyer 1982, 384–392). The resemblance to Evagrius was already noted by Dionysius's near contemporary and first translator into Syriac, Sergius of Reshaina (cf. Sherwood 1960/61). He does, though, seem to go Evagrius one better in describing the union with God as *beyond* the intellect and not within. The earlier writer had avoided, it seems (cf. Hausherr 1930 and 2955), any notion of ecstasis.

But it has been urged that Moses' trip alone to meet the One Alone sounds much more Plotinian than Christian (eg. Rorem 1988, 144), and, certainly, it does seem to be quite apart from, and even antithetical to, the sacramental and ecclesial emphasis we have just noted as characterizing Dionysian mysticism. Neither liturgy, nor Church – nor for that matter Jesus Christ Himself – are mentioned or appear to play any role whatsoever. Dionysius's mysticism has for these reasons often been presented as ultimately dissolving his Christian position – or pose – in “a metaphysics of the first principle whose roots are deeply imbedded in Neo-platonism” (Vanneste 1959, 182). In the space left to me, I would like to argue that appearances are deceptive.

Fortunately, recent scholarship has come to my assistance. Paul Rorem's *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols in the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* has argued quite convincingly against Jean Vanneste and even René Roques (1956, 29–30), for the interlocking quality of Dionysian thought, and in particular for the inseparability of the treatises on the hierarchies from those devoted to the intelligible names of God and the mystical ascent. Andrew Louth (1989) has even more recently seconded this position, and that, moreover, in a tone notably more respectful of Dionysius's claims to Christianity than Rorem. Both men note, for example, that Moses is in fact a type of the Christian hierarch (bishop) and, in addition, that the two other examples of mystical union or the vision of God which Dionysius provides – his mentor, Hierotheus, whose transport is described in *Divine Names II*, and the figure of Carpus in *Epistle VII* – involve bishops and are given a liturgical setting.

I would suggest that the vision of the prophet Isaiah discussed in *Celestial Hierarchy XIII* represents a third example: the context of the prophet's call in Isaiah 6 is the worship of Israel and its place the Temple in Jerusalem (Ritter/Heil 43–49), and I confess I find it odd that neither Rorem nor Louth include this passage. This may be because Dionysius is dealing here with what we may call a problem in hierarchical “due process” (i.e., how it can be that Isaiah receives the coal from a Seraph at the top of the angelic hierarchy and not from the lowest level, the angels) rather than the experience of God *per se*, but still, the vision itself is set in a cultic context and so fits in with the

other three. In any case, it is these four, Moses and Isaiah from the Old Covenant community and Hierotheus and Carpus from the New, who are finally the only examples that the Areopagite provides of mystical or supernatural experience—unless, of course, we count his own testimony to the illumining power of the Eucharist.

Further, Moses' three-stage ascent in the passage cited is paralleled by the threefold divisions of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: the laity who are purified, illumined, and perfected; the clergy who purify, illumine and perfect; the sacraments of baptism, eucharist and chrism which are purification, illumination, and perfection. By implication, the church building itself also conforms to this pattern as divided into narthex, nave, and sanctuary. Thus the catechumens and the others in a state of purification (penitents and possessed) are placed in the narthex outside the doors to the nave in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* III,2, while the laity remain within (Ritter/Heil 1989:12–17). The monks are stationed in *Epistle* VII,1 at the very doors of the sanctuary enclosure but are still outside it (Ibid. 176:12–177:1), and the clergy alone are allowed inside the “gates of the holy place” (Ibid. 177:1–8).

The picture of the theophany at Sinai given in Exodus 19ff from which Dionysius draws (and he is scarcely the first to do so—recall St. Paul in II Cor. 3, Philo, and Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*) bears out this ecclesiastical interpretation. The scriptural text itself is, first of all, quite possibly written with the Temple in Jerusalem in mind (cf. M. Noth, 1962, 11–17, and esp. Clements 1965, 22, n. 3 and 113–120). While Dionysius was not, to be sure, apprised of the latest in twentieth-century biblical criticism, it is not an unreasonable supposition to think him quite capable of drawing a parallel with his own liturgy from the following components: a purified people gather at the mountain's base (Ex. 19:10–15), the illumined elders meet with Moses at the “place” of God part way up the mountain, and then Moses himself ascends alone to the peak (Ex. 24:9–18). Sinai, I submit, is nothing more nor less than an image of the Church at worship. The summit, veiled in cloud and darkness, corresponds to the altar within the sanctuary veils of Dionysius's neighborhood church. An altar area separated from the nave by walls and curtains seems to have been a regular feature of church construction in late fifth-century Syria (cf. C. Schneider 1936, A. M. Schneider 1949, and Matthews 1976, esp. pp. 162–171).

Indeed, we can go another century earlier than the fifth. The mountain of god as an image of the Church appears in Syriac Christian literature as early as the 300s A.D. In his *Hymns on Paradise* (Brock 1990), St. Ephrem of Syria provides a number of suggestive parallels with the picture I have just sketched. *Hymns* II and III (Ibid. 84–96, cf. also Brock's chart, 53) assume a series of analogies between the paradise mountain, Sinai, the church building, and

the human person (body, soul, and spirit) which, to say the least, strikes a familiar note. The whole question of Dionysius's connections with, and possible debt to, Syriac Christian literature has scarcely been touched. Werner Strothman (1978) has revealed the Syrian background to the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy's* treatment of the sacred chrism, and others have suggested possible connections between the Areopagite's discussion of the monks, and his treatment of the divine names, and Ephrem's handling of these matters (eg. Louth 1989, 69–70 and 79–81), but these are only initial attempts at uncovering what may prove to be singularly important—and hitherto almost entirely overlooked—sources for the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. I shall have occasion to resort to yet another theme from Syriac Christian literature in what follows.

Sinai as image of the Church still does not address the “problem” of either the ordering of the hierarchy or the role of Christ. Regarding the former, the question is whether or not the hierarch (bishop) is the only one privileged to make the mystic ascent. This would appear to be the case when we take into account the language of “superiors” and “inferiors” which suffuses the *corpus* (e.g. Ritter/Heil 22:16–22 and 25:10–11), or the statement in *Epistle VII* that the clergy are “closer” to the divine things than those outside the sanctuary gates (Ritter/Heil 180:12–15). Is one therefore obliged to climb the mountain by literally ascending the rungs of first the lay, and then sacerdotal orders? I would answer with Andrew Louth that one does not so much climb *up* our hierarchy, the Church, as enter more fully *into* it (Louth 1981, 171). Dionysius himself defines hierarchy in one important text as “. . . in my opinion a sacred order [*taxis*] and knowledge [*episteme*] and activity [*energeia*], assimilated so far as possible to the divine likeness, and led up in due degree to the illuminations given it from God for the imitation of God . . .” (Ritter/Heil 17:3–5). Elsewhere he calls the Church (“our hierarchy”) the “hierarchic icon of divine things” (110:2). Texts could be multiplied, but, in order to summarize the argument I have made elsewhere at greater length (cf. Golitzin 1980, 133–177, also Roques 1956, 36–129, and Lossky 1939), Dionysius means essentially two things by this notion of hierarchic iconography. First, he indicates that our hierarchy is our world, i.e., our *true* world. It is the created analogue, on the level of human existence (which involves a soul and a body, as opposed to the angels' lack of bodies), of the divine Providence, the term of preference in the Areopagitea for the whole range of divine activity *ad extra* (cf. Beierwaltes and Brons 1977). Brought into existence by the economy of Christ, the work of God or “theurgy”—the term which Dionysius prefers for the Incarnation (e.g. Suchla 130:5–11) and never, be it noted, employs to signify human sacred activity (Rorem 1984, 13–14)—our hierarchy is, to use expressions familiar from the New Testa-

ment and particularly from the Pauline writings, the new creation, the body of Christ and “one new man” mentioned, for example, in Colossians (1:15–29 and 2:9–13) and Ephesians (1:9–23 and 2:14–22).

The phrase, “one new man,” leads me to what I understand as the second function of “our hierarchy”: Dionysius’s use of the ancient theme of the human being as microcosm. This is a notion whose deep rooting in the philosophy of late antiquity, in particular late Neoplatonism, has been amply documented (e.g. Gersh 1973 and esp. 1978, 27–120). It is also very much present in writers of the Origenist tradition, especially Evagrius Ponticus (cf. Evans 1970, 89–111, and for Evagrius and the Syriac tradition, S’ed 1988) whose possible links with Dionysius I have noted at length elsewhere (Golitzin 1980, 372–399, esp. 393–399). Less noted, and noted not at all in reference to possible links with Dionysius, is the presence of this idea in, again, the Syriac Christian writers of the fourth century. I have in mind particularly the latter’s portrayal of the individual Christian as a “little church,” a theme which appears in Chapter 12 of the *Liber Graduum* and again in the *Macarian Homilies* (cited by Brock 1989 and Stewart 1991, 218–219, and Murray 1977, 267–271). A couple of citations from the former and one from the latter will have to suffice us here:

It is not without purpose that our Lord . . . established this church, altar and baptism which can be seen by the body’s eyes. The reason was this: by starting from these visible things and provided our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts which cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh. . . . As for the church in heaven, all that is good takes its beginning from there, and there light has shone out upon us in all directions. After its likeness the church on earth came into being, along with its priests and its altar; according to the pattern of this ministry the body ministers outwardly, while the heart acts as priest inwardly. Those who are diligent in this visible church become like that heavenly church as they follow after it. (trans. by S. Brock 1989, 46–47).

And from “Macarius”:

Visible things are the type and shadow of hidden ones, and the visible temple [is a type] of the temple of the heart, and the priest [is a type] of the true priest of the grace of Christ; and all the rest of the order (*akolouthia* [i.e., liturgy]) of the visible dispensation . . . is [a type] of the . . . hidden matters according to the inner self. And we receive the manifest dispensation and administration as an illustration [of what is] worked . . . in the soul by grace. (trans. by Stewart 1991, 219).

One might also note the recurrence of this theme, the holy man as altar, together with the motif of the sacred mountain (Sinai, Tabor), in the fifth-century Syriac life of Symeon Stylites (cf. Harvey 1988, 381–386).

So for Dionysius, too, the ecclesiastical hierarchy is the image or icon of

man writ large. The redeemed soul reflects the universe redeemed and, *vice-versa*, the perfected world in Christ mirrors the sanctified individual. Thus, in the very same *Epistle* VII which seems to uphold a strictly vertical ordering of access to the divine, Dionysius reminds his interlocutor (a monk who has presumed to take on a priestly duty) that the latter must give “the appropriate place [*ta kat’axian*]” to the different faculties of his soul, “appetite, irritability, and reason” (Ritter/Heil 183:11). While this remark goes back, of course, to themes present in earlier writers in the ascetic tradition (especially, again, Evagrius—cf. Bamberger 1987, lxxvii–lxxviii), and ultimately to Plato and the *Phaedrus* (253c–254e), the point of Dionysius’s remark here is that the inner ordering of the soul must reflect the exterior ordering of the Church. So ordered, the soul may discover within itself the same One who dwells within the sanctuary, “reckoning” as Dionysius writes in a singularly important passage from *Celestial Hierarchy* I,3:

... the visible beauties [of the liturgy] as representations of the invisible beauty and the physical perfumes [incense] [as] impressions of the intelligible distribution, and the material lights [candles, lamps] an icon of the immaterial gift of light ... the exterior ranks of the clergy [an image] of the harmonious and ordered habit of mind [*hexis*] which [leads] to divine things, and [our partaking] of the most divine Eucharist [an icon] of participation in Jesus. (Ritter/Heil 8:21–9:6)

The kinship between this passage and the ones just quoted from the Syrian tradition seems to me unmistakeable, though to determine whether or not that relationship is one of dependence would require more inquiry than anyone has given it to date.

This passage also underscores the importance of the notion of icon, or symbol, and the very last line leads us to the second question I raised concerning Dionysian mysticism: the role of Christ. I would see the centrality of “symbol” as precisely based on the Incarnation. It is the presence of Jesus, divinity enfleshed, which is discerned in the material forms of the sacraments. The same presence constitutes, secondly, the literally central point around which the whole treatise on “our hierarchy” is constructed. Thus, with respect to the first point, and as Dionysius puts it in the third chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the Christian initiate meets – “recognizes [*epiginoskei*]” – Christ in the consecrated gifts (Ritter/Heil 94:15). In the same chapter we also find him repeating, three times, the idea that the celebrant of the Eucharist brings “the things hymned ... into sight [*hyp’hopsin*],” and the third time stating specifically that the bishop “brings Jesus Christ, our ... life, into sight” (Ibid., 90:10, 92:17, and 93:15). It is difficult, for me at least, to avoid the impression that Christ’s presence here is meant to be more than

merely “conceptual” (vs. Rorem 1984, 76–77, thus see Louth 1986).

Regarding my second point, the construction of the treatise, it is surely not accidental that chapter IV of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* focuses on Jesus as “our most divine altar” (Ritter/Heil 103:4–5). This is the pivot, or hinge, around which all the action of the treatise turns—a style of literary composition, i.e., placing the important point in the middle and building around it, which, incidentally, has markedly Semitic affinities (cf. Prokurat 88, 81, citing *inter alia* Seybold 1974, 31–39 on Zechariah 1–8) and which may thus serve as a further indication of Dionysius’s rooting in a Syrian milieu. The reader moves from the doors of the church building in its opening chapters toward the altar, pauses there in chapter IV (the middle of the treatise), then proceeds from it down the ranks of clerical ordinations, from bishop to priest to deacon, then outside the sanctuary gates to ponder monastic tonsure, and finally goes “out the doors” of the Church in chapter VII’s concluding meditation on the mystery of Christian burial. In the process, one is led from the Christian’s true birth in Baptism (chapter II) to his or her departure from this life in hope of the Resurrection (chapter VII). The whole span of human existence is covered. At its center is the altar, whose reality in turn is the sanctifying and transfiguring presence of Jesus. If Sinai in the *Mystical Theology* is a type of the Church, and if we can also say that the “mountain of God” is equally an image of the individual human soul, then Jesus is the center of both, the unique “place of God,” encountered at once at the Church’s altar and in the heart of each. Moses’ ascent in the *Mystical Theology* is thus rightly seen as “mystical,” but for Dionysius this also means that it fits squarely within the ecclesial and sacramental tradition, i.e., within “the mysteries.”

Two more texts await comment. The first reinforces my argument that Christ and the Church are at the core of Dionysian mysticism. Moses’ ecstasy in *Mystical Theology* I,3, as I noted above, has often been read as a kind of solvent with respect both to Dionysius’s view of the sacraments and his frequent professions of faith in the Christ of Christian orthodoxy. According to this view, both of the latter dissolve in accord with the exigencies of mystical union with the One (Rorem 1988, 144, most recently). What follows in reply is inference, to be sure, but I think it nonetheless based solidly on the whole structure of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

The first three of Dionysius’s “epistles,” taken together, provide an important witness for the Areopagite’s christological and ecclesiological orthodoxy. *Epistle* I discusses the divine transcendence in the familiar terms of darkness and unknowing (Ritter/Heil 156–157). *Epistle* II expounds briefly on God’s deifying gift (158). In *Epistle* III both the divine transcendence and immanence are brought together, “suddenly,” in the person of Jesus:

“Suddenly” means that which is brought out of the hitherto invisible and beyond hope into the manifest. And I think that the Scripture [literally, the “theology”] suggests Christ’s philanthropy here, [i.e., that] the super-substantial has proceeded out of [its] hiddenness to become manifest to us by becoming a human being. And he [remains] hidden as well both after the manifestation and, to put it more divinely, even within the manifestation. (159)

Jesus is at once the hidden godhead and manifest divinity, revealed gift and transcendent darkness. The word “suddenly” (*exaiphnes*), in addition, has interesting echoes. Two commentators, one modern and one ancient, will help us bring them out. Werner Beierwaltes has noted that Dionysius borrowed this term from Plato (Beierwaltes 1966/67). Where, however, Plato used it to designate the paradoxical and inexplicable in-breaking of knowledge, either knowledge of any kind or the mystical perception of supra-mundane reality, the “timeless” act of realization (275, citing *Parmenides* 1553–1557b, *Epistle* 7 341c, and the *Symposium* 210e), Dionysius takes it over to express the Christian mystery of the transcendent become manifest in time and space. This is not to say that the suggestion of mystical union or knowledge which the word carried disappeared when Dionysius took it over. On the contrary, I would maintain that he intends it to suggest both the doctrinal mystery of God become man *and* the personal mystery of encounter: “suddenly” we meet, in Christ, the transcendent God.

But this encounter, this “sudden” contact and shock of awareness, occurs within a particular context. That this context is the Church is suggested by the text of Scripture which Dionysius has chosen as his vehicle. It is John of Scythopolis, his earliest interpreter (*PG* IV; cf. von Balthasar 1940, Suchla 1980, and Rorem/Lamoreaux, forthcoming), who tells us that Dionysius’s interlocutor had “asked about the prophetic saying of the prophet Malachi [cf. Mal. 3:1] . . . which goes: ‘And suddenly the Lord Whom you seek will come into His temple, and the angel of great counsel, whom you desire’” (532A). I would like to draw attention here to the different possible senses of the word “temple” (*naos*). John clearly attaches it to the Incarnation, and so to the body or temple of Christ, a theme familiar from the New Testament (e.g., Mk. 14:58, Jn. 2:19–21, Rev. 21:21), and suggested by such texts as the Transfiguration narratives (Mk. 9:28 and parallels), or Jn. 1:14 and 51. Yet “temple” may apply equally to the Church, itself of course the body of Christ (e.g. Rom. 12:1–8), or to the building (especially its sanctuary) where Christians worship. It may also refer to the believer whose body, as Dionysius’s beloved St. Paul insists in I Cor. 3:16, is the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (again, I note, a text and theme deeply embedded in the Syriac writers, cf. again Stewart 1991, 218–220). I would certainly not put it past the Areopagite to expect his reader to pick up on all these resonances. Even

the angels are included. Jesus is therefore, “suddenly,” the point where all lines converge: the mystical and the sacramental, the personal and ecclesial, our world, the heavenly powers, and the transcendent God present in the gift of deification.

Yet this insight, glimpse or ecstasy, is necessarily brief, a sudden and temporary rapture, a “flash.” Our second text rounds out, as it were, the picture of Dionysius as a thoroughly christianized Neoplatonist by sketching his eschatology. Human existence in this world moves inexorably towards its end in death and burial. While, in Dionysius’s phrase, “our hierarchy” provides a true and “exact icon” of heavenly realities (Ritter/Heil 77:8), and while nowhere does he suggest that we may—or can—surpass or go beyond that icon *via* the dialectic of affirmation and negation (*pace* Rorem 1984, 98), it is still not the final word regarding our condition. That this mediation of spiritual realities via corporeal signs (the basis for the idea of sacraments) is temporary does not, however, point toward some eventual disincarnation, in the sense of Plato’s (or of Origen’s and Evagrius’s for that matter) liberation from the prison of the body. It looks ahead instead toward the latter’s transfiguration (but cf. Wesche 1989, and in reply, Golitzin 1990). It is thus scarcely accidental that chapter VII of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* expounds at length on the general Resurrection. Moreover, it is precisely Christ’s Transfiguration which becomes Dionysius’s paradigm for the life of the world to come in the following passage from *Divine Names* I,4:

... And we are initiated into these things *now, on the one hand*, according to our measure, through the sacred curtains of that love for humanity [revealed in] Scripture and the hierarchical traditions [the liturgy] which, by the variety of its partial symbols, veils the intelligible and the super-essential round about with perceptible and existent things, which places forms and types around those things which are without form or impression, and which both multiplies and lends shape to the transcendent and most formless simplicity; *but then*, when we shall have become immortal and have attained to the most blessed inheritance which is in the form of Christ, “We shall,” as Scripture says, “be ever with the Lord,” *being filled on the one hand* with all-pure contemplation of His most visible theophany, shining round about us in most manifest brilliancy—as it [shone around] His disciples at that most divine Transfiguration—and *on the other hand participating in His intelligible gift of light* with minds grown passionless and immaterial, and [finally] *in the union which transcends the mind* through the unknowable and blessed impulsions of [His] super-luminary rays in a more divine imitation of the heavenly minds [the angels] because, as the truth of Scripture says, “we shall be equal to the angels and sons of God, being sons of the Resurrection.” (Suchla 114:11–115:5)

The sections in italic indicate two divisions. The first, “now” and “then,” marks the distinction between this world and the next. The second sketches

the different levels at which the vision of God will be permanently enjoyed: the body, the intellect, and beyond the intellect in that “stretching” of human souls—as Dionysius puts it elsewhere in echoing Gregory of Nyssa’s *epektasis* (cf. Danielou 1961, 56–71)—“ever towards that which is before” (Suchla 149:19, and Ritter/Heil 77:6–7). The ascent to God is without end, and that dynamism in itself, together with the fact that every aspect of the human composite has its place for him in the transfigured life to come, should be enough to persuade us that here is a thinker whose use of the contemporary philosophy was undertaken in the service of the faith revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Dionysius is mystic and Neoplatonist both, to be sure, but he is first and last a man of the Church.

I would like to add that this was exactly the sense in which the *Corpus areopagiticum* was interpreted by Dionysius’s contemporaries and successors in the Christian East. John of Scythopolis is eloquent in his defense. In the seventh century Maximus the Confessor wrote his *Mystagogy*, a work which in my view was written to bring into relief just those points in the Areopagite which I have been obliged to tease out of him: the Church as icon of God, of the world, of man, and of the soul (PG 1991, esp. 664D–688B). John of Damascus, especially in his *Expositio Fidei* 1–17 (Kotter 73, pp. 7–44), draws heavily on the *Divine Names* in the eighth century. In the ninth, Germanos of Constantinople clearly borrows from him, and in particular from the *Mystical Theology*, for his likening of the priest before the altar to Moses on Sinai (P. Meyendorff 1984, 90–92). Symeon the New Theologian and his disciple Nicetas Stethatos are equally indebted to him in the eleventh century. The former, arguably the most important of the Byzantine mystics and certainly the most striking, is obliged to Dionysius for much of his phrasing of his experiences (cf. Julien-Fraigneau 1985, 171–181), and as well seems to express his liturgical piety in just that parallelism between micro- and macrocosm that I noted above as central for the Areopagite (compare *Celestial Hierarchy* I,3 with Symeon’s XIVth *Ethical Discourse*, Darrouzès 1967, 422–442). Stethatos is remarkable for his efforts to associate his master’s thought even more clearly with the “divine Dionysius” (Koder 1969, 50–64 and 106–134). George Pacymeres wrote an important commentary in the thirteenth century (PG III, accompanying the *corpus*) which anticipated the heightened interest in and debate over the Areopagica in the fourteenth. For Gregory Palamas, Nicolas Cabasilas and the whole hesychast movement of the latter century, he was an unquestioned authority and luminary of the Church. Indeed, the whole debate engaged in by Gregory against Barlaam the Calabrian which resulted in the former’s celebrated (or debated) distinction between energies and essence in God can be said to have been over the proper interpretation of Dionysius (cf. J. Meyendorff

1964, 187–192 and 204–209). Nicholas's celebrated meditation on the sacraments, *The Life in Christ* (PG 150.493–726), focuses deliberately on the same territory covered by Dionysius in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* II–IV (cf. de Halleux 1984). This universal and unequivocal respect must surely have derived from more than the simple device of a sub-apostolic pseudonym. I, for one, cannot but hold that it came rather from the quality and depth of the writings which that Name was chosen to adorn.

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