

Uniting with Divine Wisdom: theurgic prayer and religious practice in Dionysius and Marsilio Ficino

Rebecca Coughlin

McGILL UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius the Areopagite discusses Wisdom as a divine name; God is Wisdom. Within the Neoplatonic tradition the divine names are often used as icons in contemplative religious and philosophical practice; this form of practice is referred to as theurgy—a term that denotes both ritual activity and contemplative practice that effects a change in the practitioner and brings them into contact with the divine. Worship, ritual practice, and prayer are often described as theurgic, or at least in theurgic language, within the Dionysian corpus. Dionysius begins the discussion of God as Wisdom by moving the reader to praise God as wise and as the principle of all wisdom, which transcends wisdom. By engaging in this act of praise, the practitioner participates in theurgic prayer, and is united to God as Wisdom in a way that is not possible through discursive reason alone. In his commentary on Dionysius' *Divine Names*, Ficino agrees with Dionysius that the soul's access to God is not by way of understanding or reason. For Ficino, access to God is through the divine light infused in the soul that sparks union with God through love. Love alone, Ficino says, is that which can unite the soul to God. This love, which he calls a 'secret reasoning,' occupies the same place within his system that theurgy does for Dionysius; it is what allows the practitioner to transcend intellect and be united with the divine. Yet, love does not replace theurgy. Ficino continues to advocate for the centrality of religious practice in raising the soul to divine union. Indeed, he regards the study and exploration of the books of the Platonists alongside Holy Scripture as a form of effective religious practice akin to theurgy that unites the soul to God as divine Wisdom.

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WISDOM AND THEURGY IN THE DIVINE NAMES

In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius draws upon a long tradition among the Neoplatonists of using the names of the gods as symbols for contemplation, prayer, and ritual practice. This is well established in the works of both Iamblichus and Proclus. For Iamblichus the names are used within the contexts of both ritual and prayer—indeed prayer and ritual are always coupled. The names function as symbols, and thus, for Iamblichus, the contemplation of the names themselves, within a ritual context, is a participation in theurgic activity. Proclus entreats the practitioner to worship the divine names; yet, like Dionysius, he also says that we must worship even those most dissimilar names, as echoes of the divine, because even they will help us reach the gods. It is by the worship of the divine names that “we establish ourselves at the highest level of the models of the names.”¹ Thus, for Proclus, the names are the focus of an internalized theurgic ritual that lifts the practitioner from the names to the divine. For Dionysius the very structure of the *Divine Names* reveals the nature of the text as prayer, and specifically as theurgic prayer. The text begins with several references to prayer: the text itself is to be seen as a prayer, through it Dionysius and his companion Timothy, to whom the text is addressed, will “offer worship,” “do honor,” and “with [their] beings shaped to songs of praise” they will praise the divine Source.² This starting point in prayer and worship is reflected throughout the text as it moves through the names of God from one to the next in a pattern that has been described as following the Neoplatonic structure of procession, remaining, and return. The structure of the text mirrors the structure of the divine activity as understood by Dionysius, and through this mirroring it becomes theurgic. Understood as theurgic prayer, the *Divine Names*, like all theurgic ritual, allows for the soul’s participation in the divine activity.

1 Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*, texte établi et traduit par H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink, (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968–1997), 1.29.

2 Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* (DN) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 589C.

The name Wisdom is considered in Chapter 7 of the *Divine Names*, following directly after a consideration of the name "Life." Dionysius begins: "Now, if you will, let us give praise to the good and eternal Life for being wise, for being the principle of wisdom, the subsistence of all wisdom, for transcending all wisdom and all understanding."³ This is another example of Dionysius framing a philosophical discussion with a prayer, an act of praise, which brings the reader into right relation with the text as ritual activity, highlighting the theurgic nature of his project. It is within this theurgic context that Dionysius' use of negation and of names which are not usually applied to God should be understood. It is because the text of the *Divine Names* is theurgic prayer that Dionysius will speak of God as both Wisdom and also not Wisdom: "It is not simply the case that God is so overflowing with wisdom that 'his understanding is beyond measure' but, rather, he actually transcends all reason, all intelligence, and all wisdom."⁴ Dionysius takes this as far as to call God foolish. This assertion of God's "foolishness,"⁵ although it sounds absurd, is the catalyst for the theurgic power of the divine name "Wisdom." The dissonance of thinking of God as foolish serves to "[uplift the soul] to the ineffable truth which is there before all reasoning."⁶ This truth is that God as Wisdom "has neither reason nor intelligence", and yet, is described "as the Cause of all intelligence and reason, of all wisdom and understanding."⁷ By conceiving of God's wisdom as foolishness, the practitioner is faced with understanding that while Wisdom may indeed be a worthy name for God, it cannot denote what God is any more than foolishness does. Yet, "divine Wisdom is the source, the cause, the substance, the perfection, the protector, and the goal of Wisdom

3 DN 865B.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 DN 865C.

7 DN 868A.

itself, of mind, of reason, and of all sense perception,"⁸ which he says can "properly be described as echoes of wisdom."⁹ This is an example of the Dionysian process of affirmation and negation—a process that characterizes the soul's ascent to God through the divine names, both affirmative and negative, but ultimately beyond them both to the divine Source which is beyond all conceptions.

God is not only Wisdom itself, but God is also the divine mind that knows all things. However, the divine mind does not know all things as a subject knows an object. To know the cause of something is to know that very thing, and since there is nothing that is outside of God as its cause, God knows all things by knowing himself as their cause. "The divine mind," Dionysius explains "does not acquire the knowledge of things from things. Rather, of itself and in itself it precontains and comprehends the awareness and understanding and being of everything in terms of their cause."¹⁰ As such, "...God knows all things, not by understanding things, but by understanding himself."¹¹ In this way, Dionysius suggests that God can be known through the order of the universe; God's Wisdom is the overall principle upon which the whole of creation is built, and so, just as God can know the things of the universe by knowing himself, the soul can know God as Wisdom through the things of the universe and their ordering. Yet, God is not the creation, he cannot be identified with the whole of creation, nor is he any single thing in the creation, and so Dionysius clarifies that he is known "in all things and as distinct from all things."¹² For this reason "he is known both through knowledge and through unknowing."¹³ Ritual practice, specifically theurgic practice—acts of prayer, praise, and worship—move the soul that is searching for God beyond the contemplative, intellectual

8 *DN* 868C.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *DN* 869B.

11 *DN* 869C.

12 *DN* 872A.

13 *Ibid.*

acts of knowing and unknowing, towards divine union. As he says, “the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom.”¹⁴ This final depth of Wisdom is beyond knowing, beyond understanding—it is the place where the soul, through prayer, comes not to know God as Wisdom, but to be united to God in Wisdom.

LOVE AS THEURGIC ACTIVITY

Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) was a prolific writer, translator, and lover of the Platonists; he worked diligently to translate and make the books of the ancients accessible to his Latin-speaking colleagues, translating works of Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, and many others. Some of Ficino’s translations are straight translations, but more often his translations are accompanied by commentaries. This is the case for his work on Dionysius. Ficino did not begin to work on his translation of Dionysius until the end of his career; he saw in Dionysius the great synthesis of Platonic and Christian thought—so much so that he claimed, in a letter from 1491, that “no form of knowledge is more delightful to me certainly than the Platonic, and of this knowledge, none will ever be more venerable to me than that in Dionysius. I love Plato in Iamblichus, I admire him in Plotinus, but I venerate him in Dionysius.”¹⁵ Thus, Ficino set about preparing a translation of Dionysius’ *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* that reflects this attitude—bringing out the Platonic elements of the texts and understanding them within their ritual context.

14 DN 872B.

15 Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, (Basel: Henricpetri, 1576), 925.2, quoted in Michael J. B. Allen, “Introduction,” in Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite: Mystical Theology and The Divine Names*, Part I (chapters 1–135), volume 1, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), xiv.

When Dionysius speaks of the soul coming to a divine union that is beyond intellect and understanding, Ficino believes he is speaking of a kind of intuition. He understands this intuition to be a capacity for union that is infused in the soul by God. The language Ficino uses to describe this intuition and the union it makes possible is the language of desire and of love. He calls divine union an “amatory union” (*unione quadam amatoria*) and describes how the soul is “set aflame through the light divinely infused” (*per infusum divinitus lumen accensa*) in it.¹⁶ Further, Ficino adds that the soul intuits God not with any kind of understanding, but “with some other more sublime and most secret reasoning.”¹⁷ This sublime and secret reasoning is attained after the soul passes through the affirmations and negations. While the activity of engaging in negations surpasses even the higher affirmations in approaching God, then the mind is “closest, when, after such negations and with its own investigating eventually set aside, it transports itself to the divine light wholly by love; and illuminated and united in marvelous ways, it rejoices [in God] to the utmost.”¹⁸ Love, in Ficino’s interpretation takes the place of praise, worship, ritual—*theurgy*. The divine names, Ficino argues earlier in the commentary, are given for the benefit of the soul, in Scripture, to be worshipped:

What shines in God as the Sun of the world’s sun, since it is above the limits of essence and understanding, we ought not to examine so much as venerate. Hence, we ought to turn the eyes of the mind, which cannot bear this immense light, toward the sacred Scriptures, as to the heavens. In the Scriptures the names and divine cognomens are divinely handed down to us, just as the stars are accommodated to our eyes. From these stars indeed, the proper powers of God and the appellations and praises that are divine shine in us, as the sun’s powers shine in the stars.¹⁹

16 Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names*, Part II (chapters 136–351), volume 2, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 244.3.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 259.2.

19 Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite: Mystical Theology and The Divine Names*, Part I (chapters 1–135), volume 1, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 11.1.

The divine names, through which the soul worships God, are found present in the soul and it is through them that the soul attains union with God—not through a power of the soul, but rather through God’s own power moving through the soul. The principle of this motion, indeed of all motion and of all rest, for Ficino, is love.²⁰ Love, he says, “like wings, is what lifts minds aloft through things sublime, so that they no longer turn away toward the depths.”²¹ Thus, love, for Ficino, is many things: it is the power that lifts the mind while keeping its sight firmly set on God; it is God’s activity working through the soul to bring it to union; and—like theurgy for Dionysius—it is the final step beyond understanding and reason, beyond affirmation and negation, that accomplishes the soul’s union with God.

Ficino situates his central work, the *Platonic Theology*, within this same tradition that acknowledges the interrelation of ritual and philosophy; a tradition that understands itself to be the original Platonic tradition. In the *Proem* to the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino praises Plato: “For whatever subject he deals with, be it ethics, dialectic, mathematics, or physics, he quickly brings it round, in a spirit of utmost piety, to the contemplation and worship of God.”²² Contemplation and ritual practice are fitting ends of the philosophical endeavour in this tradition as both bring the philosopher closer to the divine, closer to the truth, and closer to their own individual unity. In this way ritual is the natural complement of contemplation. Indeed, it is also Ficino’s vision that God be worshipped and contemplated through his philosophical examinations: “My main intention in writing it has been this: that in the divinity of the created mind, as in a mirror at the centre of all things, we should first observe the works of the Creator,

20 Ibid., 9.5.

21 Ibid., 9.4.

22 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, I–IV, volume 1, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Proem, 2.

and then contemplate and worship the mind of the Creator."²³ This phrase echoes Aristotle who urges the philosopher to move from the created world, the creature, to the creator, rising by degree from effect to cause. Philosophical study is not practiced in isolation; Ficino insists that within the perennial philosophical tradition, ancient philosophers had "always combined the study of philosophy with religious piety."²⁴ In the *Platonic Theology* Ficino also examines how the soul is ultimately united to God. He agrees with the Platonic theologians including Iamblichus, Proclus, and Dionysius who posit a unity as the highest part of the soul, so to speak, which is the condition of the soul's capacity for divine union: "... God is unity itself above mind and is the center of essences above essence, and the soul therefore is united to Him properly not through its mind but through its unity which is the head of the mind and the center of the whole soul...."²⁵ If the union of the soul with God is achieved once the soul surpasses intellectual understanding / reason, then what of the soul is united to God? The answer for Ficino, as for many of his predecessors, is the apex of the soul. Ficino posits the apex of the soul in order to assert that the soul can only be united to the divine through a union that takes place beyond intellect: the utterly purged soul—with all mutability rendered constant and all multiplicity collected as one—gathers itself entirely into its own unity, which is higher than the intellect. "Through this unity it now transfers itself into the unity divine which is higher than the intelligible world; and rather than in itself, it lives in God to whom it is surely joined by a wonderful principle that surpasses understanding."²⁶

23 Ibid., 3.

24 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, XII–XIV, volume 4, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.1.14.

25 Ibid., 13.4.6.

26 Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, XVII–XVIII, volume 6, edited and translated by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 18.8.8.

This unity of the soul, the part of the soul that moves beyond intellect and is united to God, is the place of the divine love that allows for the soul's union with God. Love is what Ficino calls the soul's highest participation in divine goodness: "We certainly fear the divine power, we seek the divine wisdom, and we love the divine goodness. The love alone of goodness transforms the soul into God. So, love restores the soul to its native land without its seeking or fearing."²⁷

The love that Ficino is speaking of is two-fold; it is at once the soul's love for the divine, and God's love for himself as participated by the soul:

We must understand that the mind cannot be raised through itself to envisioning the divine substance through the increase only of its natural power and light, since such a contemplative activity differs from the natural activity of the mind more than simply by genus: it needs a new power and a new radiance, one descending from a higher principle. They call this radiance grace and glory, the radiance by which the illuminated mind, and even more so the mind on fire, now puts on the divine substance (with whose heat it already burns) like a flame ... but rather a supercelestial flame, one that is dazzlingly bright and beneficial, not one that scorches.²⁸

This is akin to Dionysius' understanding of theurgy, where the definition of theurgic activity surpasses mere ritual practice or contemplation and comes to mean both the divine activity and the soul's participation in that activity.

In the *De Amore*, his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, Ficino captures this idea succinctly when he concludes: "for we achieve neither poetry nor mysteries, nor prophecy without vast zeal, burning piety, and sedulous worship of divinity. But what else do we call zeal, piety, and worship except love? Therefore, all exist through the power of love. It is also the most excellent since the others are related to this as to an end. Moreover, this joins us most closely to God."²⁹ In a way then, all of the soul's activities,

27 Ibid., 18.8.12.

28 Ibid., 18.8.19.

29 Marsilio Ficino, *De Amore: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's*

which move it closer and closer to God, are manifestations of love, not a generic love or a personal love, but the very love of the divine for itself that the soul participates in when it is engaged in those other activities—zeal, piety, and worship of God—which have as their end that very same divine love.

RITUAL ACTIVITY, PHILOSOPHY, AND LOVE IN FICINO

In his treatise on the health and good life of the scholar, called the *De Vita*, or the *Three Books on Life*, Ficino has produced a handbook for health—both physical and spiritual—for the intellectual. It touches on the four humours, astrology, mortality, virtue, and the use of medicine. The third book specifically treats the life of the soul and is entitled: “On Obtaining Life from the Heavens.” Recent studies from Denis Robichaud and Sarah Wear have shown the extent to which Ficino relied on the works of Plotinus and Proclus in this third book.³⁰ Here I will highlight a few passages where Ficino discusses the importance of hymns, prayer, and ritual for the life of the soul. In chapter 21 he speaks of hymns and how hymns have the power to rouse the soul; this power comes from their ability to move both the singer and the audience to imitation: “by the same power, when it imitates the celestials, it also wonderfully arouses our spirit upwards to the celestial influence and the celestial spirit downwards to our spirit.”³¹ In addition, he claims that “a prayer, when it has been suitable and

Symposium, edited and translated by Jayne Sears Reynolds, (Missouri: University of Missouri, 1944), 7.15.

30 Denis Robichaud, “Fragments of Marsilio Ficino’s Translations and Use of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* and *Elements of Physics*: Evidence and Study,” *Vivarium* 54 (2016), 46–107; Denis Robichaud, “Ficino on Force, Magic, and Prayers: Neoplatonic and Hermetic Influences in Ficino’s *Three Books on Life*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017), 44–87; Sarah Wear, “Ficino’s Hymns and The Renaissance Platonic Academy,” in Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw, and Valery Rees, *Laus Platonicæ Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 133–148.

31 Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes* (DV), edited and translated by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1989), 21.78–80.

seasonably composed and is full of emotion and forceful, has a power similar to that of song."³² In Book 3 Ficino often refers to the "Chaldeans, the Egyptians, and the Platonists" as a group; they are all expressions of the same universal truths, the content of what he calls *prisca theologia*. In this case, these truths speak to how the soul is prepared to be united with the divine and the place of hymns in this preparation. He concludes this chapter by summarizing: "consider that those who by prayer, by study, by manner of life, and by conduct imitate the beneficence, action, and order of the celestials, since they are more similar to the gods, receive fuller gifts from them."³³ Ritual activity, like prayer and the singing of hymns, makes the soul like the divine; as it participates in the divinely given rites, the soul becomes like the gods. Good conduct and a properly ordered life are also paths which serve to order the soul and establish it in right relation to the whole of creation—the "order of the celestials"—and thus, to God. This parallels Ficino's discussion of the soul that becomes like God through the power of love that moves it to participate in the divine love itself. While Ficino focuses on the language of the ancient philosophers in the *De Vita*, this understanding is equally available to him in Christian terms as we see in his commentary on Dionysius. Both the hymns and songs that were part of the ritual practices of the ancient Platonic philosophers and those of Scripture and the Church are means for the soul to achieve union with the divine. In both cases, it is the material and bodily character of the rituals that allows them to move the soul beyond intellect to a union rooted in the creative power of the divine love—more perfect than that which is possible by the grasping of intellect alone.

Ficino himself speaks of his own practice of singing hymns and of helping friends with physical disease using what he called "spiritual medicine." Dennis Lackner has written specifically about Ficino's own spiritual practices and his relation to the Camaldolese

32 Ibid., 21.144–145.

33 Ibid., 22.115.

monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence. He writes: “Characteristic of Ficino’s own testimony is a letter to two friends cured by his spiritual medicines, where Ficino wrote how ‘you paid your respects to the Academy, as if it were your own doctor. You then asked for and heard the sound of the lyre and the singing of hymns.’”³⁴ The hymns and especially the lyre have the power, by Ficino’s own account, to heal the soul and even the body. As the soul and body are in such close relation, those things meant for the perfection of the soul can also be used to heal the body—the perfection of the former being closely tied to the health of the latter. In addition to healing others, Ficino describes in a letter from May of 1490 to Ermolao Barbaro, that “like a monk, he himself sang psalms thrice daily.”³⁵ Ficino’s own philosophical practice: the singing of hymns; preaching for the purpose of purifying the soul; healing the body and spirit through song; and uplifting the mind to and beyond divine contemplation, is well documented through his letters and in the *De Vita*. He is also known to have preached on numerous Platonic subjects in the church and cloister of the Angeli during the 1480s and 90s; in December 1488 he preached in the church of the Angeli every day for the whole month.³⁶ Lackner cites a Camaldolese General, Pico Dolfin, who wrote at the time: “I have known for some time that scholars, qualified in various disciplines, have given public lectures in the monastery of the Angels... However, up to the day of my recent visit, no one had appraised me of the fact that this kind of lecture took place in the church sanctuary itself.”³⁷ Here, in the church of the angels, Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus were preached alongside sacred Scripture; as pagan and Christian texts were being studied, so too psalms and Proclean hymns were being sung, laymen and brethren were

34 Denis Lackner, “The Camaldolese Academy: Ambrogio Traversari, Marsilio Ficino and the Christian Platonic Tradition” in Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, and Martin Davies, *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 32.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Quoted in Lackner, “Academy,” 34.

together drawn into the mysteries—Christian and Neoplatonic. In his *Oratio in principio lectionis*, Ficino exhorted that the sacred philosophy of Plato is best proclaimed in sacred places and before a religious audience. Referring to the use of temples and other holy places for teaching the ancient sages, Ficino commences his oration by emphasizing the appropriateness of the Camaldolese church of S. Maria degli Angeli for the contemplation of Plato: “Following as best we may the path trodden by ancient sages, we will therefore follow the holy philosophy of Plato here in this Church. In this seat of the angels [*sedes angelorum*, the name of the monastery] we will contemplate divine truth.”³⁸ This monastic setting—austere, devoted to communal prayer, ritual practice, and worship—was the perfect site for Ficino to practice his philosophical Christian religion, to facilitate the purification of the soul, to bring into practice the life of the soul that he read about in the Platonic dialogues and other Neoplatonic sources, and that he himself describes in the *Platonic Theology*. Lackner imagines that “here at the Angeli, where David’s psalter sounded continuously, Ficino harmonized on his Orphic lyre ancient Platonic *sententiae* with monastic hymns to Christ’s resurrection.”³⁹ Both these acts of worship—the psalter and the lyre—move the soul in love beyond reason and understanding, through Wisdom to Love. In this ritual practice, the soul becomes theurgic and is united to God in the divine activity which is love itself.

CONCLUSION

We began our consideration with Dionysius and the divine name Wisdom. We saw that the *Divine Names* can and should be understood as prayer—as a participation in theurgic activity. While the text calls the practitioner to contemplate the divine names as affirmations and as negations, recognizing God as both Wisdom

38 *Opera omnia*, 886, translation D. Lackner, quoted in Lackner, “Academy,” 34.

39 Lackner, “Academy,” 34.

and foolishness, the end of this contemplation is a move beyond all conceptions, in theurgic prayer, enabling the soul's participation in the divine activity that is beyond intellect. For Ficino we saw that this movement beyond reason and understanding is a movement that is rooted in love; it is an expression of the soul's love for God, which is also God's creative love for himself and his love of creation. This love, which Ficino calls a secret reasoning that is beyond knowing, is the soul's participation in the divine love that allows its union with God. Theurgy and love, as the two concepts at the root of the soul's experience of the divine activity, for Dionysius and Ficino respectively, describe the means of the soul's return to God. Finally, we saw that both Dionysius and Ficino rely on Neoplatonic religious and philosophical language, together with the language given by God in the Sacred Scriptures, for the ritual practice they imagine. Especially for Ficino, we see that he was engaged in a world of religious practice that was rooted in both traditions, which he brought together for a time within the religious life of the Angeli.