Eros as Hierarchical Principle:
A Re-evaluation of Dionysius' Neoplatonism

Timothy Riggs
University of Jyväskylä

Neoplatonism and the Unity of the Dionysian Corpus

The place of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in the history of philosophy, and indeed within the Dionysian corpus itself, remains a matter of contention among modern commentators. Some scholars would like to minimize its influence upon either one or both of the Western Latin and Eastern Greek theological and philosophical traditions,[1] while others tend toward the opposite route of affirming the strength of its influence.[2] At the source of the debate is the Areopagite's relationship to pagan Neoplatonism, especially his relationship to Proclus, Diadochus of the Athenian School for most of the 5th century CE.[3] In general, when he is not labelled outright as a Neoplatonic traitor to the Christian faith, the parts of his system which are found to be at fault are almost invariably labelled as "too Neoplatonic" and thus not enough Christian, as though to be called one is necessarily to be excluded from being called the other. Scholars and theologians usually charge Dionysius with either having a detrimental influence on Christian theology or of misunderstanding the "orthodox" Christian message because of his reliance on Platonic forms of thought. On the other hand, among those who wish to affirm that his influence has been positive or, at the least, to affirm the coherence and originality of his thought, many seek to reduce Neoplatonism to absurdity and to distance Dionysius from it by inventing

---

1. E.g., Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford U Press, 1993), 118–32; John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christianity Thought* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1975), 91–111. Also, see Kenneth Paul Wesche, "Christological Doctrine and Liturgical Interpretation in Pseudo-Dionysius," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33.1 (1989): 53–73.

2. E.g., Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 111–29; Alexander Golitzin, *Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessaloniki: ΑΝΑΛΕΚΤΑ ΒΛΑΤΑΔΩΝ).

3. As Alexander Golitzin has so amply shown, such judgments are dependent upon the interpretation of the Dionysian Corpus favoured by the commentator in question (Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 25–42).

numerous distinctions between the doctrines of the two, founding these distinctions upon supposed modifications made by the Areopagite.[4] Of course, there are others who take a more sympathetic view of Dionysius' relationship to Neoplatonism, not seeing it as diminishing his devotion to Christianity. Regardless of their approach to the characterization of Dionysius' influence upon the subsequent Oriental or Occidental tradition, all scholars agree that, at least in the West, his influence was great.

The study of Dionysius' influence on the philosophical and theological traditions subsequent to, and in so many ways engaged with, his work is best served by clarifying his intellectual and spiritual relationship to the Neoplatonism which clearly inspired him. This present essay is, in essence, the outline of an attempt to contribute to such a clarification. The brevity of this outline necessitates that I focus on the most significant of Dionysius' influences, namely the philosophy of Proclus on which it has been shown conclusively that Dionysius has modeled his own treatises.[5] Broadly speaking, I will attempt to show that Dionysius himself did not think that the thought of his Neoplatonic predecessor was intrinsically opposed to Christianity. Rather, I shall argue that his adoption and adaptation of Proclus' Neoplatonic principles for his own interpretation of Christianity points to a profound respect for this thinker's attempt to give a scientific account of the divine and its significance for human life by harmonizing revealed theology (e.g., Chaldaean Oracles) with Platonic (and Aristotelian) philosophy. Dionysius implicitly takes up this project with the intention of bringing Neoplatonic philosophy to its proper completion (as he sees it) by harmonizing it with Christian Scripture and sacrament. Thus, Dionysius does not simply bor-

---

4. For some examples of this technique, see W.J. Hankey, "Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic: Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82.4 (2008): 683–703. This is not to say, of course, that Dionysius does not modify Neoplatonic principles in adapting them to his Christian perspective; rather, it is necessary to affirm that he does do this, but also to try to come to grips with the *real* distinctions that he makes.

5. Most famously, as is well known, by H. Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895): 438–54 and J. Stiglmayr, "Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Uebel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895): 253–73. Also see H.-D. Saffrey, "Un lien objectif entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus," *Studia Patristica* 9 (1966): 98–105; *idem*, "New Objective Links Between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State U of New York Press, 1982), 64–74; C. Steel, "Denys et Proclus: L'existence du mal," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa posterité en Orient et en Occident*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 89–116; I. Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic Theology, A Preliminary Study," in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13–16 mai 1998) En l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, édités par A.H. Segonds et C. Steel. Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, De Wulf-Mansion Centre, Series I, XXVI (Leuven/Paris: Leuven U Press/Les Belles Lettres, 2000), 491–532.

row Neoplatonic philosophical vocabulary to dress up his own reflections on theology, but rather he wholeheartedly embraces the full import of Neoplatonic thought, using it to explain, as far this is possible, the meaning of Christ's revelation. For Dionysius, the fundamental principles of Neoplatonic philosophy are entirely commensurable with Christian revelation and this is shown in the structure and activity of the church congregation as described in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

I will attempt to give a brief overview of the unity of Dionysius' entire corpus through a demonstration of his consistent application of Neoplatonic metaphysical principles from his highest reflections on the Divine Unity and Trinity as far as to his reflections (however sparse) on political theory. In the course of this demonstration it will become clear that Dionysius does not follow his Neoplatonic predecessor uncritically. I am going to focus on his relationship to Proclus and so, by the end of this essay, a view of the extent to which he diverges from, and attempts to "correct," Proclus will emerge. This "correction" is, of course, not a rejection of Neoplatonic thought but instead a sublation of it into what Dionysius takes to be the true revelation of the divine. Since I am arguing for the unity of the Dionysian corpus as a coherent series of Christian reflections, and since it is not possible to get into a detailed review of all of the arguments for and against this unity, I shall begin with a brief consideration of the arguments of some scholars who have made a strong case for it.

Hierarchs and Philosopher-kings

The first scholar whose work I want to consider is Alexander Golitzin who argues for the centrality of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in the Dionysian corpus. He very neatly summarizes his position on the content and importance of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* in his monograph, *Et Introibo ad Altare Dei*:

> 1) hierarchy is the reality intended by God for the two worlds of creation, intelligible (the angels) and sensible (humans); 2) and is thus the full expression of Providence for that world, the analog of God. 3) As the icon of Providence it is necessarily an object of contemplation, because 4) it carries the γνῶσις of God and so communicates a share in his "mind". The mind of God being love, 5) a hierarchy is therefore a community, a single corporate organism bound together by the exercise of a loving and mutual providence whose origins and enabling power come directly from God. 6) This corporate element means that the given creature, angel or human being, discovers its salvation and deification as a member of a community. The path to ἕνωσις lies through and within the hierarchy, not outside of it. Dionysius has no "alone to the alone." His vision is, speaking sociologically, centripetal. There is, though 7) a place for the individual's enjoy-ment [sic] of union with God in Christ. This is indicated by hierarchy's function as microcosmos.[6]

6. A. Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 163–64.

It is the author's emphasis on the total integration of the created world, of both the angelic and human realms, and the source of this unity in the love of Christ that is of the greatest interest for my own argument. As will become clear below, my analysis of Dionysius' relationship to Proclus will reinforce and, indeed, shed more light on these principles of Dionysian theology.

Golitzin's position holds great interest as well by virtue of the fact that it directly flies in the face of the tendency among scholars to identify a "Platonic" *chorismos* between the intelligible and sensible in Dionysius' thought and often to read the inclusion of Christ in the author's work as simply lip-service to the Christian tradition of which he claims to be a part.[7] This *chorismos* is taken to be a definite, universal and unproblematic feature of Neoplatonic thought and is held up as a symbol of the Neoplatonist's unqualified disdain for the body and its effects on the human soul. With this conception of the *chorismos* in mind, Dionysius' relationship with Neoplatonism becomes an obstacle for these scholars; that is to say that it prevents them from admitting any possibility of commensurability between Neoplatonic thought, as they understand it, and Christian revelation which includes the body in its conception of salvation via the Resurrection. In other words, they exclude *a priori*, as un-Christian, any interpretation of this revelation which may be founded upon Neoplatonic principles.

The work of Jean Vanneste provides an instructive example of this kind of interpretation. He divides the Dionysian corpus into two autonomous parts whose independence he thinks he can justify by an appeal to Dionysius' terminology.[8] Since he sees that the predominant triad of stages of perfection in the *Mystical Theology*—ἀφαίρεσις, ἀγνωσία, ἕνωσις—differs in semantic form and in plane of operation from the corresponding triad which he finds in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*—κάθαρσις, φωτισμός, τελείωσις—Vanneste concludes that the Dionysian corpus operates according to two separate kinds of knowledge corresponding to the two triads. He recognizes that we may be inclined to identify the two triads because of some similarities, but warns against doing so. Evidently, he believes that such an identity is precluded by the fact that the triads operate on different planes, the first on the intellectual, and the second on the moral or ethical plane;

---

7. E.g., J. Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*; K.P. Wesche, "Christological Doctrine"; P. Rorem, "The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius," in *Christian Spirituality*: *Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, J. LeClercq (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 144; R. Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien: Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 68–81; J. Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu: Essai sur la Structure Rationnelle de la Doctrine Mystique du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite* (Brussels, 1959), 8–10, 18–21, 47–51, 52–54; idem, "Is the Mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius Genuine?" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 286–306, *passim*.

8. See note 7 for citations.

Vanneste associates the former triad with a Neoplatonic epistemology and the latter with a Christian one. According to Vanneste, whereas κάθαρσις involves turning away from the passions and the material world, ἀφαίρεσις is nothing more than an intellectual process of "negations abstractives." This translation of ἀφαίρεσις as "negations abstractives" is the root of Vanneste's error. He claims that it is difficult to translate this Greek word accurately; however, I suspect that the difficulty is not so much in the translation of the word as it is in trying to interpret its meaning to fit a pre-conceived judgment concerning the Areopagite's use of Neoplatonic terminology. If we abandon such judgments and translate ἀφαίρεσις more literally as 'taking away,' the commensurability of the two triads becomes clear. The 'taking away' of divine names from the conception of God which we bear in our soul is, in fact, a κάθαρσις, a turning away from the created toward the uncreated and stripping away of all limitations of being which inform our conception of the God which transcends all being. The end result of this movement is not, as Vanneste asserts, an epistemology: it is precisely the limitation of any and all epistemology which the movement of mystical theology is intended to overcome. Consequently, Vanneste's interpretation cannot take proper account of the image of the sculptor which Dionysius uses in *Mystical Theology* II. In accordance with this image, ἀφαίρεσις and κάθαρσις are synonymous terms for the same process—the process of chipping away at the stone to get to the true image within—the one being proper terminology for the process as it takes place within the soul, the other for the process as it is manifested in the human community: the one is a turning away from intelligible concepts, the other from 'material' or irrational objects and passions. A similar account can be given for the remaining terms of the two triads.

This unqualified notion of *chorismos* and of its application by the Neoplatonists still informs more recent studies of Dionysius, although with different results. This is the case with a new publication by Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon which aims to give a comprehensive view of Dionysius' thought as a unified whole and of his relationship to Neoplatonism—a worthwhile task in itself.[9] While they rightly recognize that Dionysius is in close dialogue with not only Proclus but Neoplatonism in general and that Dionysius' thought diverges in important ways from that of Proclus, nevertheless their account seems rather to overemphasize the similarities and minimize the divergences: they paint a picture of a more or less Christianized Proclus.[10]

9. S. Klitenic-Wear and J.M. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

10. Cp. with the approach in R. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius: A Study in the Form and Meaning of the Pseudo-Dionysian Writings* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

When they do note divergences, they account for them by positing an intellectual relationship between Dionysius and Platonists other than Proclus (particularly Porphyry in the second and third chapters of the book), for which the available evidence is of debatable validity. These relationships seem more plausible if one agrees with the authors' assertion that Dionysius was a Monophysite Christian and if one shares their view that the Monophysite creed is intellectualist and therefore unconcerned with the body; Monophysitism characterized in this way is certainly commensurable with the simplistic *chorismos* interpretation which I discussed above.[11]

However, the evidence which the authors offer in support of this thesis is neither conclusive nor convincing. The authors quote a passage from *Epistle* IV—the orthodoxy of whose language remains in debate—and simply declare that it is clearly expressive of a Monophysite position: those who see orthodoxy in it, or even the ambiguity which most scholars agree is present, are "dull-witted" and easily deceived.[12] (Interestingly, their list of such "dull-witted" readers includes John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor.) The strongest support which they offer is their implication that Dionysius means 'body,' as instrument, when he writes ἄνθρωπος. The latter term is more commonly translated "man" or "human being" and is never, so far as I know, used to indicate the body unaccompanied by soul.[13] This translation is clearly implied because, while they assert that Dionysius simply regards the body as an instrument, nowhere in the passage cited does Dionysius refer either to 'body' or to 'instrument,' let alone both together, but only to Christ as ἄνθρωπος. A few pages later, they use Dionysius' supposed disinterest in the resurrection of the body (since the body is just an instrument) to entirely discount the genuineness of the last chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* concerning Christian burial, where Dionysius exhibits a clear interest in the resurrection of the body. Despite the relegation of this assertion to a footnote, it seems to be the reason for the authors' appeal to the work of Bernhard Brons as authority for this excision. However, the argument from Brons which they cite—that Dionysius makes an anachronistic reference to *ancient Christians*—would require the excision of at least *Epistle* VIII[14] as well (if not

11. John Meyendorff, in *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: the Church 450–680AD* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) argues that Monophysitism cannot be so easily generalized in this way. Andrew Louth, in "The Reception of Dionysius up to Maximus the Confessor," *Modern Theology* 24.4 (2008): 573–83, also expresses his reservations with this characterization.

12. Wear & Dillon, *Despoiling*, 4–6.

13. The Greeks had perfectly good words for the corporeal matter which we call "body". There is no reason to suppose that Dionysius would not have used one of these words had that been what he intended to signify.

14. Ibid, 8.

other passages), which the authors seem to have no interest in doing. In any case, the work of Golitzin[15] and Perl[16] concerning Dionysius' affirmation of the resurrection of the body are cleanly passed over both in the text of this study and in its bibliography. The authors' arguments seem to be designed to cement Dionysius' status as a disciple of Proclus more firmly, since the rest of the book attributes little creativity to Dionysius himself; rather, any modifications which he makes to Proclean principles (with few exceptions) are determined to be, in the main, returns to Plotinian and Porphyrian doctrines or to be suggested allusions to those of Damascius.[17] This allows the authors to avoid the difficulty of explaining how Dionysius could take an interest in a doctrine like that of the resurrection of the body, which could not fit easily into a Neoplatonism with a merely Christian surface.[18]

Golitzin, on the other hand, is more successful in providing a comprehensive view of the corpus. His greater success is evident in the fact that his interpretation has the benefit of preserving the integrity of Dionysius' system: he leaves no part of the corpus unaccounted for and is able to see how Dionysius attempts to bridge the *chorismos* between the intelligible and sensible. Without his recognition of the complete integration of the intelligible and sensible (including the human) in and through God, violence must be done to the coherence of the four main treatises of the corpus, such as has been done by Vanneste and, to a lesser extent, Wear and Dillon. What might seem striking at first in Golitzin's interpretation is that he manages to preserve the integrity of Dionysius' theology, for the most part, without truly grasping the significance of Neoplatonism;[19] however, it must be noted that the sources of Dionysius' theology on which he dwells the most are those Fathers and contemplatives of the Orthodox Church who were most influenced by the Platonic tradition, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Evagrius Ponticus and the Cappadocian Fathers. This is not a bad approach—after all, we could

15. Golitzin, "On the Other Hand," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 34.4 (1990): 305–23; idem, *Et Introibo*.

16. Perl, "Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39.3/4 (1994): 311–56.

17. Although, to be fair, there is some discussion, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3, of the Cappadocian Fathers.

18. This is the only impression one can derive from Wear and Dillon's account of Dionysius' teaching, despite their assurances that they do not doubt Dionysius' belief that he was a good Christian. Of course, I do not deny Dionysius' Neoplatonism—in fact I am arguing the opposite in this paper—but I must insist that his Neoplatonism is not just a 'Porphyry-modified Procleanism' as the authors seem to suggest. Such a reading is impossible if one reads and tries to comprehend the corpus as a *whole*, with *all* of its parts. Again, Golitzin and Perl are highly instructive in this regard.

19. To be fair, Golitzin is not interested in Neoplatonism for its own sake.

say that it was John Scotus Eriugena's method by necessity[20]—but it necessarily misses some of the interesting aspects of Dionysius' thought which only emerge through contemplation of his relationship with Proclus.[21]

A more Neoplatonically informed interpretation of Dionysius' system is that of Eric Perl. He offers a more sympathetic reading of the Neoplatonists and especially of Dionysius' relationship to them. According to Perl's account, as for Goltizin's, the Incarnation, and so Christ, is central to Dionysius' understanding of the relationship of created things to God the Uncreated, and thus to the operations and cohesion of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* both as a treatise and as a human structure grounded in the transcendent.[22] For Perl, again as for Golitzin, there is a total integration of the sensible and the intelligible:

> A dichotomy between sense and mind is the farthest thing from Dionysius' intent, for it would mean that God is inaccessible to sense but accessible to mind, whereas Dionysius invariably insists that God is both inaccessible and accessible to both sense and mind.[23]

> Because for Dionysius the fundamental difference between the uncreated and the created is not between spiritual and material but between God and beings, it follows that the body no less than the soul, insofar as it *is*, [participates] in God.[24]

This is so because creation, whether intelligible or sensible, is *theophany*, the manifestation of the transcendently simple, the One, into multiplicity, and this is what it means *to be*.[25] Thus all things are symbols of God insofar as they exist. Furthermore, concerning the hierarchy of created things (including the ecclesiastical hierarchy), Perl argues that

> This hierarchy is a hierarchy of love, in which the higher providentially serves the lower and [the] lower in response follows the higher. Therefore all hierarchical order is the expression of love.[26]

20. I thank Dr. Wayne Hankey for reminding me of this fact.

21. Thus, had Golitzin taken an interest in Dionysius' Pagan Neoplatonic predecessors, he might have found satisfactory answers to some of the questions which he is compelled to leave unresolved.

22. Perl, "Symbol," 336–38. Although this particular work is written primarily from the perspective of Orthodox theology, its content is not contradicted by Perl's more recent philosophical interpretation of Dionysius' metaphysics and its sources in Neoplatonism in his *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007). In any case, the influence of Neoplatonism on the language which Perl uses throughout his paper is clear.

23. Ibid, 319.

24. Ibid, 334. Italics are the author's own.

25. Ibid, *passim*. Also see Perl, *Theophany*, 17–34, where he traces Dionysius' understanding of what comes to be called theophany by Eriugena back to Plotinus.

26. Ibid, 353.

The love which he refers to here is both the "love of creation for God" and the "love of God for creation."[27]

Perl is fundamentally in agreement with Golitzin on these broad aspects of the Dionysian hierarchies, although, unlike Golitzin, he traces these aspects back to Dionysius' Neoplatonic predecessors, in particular Plotinus and Proclus. The agreement between Dionysius and the Neoplatonists on these points, which Perl so adequately outlines, is a crucial precedent for the metaphysical analysis which this essay intends to outline. The only thing that is missing, so to speak, from Perl's account is discussion of the role of the hierarch in Dionysius' hierarchical scheme. This is hardly a criticism: his focus in his work is primarily on the specifically metaphysical doctrine in Dionysius' writings. Golitzin's work is more helpful precisely at this point since he has provided an interesting discussion on this subject.

Golitzin emphasizes the role of the hierarch as a model of Christian perfection for the congregation of faithful in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[28] This figure can be such a model only because of the fact of the Incarnation of Christ: in performing the sacraments, the hierarch is imitating the philanthropic (and one must add providential) procession of God, as Christ, into the human condition.[29] In fact, Golitzin writes,

> It is to Jesus that we look for the model of the hierarch's actions. Better than model, he is rather the presence working through and in the bishop, the proper ἀρχή to which the latter is restored.[30]

In this way, Christ is present and active throughout the entire human hierarchy and is the ground of the latter's activity. The hierarch stands as a mediator (sc. revealer) of Christ's already immanent presence in the world to those lower in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, Goltizin reads Dionysius' account of Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai in the *Mystical Theology* as a symbol of the hierarch's mystical union which is intrinsically connected to his performance of sacramental rites in the Church.[31] According to this reading, the "cloud" and "place" of God to which Moses ascends become figures of the altar to which the hierarch proceeds,[32] and so Sinai becomes a figure of the Church "within whose liturgy the mystical union here-below is signified and accomplished."[33] The author

27. Ibid.
28. Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 197.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid, 170–73.
32. Ibid, 171.
33. Ibid, 172.

justifies this reading by pointing to Dionysius' descriptions of other mystical visions (those of Isaiah, Hierotheos and Carpus), all of which, as he rightly indicates, take place within the context of public worship.[34] Moses' ascent of Sinai, and so also the hierarch's approach to the altar, figures as the type "of the individual's ἀναγωγὴ that our hierarchy […] reveals as the icon of the perfected human being" and which is thus "typified in, and enabled by, the hierarchy."[35] Such a reading excludes the possibility of a mystical contact with the transcendent outside of the context of the corporate Church and thus avoids the solipsism imposed upon the Areopagite's work by scholars such as Vanneste: mystical union is only attained by the hierarch insofar as he ministers to the clergy and laity.

Now, while the work of Golitzin and Perl is primarily theological and metaphysical, that of Dominic J. O'Meara in his *Platonopolis*, and in an earlier paper which informs his account in the latter work, approaches the ecclesiological theory of Dionysius from the much lower (from a Neoplatonic perspective) plane of political philosophy;[36] in other words, he approaches the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* from the point of view of what it has to say about the structure and activity of a human community. Broadly speaking, he argues that the goal of all the major philosophical schools of the Classical and Hellenistic periods, although variously understood, was the divinization of the individual soul,[37] and no scholar could seriously deny that this is true of Dionysius' own thought. Likewise, in all of these schools, the project of divinization involves a political dimension. Amongst the Neoplatonists, the political aspect of the philosophical life is, in one sense, a preparatory stage on the way to divinization while, in another sense, it is the result of union

---

34. Ibid, 173.

35. Ibid, 176.

36. D.J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003); idem, "Évêques et philosophes-rois: Philosophie politique néoplatonicienne chez le Pseudo-Denys," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa posterité en Orient et en Occident*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 75–88. In his *Platonopolis*, O'Meara is necessarily opposed to Hathaway who, in his *Hierarchy and Definition of Order*, 124, claims, not unconventionally, that political philosophy disappears in Neoplatonism and that despite the prevalence of political terminology in Dionysius' *Epistle* 8 which he himself emphasizes, there is no real political philosophy in the Dionysian Corpus. Hathaway's justification for this assertion is that the human hierarchy is not but a mean between the sensible and intelligible and thus there is only concern for the divine to the exclusion of the lower orders. To make this claim is to deny Dionysius' frequent emphasis on the providential care exerted by all levels of created hierarchy for lower and contemporary members and, especially with regard to political theory, the care exerted by the hierarch and subordinate members of the clergy for the laity. See the more focused exposition of the same material in O'Meara, "Évêques et philosophes-rois."

37. O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 34.

with the transcendent first principle;[38] this is equally true of Dionysius.[39] These claims provide an important complement to the readings of Dionysius which I have discussed above.

O'Meara, taking up the suggestion of Roques, argues that Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is an attempt to describe an ideal *politeia* along the lines of that presented in Plato's *Republic*, although with significant differences which situate it more closely to Proclus' celestial *politeia*.[40] Within this ideal community, the hierarch shares striking similarities with Plato's philosopher-king, although, O'Meara argues, the differences between them can be explained by Dionysius' use of a Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Republic*, and especially of the role of the philosopher-king.[41] In particular, the hierarch shares with the philosopher-king the role of a moral and ethical exemplar to the ranks subordinate to him: that is to say that both figures must have ordered their own souls and thus be irreproachable both politically and ethically.[42]

O'Meara maintains that the Dionysian hierarch is anticipated by the figure of Moses, as Dionysius depicts him, whose soul is ordered according to a divine paradigm acquired through a revelatory vision.[43] At this point, O'Meara's reading of Dionysius on the relationship between Moses and the hierarch introduces a potential distinction which Golitzin, in setting aside considerations of Dionysius' relationship to Neoplatonism, has not recognized. Whereas Golitzin reads Moses and his ascent of Sinai as being direct symbols of the hierarch and his liturgical activity, O'Meara asserts that the activities of Moses and the hierarch are not entirely commensurable: hence his description of the former as an "anticipation" of the latter. Moses, according to O'Meara, is a direct representation of the Neoplatonic philosopher-king—O'Meara compares him to Minos as Plotinus represents him in the *Enneads*—in that, like the philosopher-king, Moses fashions a state (so to speak) and legislates in accordance with a vision from God. He outlines the difference between the philosopher-king (and thus Moses) and the hierarch in the following way:

---

38. Ibid, 40–49 & 73–82.

39. Ibid, 164–65. The language of political philosophy as a preparatory stage of divination is explicit in *Epistle* 8, as acknowledged by both O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, and Hathaway, *Hierarchy and Definition of Order*. The other side of the political aspect of the philosophical life is apparent in the hierarch's activities as described in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, as will be discussed below.

40. Ibid, 159–70. Cf. R. Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien*, 81–83; 89.

41. Ibid, 169. O'Meara, "Évêques et philosophes-rois," 88.

42. O'Meara, "Évêques et philosophes-rois," 80. This claim receives some qualification in the latter part of the present essay.

43. Ibid, 80–81. O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 164–65.

> Le philosophe-roi qui modèle la cite idéale d'après un paradigme divin de la vertu devi-
> ent chez Denys l'homme saint qui se modèle selon ce paradigme. L'action politique du
> philosophe-roi est, pour ainsi dire, intériorisée, rendue «secrète». Mais cette intériorisa-
> tion, cette dissimulation ne font qu'intensifier la description de la qualité intérieure
> morale et spirituelle qui est source chez l'homme saint de son action bienfaisante, la
> communication du bien aux inférieurs. Denys pousse ainsi à l'extrême le paradoxe du
> philosophe-roi néoplatonicien, qui à la fois se retire du monde pour s'unir à l'Un, et
> cherche à donner au monde une image de cette union.[44]

Thus, through Moses as founder of the "legal hierarchy," Dionysius subordi-
nates the Neoplatonic philosopher-king to the hierarch, for whom the law
has already been established and, what is more, sublated by the Incarnation.
This, if true, is completely in keeping with the New Testament doctrine of
Christ's coming to fulfill the promise of the Old Testament: the hierarch
as image and mediator of Christ and his activity completes the hierarchy
founded by Moses.

Despite his potentially fundamental insight, O'Meara does not draw
the latter conclusions. In his own words, he has avoided the theological
and biblical dimensions of the Areopagite's thought and limited himself to
merely outlining connections to the Neoplatonic writings in the text of the
former.[45] Conversely, Golitzin's interpretation suffers from his lack of atten-
tion to the Neoplatonists. Both scholars are left with questions to which they
either have no answers or, at best, only tentative ones; in particular, both
are concerned about a perceived lack of symmetry between the ecclesiastical
hierarchy and the celestial hierarchy of which it is the image. Such a lack of
symmetry could suggest that Dionysius was unable, contrary to the arguments
of Golitzin and Perl, to bridge the *chorismos* between the intelligible and
sensible. In what follows I shall show that a closer inspection of Dionysius'
dialogue with Proclus bring together the metaphysical and political/ethical
dimensions of Dionysius' thought and will show, among other things, that
any lack of symmetry is only apparent.

The Metaphysics of Love

In order to solve this problem of symmetry, I will attempt to draw a clearer
account of how Dionysius attempts to maintain the unity of the intelligible
and sensible. I suggest that this can be shown through the investigation of
one principle, namely *erôs*, and of the names which are most immediately
related to it (Good and Beautiful). A detailed analysis of Dionysius' Trinitarian
doctrine would show that *erôs*, as an attribute of God and an activity which
he ecstatically exercises toward His creation, is fundamentally a demiurgic

44. Ibid, 82. See also O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 165–66.
45. O'Meara, "Évêques et philosophes-rois," 86.

principle responsible for the reversion of all things to their source (i.e., God) and thus for their completion and turn to their own proper selves. In the case of humanity, this reversion and completion is accomplished by means of God's entrance into, and continuous presence in, the human condition in the Person of the Son; in this way he exalts and perfects not only human being but all being whatsoever. This same analysis would show that Dionysius follows Proclus' erotic doctrine very closely but, at the same time, makes significant changes. Although I cannot present this analysis in full detail here, I will, nevertheless, outline its results.[46]

Both Dionysius' and Proclus' doctrines of *erôs* are intimately connected to the henadological theory, the importance and character of which have been analyzed by Edward Butler.[47] Butler argues convincingly that Proclus distinguishes the henads from noetic forms not only by the degree of their union with each other but also by their absolute distinction from each other, that is to say by the superlative degree of their identity in distinction.[48] He reconstructs two different sets of terminology used by Proclus to distinguish talk of henads from talk of forms. The thrust of Butler's argument is that Proclus ultimately distinguishes the henads from the forms insofar as the former are prior to, and are the sources of, Being, while the latter are individual specifications of Being or, in other words, particular beings.

Butler's insight into the relationship between the henads and the One, Proclus' first principle, is also of utmost importance. He identifies two kinds of procession, citing *In Parm.,* 745: procession by unity (*henôsin*) and procession by identity (*tautotêta*).[49] The latter is characteristic of the procession of beings from Being whereas the former is characteristic of the procession of the henads from the One. He argues that the procession characteristic of the henads ensures that the One, as first principle, is not anything other than each of the Gods, but rather is expressive of the contemplation of the

46. I intend to publish the details of this analysis in future articles.

47. E. Butler, "Polytheism and Individuality in the Henadic Manifold." *Dionysius* XXIII (2005): 83-103; idem, "The Gods and Being in Proclus." *Dionysius* XXVI (2008): 93–113.

48. Some relevant Proclean passages are: *In Parm.*, 1048.11–26; *In Parm.,* 745; *El. Th.,* 112.14–24; *El. Th.,* 120.17–30. Citations of Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* will be indicated by *in Parm.*, as here, followed by the Cousin pagination in Proclus Diadochus, *Commentarius in Platonis Parmenidem*, ed. Victor Cousin, Opera inedita vol. 3 (Hildesheim, 1961). Citations of the same author's *Elements of Theology* will be indicated, as here, by *El. Th.* followed by Dodds' pagination in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, 2nd ed, a revised text with translation, introduction and commentary by E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon, Reprinted 2004).

49. Butler, "Polytheism and Individuality," 94–95. Butler notes that the procession by identity seems to be the same as the procession by difference, presented at *In Parm.,* 1190. Perhaps these are indeed two ways of referring to the processive triad of identity—difference—similarity which Stephen Gersh shows to be associated with the triad remaining—procession—reversion (in ΚΙΝΗΣΙΣ ΑΚΙΝΗΤΟΣ: *A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus* [Leiden: Brill, 1973], 74–76).

henads prior to any taxonomical or individual distinction—the One is the unity which is characteristic of their manner of subsistence.[50] The henads are thus pre-ontological, absolute individuals which are the origins of both universality and individuality in beings. Dionysius uses the same language in his discussion of the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in the second chapter of the *Divine Names*.[51] It is especially there that we find Dionysius applying terms such as "individuality" (ἰδιοτής)[52] and "unitary" (ἐνιαίος)[53] to the God beyond being. Likewise, he follows Proclus in using "sameness" or "identity" (ταὐτότης),[54] difference (ἐτερότης)[55] and essence or being (οὐσία)[56] when discussing beings and their characteristics.

It is in the henads, for Proclus, and in the Trinity, for Dionysius, that the *erôs* in all of its forms has its source. Thus, like Being in general, *erôs* has a pre-ontological (really non-ontological) origin. For Proclus, *erôs* originates amongst the highest Gods or henads,[57] as the expression of the revertive

---

50. Ibid, 98: "the One ultimately represents each God's uniqueness and absolute individuality." This conclusion arises out of an analysis of *De Decem Dubitationes*, X.63. See also Butler, "Gods and Being," 99.

51. I have made use of the editions of Dionysius' Greek prepared by the editors of *Corpus Dionysiacum I. De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990) and *Corpus Dionysiacum II. De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, eds. Günter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991). When citing Dionysius' individual treatises, I will give the chapter divisions followed by the Migne pagination and the pagination, in parentheses, of the two volumes just indicated. These numbers will be preceded by abbreviated forms of the titles of the treatises: *DN = Divine Names*; *CH = Celestial Hierarchy*; *EH = Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*; *MT = Mystical Theology*; *Ep. = Epistles*.

52. E.g., *DN*, 2.4 641A (126.17). This only appears once in the Chapter on the Trinity, but it also appears elsewhere in relation to what comes from God, e.g., at *DN*, 10.3 937C (216.8).

53. E.g., *DN*, 2.11 649B (136.6); *DN*, 2.11 652A (137.7); *et alia*.

54. E.g., *DN*, 2.4 641A (126.7); *DN*, 4.2 696B (145.1); *et alia*.

55. E.g., *DN*, 1.4 589D (112.13); *DN*, 4.7 704B (152.15); *et alia*.

56. E.g, *DN*, 1.1 588B (109.10); *DN*, 2.10 648C (134.13); *et alia*. Dionysius refers to God as *hyperousios ousia* at *DN*, 1.1 588B (109.13–14) but S. Lilla, "Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite, Porphyre et Damascius," in *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa posterité en Orient et en Occident*, ed. Ysabel de Andia (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1997), 117–54 at 126 shows that this inconsistency is only apparent.

57. This remark runs wholly contrary to the assertion, most strongly made by C.J. De Vogel that, according to Proclus, *erôs* originates in a God which occupies a low level on the henadic hierarchy; see De Vogel, "*Amor quo caelum regitur*," *Vivarium* 1 (1963): 2–34 and "Greek Cosmic Love and the Christian Love of God: Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite and the Author of the Fourth Gospel," *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981): 57–81. This assertion is controverted by Proclus himself who finds the origin of *erôs* in the very highest henadic triad. Aside from this, it is also controverted by the essential unity of the henads: since the henads, as Butler has emphasized, are all in all, then since *erôs* is present at one level of the henadic hierarchy then it must be present at all levels.

activity of the Beauty of the Gods. As such, it is associated with the third term of a "processive" triad of the Good (*to agathon*), the Wise (*to sophon*) and the Beautiful (*to kalon*). Each moment of this triad corresponds respectively (and primarily) to each moment of the cyclical process of remaining, procession and reversion. Proclus discusses Beauty as a revertive moment in two different contexts: 1) at *PT*, 1.24,[58] he describes the relationship between Beauty and *erôs*, the former as attribute and the latter as activity, of the Gods in general;[59] at *PT*, 3.22, he describes this same relationship as characteristic of a particular rank among the highest order of Gods, namely the intelligible Gods.[60] It seems, then, that *erôs* is of great importance to Proclus' theological reflections, despite the fact that Proclus indicates that, as a way to union with the Gods, *erôs* is less effective than *pistis* and *alêtheia*.[61] For Dionysius, *erôs* is the activity of the Beauty of God, as he explains at *DN*, 4.7–10. Beauty is a name of God which is associated with the name Good and, like Good, it is pre-ontological in its signification.[62] This Beauty occurs, just as Proclus' *to kalon*, as the third term of a processive triad of Good, Wisdom and Beauty, whose three members fulfill essentially the same functions as those of the Proclean triad.

This metaphysical *erôs*[63] does not simply reside in God or the Gods; rather, it is manifest at all levels of being as a source of perfection in things, in that it provides to beings their impulse to seek their own perfection: indeed, this is what it means for *erôs* to be the source of reversion. Proclus argues, citing Plato's *Symposium* in his commentary on Plato's *Alcibidades*, that the primary mediators of *erôs* from the Gods to beings, specifically human souls, are *daimons*.[64] In turn, this *erôs* is mediated from human soul to human soul primarily by those souls which are most in tune with their own *daimonic* mediator: Proclus' exemplar for this kind of mediation is Socrates in his relationship to the young Alcibiades, the very relationship which provides Plato with the dramatic vehicle for a discussion of the nature of human

58. For passages from Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, I will cite them as they appear in Proclus, *Theologie Platonicienne*, 5 vols., translated and edited by H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968–87). Citations will be indicated by *PT* followed by Saffrey and Westerink's chapter divisions and then their pagination.

59. *PT*, 1.24 (108.7–20).

60. *PT*, 3.22 (81.11–20).

61. *In Alc.*, 28.22–30.3 (23–24). Citations, indicated by *In Alc.*, as here, followed by the Creuzer pagination, are made from Proclus, *Sur le Premier Alcibiade de Platon, Tomes I & 2*, texte établi et traduit par A.Ph. Segonds (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1985).

62. *DN*, 4.1–2 693A–697A.

63. There is, of course, a *erôs* of terrestrial, accidental things, which is inappropriate for human souls. See *In Alc.*, 36.25–37.18.

64. *In Alc.,* 30.21–31.2.

being.[65] It is, in fact, the desire to know just what human being is which is initially stirred in Socrates by Apollo's command to 'Know Thyself'[66] and it is this desire which Socrates tries to stir in Alcibiades by means of his erotic[67] relationship with the young man. An erotic relationship is appropriate to Alcibiades because the latter's character requires unification with the third moment of the Good, namely the Beautiful; Socrates orders, with the help of *daimones*, all of his relationships in a similar way. Similarly for Dionysius, *erôs* is mediated to human souls through the angels (analogous to Proclus' *daimones*) from God and it is manifest in an exemplary way in Christ who is the leader of the celestial (angelic) and human hierarchies.[68] At the level of human being, Christ's *erôs* is mediated by the hierarch, as an image[69] of the Incarnate Christ, to the hierarchy of human souls over which he presides. This mediation of *erôs* is accompanied, as it is for Proclus, by a mediation of the knowledge of what it means to be human.[70] In this way, Christ's *philanthropia*, the reason for the Son's entrance into being,[71] becomes the foundation of the hierarchical activity of the church community; the relationships of higher to lower, lower to higher, of peers with each other, are all performed in imitation of the divine *erôs*. This points to an implied criticism of Proclus' doctrine: for Dionysius, *erôs* is the way of union for every member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, mediating Christ's *erôs* and knowledge in full to each individual according to the individual's capacity, whereas, for Proclus, *erôs* provides only a deficient form of union for certain individuals who are not capable of penetrating to the deeper levels of knowing.

This criticism is most conspicuous in Dionysius' treatment of the "legal" hierarchy instituted by Moses.[72] Dionysius considers the place of this hierarchy in terms of the symbols which Moses received in his vision on Mt. Sinai and their anagogical effect on the souls of the members of the hierarchy. The legal hierarchy is "introductory" (εἰσαγωγικῶς) to, or a preparation for, the ecclesiastical hierarchy instituted according to Christ's revelation; the latter hierarchy is a "more perfect initiation" (ἐπὶ τελεωτέραν μύησιν). Dionysius implies that the symbols employed by the two hierarchies are essentially the

65. Whether this dialogue is spurious or not is of no importance here. The fact that Proclus takes it to be genuine is all that matters.

66. *In Alc.*, 4.21–5.14.

67. *In Alc.,* 29.15–30.3. Socrates' 'erotic' relationship with Alcibiades must be understood in light of Plato's account of it in the *Symposium* where it does not involve sexual intercourse (despite Alcibiades' advances) and not in the usual modern sense of 'erotic.'

68. *EH*, 1.1 372AB (63.11–64.14).

69. Cf. Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 160.

70. *EH*, 1.1 369A–372B (63.2–64.14).

71. *EH*, 3.*theoria*.12 444A (92–93).

72. *EH*, 5.2 501BC (105.3–16).

same, although, for the legal hierarchy, the symbols remain obscure and accessible to only the few who are initiated into their meaning.

The details of this passage seem to be a response to Proclus' division of the levels of meaning in mythological imagery as he presents them in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*.[73] In this text Proclus describes two levels of meaning: the educative and the mystical. Educative myths use simple images, easily understood and explained, which serve as an initiation into political and legislative activities which are preparatory for the mystical life. Initiation into the mystical life proper requires the ability to penetrate and comprehend the meaning of the more obscure, and sometimes monstrous, imagery of myths bearing mystical meaning. What Dionysius does is transpose the function of educative myth into the obscure, sometimes monstrous, imagery of the legal hierarchy which is deeply concerned both with political and legislative concerns and with sacramental concerns. Simultaneously, this results in a shift of the function of Proclus' highest form of myth, whose deepest meaning is known only to the few initiated, to the lower category of educative myth. For Dionysius, the meaning of the educative, Mosaic imagery is identical to the higher, mystical meaning and is mediated to the many by the few initiated (Moses and the priesthood). The imagery remains educative and conveyed as law so long as Christ has not yet come; with Christ's advent, the full meaning of the imagery is revealed and the way to the intellectual and erotic ascent to union with Chist is given in the institution, performance and participation in the sacraments. The ascent through religious imagery is no longer dependent upon intellectual acuity but rather is fully accessible to all members of the Church in accordance with each member's intellectual capacity through the mediation of *erôs* in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

A Political Theory?

Discussion of the relationship between the legal and ecclesiastical hierarchies brings me to the final part of this essay. My goal here is to show how *erôs*, especially in its manifestations in the legal and ecclesiastical hierarchies, extends to and modifies the political and ethical dimensions of human existence. Dionysius does not deliver his reflections on these subjects in the mode of a sustained analysis of individual and corporate human behaviour and the psychological mechanisms which guide its reactions to circumstances. Rather, he approaches the subject from the point of view of how human behaviour is affected by the influence of Christ's *erôs* as mediated through the angels and ecclesiastical hierarchy: there is no consideration of behaviour outside of the context of the community guided and informed by Christ.

73. *In Remp.*, I.81.11–82.2 & 84.2–19 in Proclus, *In Platonis Rem Publicam Commentaria*, ed. W. Kroll, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899–1901).

Thus, Dionysius does not so much present a theory of political and ethical behaviour on their own terms as he presents a theory of their rehabilitation and re-orientation.

In order to support these claims I will use, as a convenient entry point, the problem of asymmetry between the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies which both Golitzin and O'Meara have identified, and which I briefly introduced above. In that place, I briefly presented both Alexander Golitzin's conception of Moses as archetypal hierarch and Dominic O'Meara's implicit revision of this view[74] in his description of Moses as an *anticipation* of the hierarch. I noted that Golitzin's interpretation is entirely theological and passes over the political dimension of the hierarchy of the Law. This is not a discredit to his work since he is interested in showing the connection between the content of the *Mystical Theology* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. For Goltizin, the interpretation of Moses' ascent as a symbol of the church is an indication of this connection and of Dionysius' consistency with the theological tradition of the Greek Church Fathers. On the other hand, it is the political dimension of this image which holds O'Meara's interest. I have already mentioned the presence within the legal hierarchy of both a sacramental or religious domain and a political one and how these two aspects of the hierarchy are completed in the hierarchy instituted by Christ; what needs to be done now is to show how this rather more holistic view of the hierarchy might be able to answer the problems which both Golitzin and O'Meara have inherited from René Roques.[75] The problem of asymmetry, as identified by these two scholars, consists in the following:

1. Ontological asymmetry. Dionysius says that his church hierarchy is an image of the angelic but its organization does not follow precisely that of its model. Golitzin sees the discrepancy in light of the uneven distribution of powers in each rank. Whereas in the angelic hierarchy each order and rank depends upon the order or rank above it, in the human hierarchy the ranks of initiated do not depend upon each other but rather upon the ranks of the initiators.[76] O'Meara sees a numerical distinction: the angelic hierarchy is triadic while the human hierarchy is dyadic, insofar as it is divided into the "initiators" and the "initiated."[77] He justifies this characterization by pointing out that the angelic hierarchy is composed of three orders of *intelligences* while the human hierarchy is composed of only two orders of *intelligences* and a higher order of sacraments. In either case there appears to be a disjunction in the ontological continuity of the human hierarchy.

74. O'Meara does not address Golitzin's work in his essays on Dionysius and political theory.

75. Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien*, 173–75; 183; 196–99.

76. Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 209; 216–17.

77. O'Meara, "Évêques et philosophes-rois," 83–84; cf. idem, *Platonopolis*, 166–67.

2. *Gradational asymmetry*. O'Meara is concerned about the relative importance that Dionysius attributes to the hierarch in light of the human hierarchy's status as an image of the angelic. According to him, the importance of the hierarch "va bien au-delà de ce que l'on pourrait attendre d'un système de gradation continue tel celui qui structure les anges."[78]

Both Golitzin and O'Meara reject Roques' solution to these problems which is to suggest that Dionysius has been compelled by the form of the Church in his own time to disrupt the structural continuity between the angelic and the human hierarchies.[79] On the other hand, their solutions are very different.[80]

Golitzin's solution to the first problem, that which I have called the problem of *ontological asymmetry*, is to posit the discrepancy between the human hierarchy and the angelic as an eschatological indicator.[81] According to this view, the distribution of powers in the human hierarchy is an imperfect image of the even distribution of the angelic because of the fallen condition of humanity. Thus, this discrepancy is something to be corrected only at the end of days. Whatever truth there may be in this, it takes no account of the parallel of the ecclesiastical hierarchy's structure to that of the Platonic political hierarchy and so is of little use with regard to political concerns. Nevertheless, his explanation of Moses' ascent to Mt. Sinai, as represented in the *Mystical Theology*, as the archetype of the activity of the church, and thus of Moses as the archetype of the hierarch is formally correct. We shall see that O'Meara's reflections of the structure of the church help to complete the picture painted by Golitzin.

Unlike Golitizin, O'Meara presents a solution to this same problem which takes account of the possibility of political reflections in Dionysius' work. He suggests that Dionysius divides the human hierarchy in much the same way that Plato divides the classes of citizens in his *Republic*: just as Plato divides the city into the guardian and producing classes, so does Dionysius divide the hierarchy into the initiators and the initiated. Such a division may also be seen in Proclus' distinction between educative and mystical myths, and those characters which are associated with them. O'Meara suggests a further division of the class of initiators along the lines of Plato's division of the

78. Ibid, 84; cf. idem, *Platonopolis*, 167.

79. Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien*, 175; 196.

80. There are other potential difficulties which I shall not address here, in particular the question whether Dionysius suggests a kind of clericalism which was foreign to the Church and which is not unrelated to the difficulty concerning the importance of the hierarch that is indicated by O'Meara. This is a difficult question and worthy of study but it cannot be treated here. For a summary of the problem and of arguments for and against clericalism see Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 209–12.

81. Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 216–17.

guardian class into the "complete" guardians, from whom the philosopher-kings are chosen, and the "incomplete" guardians, the auxiliaries; according to this analogy, the hierarchs would be equivalent to the "complete" guardians and the priests and deacons to the "incomplete." O'Meara does not say anything about the priests or deacons but their inclusion in the "incomplete" category must follow from his analogy. He uses this same division to address the second problem, that which I have called the problem of *gradational asymmetry*. If Dionysius has, indeed, divided the rank of initiators in the same way that Plato appears to have divided the guardians, then it stands to reason that the hierarchs are the "essence" of the initiators in the same way that the philosopher-kings are the "essence" of the guardian class. O'Meara argues that this parallel between Dionysius' hierarchy and Plato's is plausible not only because Dionysius speaks in terms of Platonic political philosophy, particularly in *Epistle* 8, but also because he organizes his hierarchy according to the Platonic conception of political justice which stipulates that each member of the hierarchy is suited by nature for a particular rank.

At this point I find a problem with O'Meara's argument. Part of his solution to the problem of *ontological asymmetry* was, as we have seen, to posit a division between hierarchs as "complete" initiators and priests and deacons as "incomplete," just as Plato divides "complete" guardians (from whom philosopher-kings are drawn) from auxiliaries. In applying this division to the problem of *gradational asymmetry* he equates the hierarch with the philosopher-king which itself is another, higher sub-set of guardians. After all, not all guardians are philosopher-kings, only the most capable. Furthermore, O'Meara not only breaks his own analogy but he also misses a very important passage. I suggest that, if his analogy is to work at all, then there are three alternatives from which to choose in order to correct it. The first would require hierarchs to be understood as equivalent to philosopher-kings and thus drawn from the priests who would then be equivalent to Plato's "complete" guardians. The deacons, of course, would be equivalent to the "incomplete" guardians, or auxiliaries. The second and third alternatives would require a rank above the hierarch. Dionysius suggests such a rank in his *Epistle* 8 (in which O'Meara finds the language of Neoplatonic political theory). While admonishing the monk Demophilus who has erringly chastised a priest, he writes: "Therefore, you yourself define your desire, *thumos* and reason as it is fitting, and the divine deacons will do this for you and the priests for these ones, the hierarchs for the priests and the apostles and successors of the apostles for the hierarchs."[82] This statement clearly suggests that the apostles

---

82. *Ep.*, 8 1093B (183.11–13): Αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν ἐπιθυμίᾳ καὶ θυμῷ καὶ λόγῳ τὰ κατ᾽ ἀξίαν ἀφόριζε, σοὶ δὲ οἱ θεῖοι λειτουργοὶ καὶ τούτοις οἱ ἱερεῖς, ἱεράρχαι δὲ τοῖς ἱερεῦσι καὶ τοῖς ἱεράρχαις οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ τῶν ἀποστόλων διάδοχοι.

and their successors, however they are chosen, in some way have hierarchical authority beyond hierarchs. Dionysius says little more than this about such divisions but we may be meant to think of his own professed teacher Hierotheus and certainly of, say, Paul and John the Evangelist, to whom the tenth *Epistle* is addressed. In light of this, the second alternative would be to identify the hierarch with the "complete" guardians and the priests and deacons with the auxiliaries, reserving the analogy with the philosopher-king to the apostles and their successors. The third alternative would be to maintain O'Meara's analogy of the hierarch to the philosopher-king and say that Dionysius posits a rank which is somehow superior to the philosopher-king.

A refined version of the third alternative seems to me to be the most likely case, although there can be little certainty attached to it, due to Dionysius' near silence on the subject. What I suggest is that in each church congregation the hierarch acts analogously to the philosopher-king of Plato's *Republic*, as O'Meara himself suggests. However, there must be those who are exceptional even among these figures and these exceptional ones must be the apostles and their successors. In relation to other hierarchs, then, the apostles and their successors act as philosopher-kings. Such a relationship seems to be necessary for Dionysius who, unlike Plato, is concerned with numerous hierarchies each with their own hierarch; there may be precedence for such a distinction in a Neoplatonic commentary on the *Republic* which is no longer extant or some other such work which would have been required to re-work Plato's theory in light of the Imperial administration as opposed to the *polis* with which Plato was concerned. It would be difficult to say that the apostles are a special rank beyond the hierarch in the way that the hierarch is beyond the priest or deacon since the entire activity of the hierarchy is determined by the hierarch. A determination of the details of the hierarchy's workings at this level would require a thorough study of the relationships between the various characters that Dionysius represents as hierarchs and/or apostles. Even then, the results are likely to be highly speculative.

This picture of the hierarchy at which I have arrived is wholly dependent upon an analogy made between Dionysius' church hierarchy and Plato's political order (although this is likely mediated to Dionysius by a Neoplatonic commentary) and it is this very analogy which has been put into question by L. Michael Harrington in a recent article.[83] While he does not take issue with the bare structural parallel between Dionysius' ecclesiastical hierarchy and Plato's political hierarchy as suggested by O'Meara, he does take issue with O'Meara's conclusion that, in Harrington's own words, "in Dionysius we find a politics of the church, modeled on and intending to replace the

---

83. L.M. Harrington, "Recent Attempts to Define a Dionysian Political Theory," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82.4 (2008): 639–60.

politics of the city."[84] Harrington argues that what there is of the political in Dionysius' thought is relegated to the legal hierarchy and has nothing to do with the ecclesiastical since the latter is only concerned with purificatory virtues. He supports this claim with a demonstration of the different ways in which the legal and ecclesiastical hierarchies interpret the same symbol. As an example, Harrington chooses Dionysius' interpretations of *Ezekiel* 9:2, 4, one of many examples of God's correction of Israel. Concerning Dionysius' interpretations,[85] he writes:

> First, he interprets it according to its literal—or "political," we might say—meaning: "God, out of fatherly love for humanity, willed correction for the sake of Israel's improvement." This is the meaning that is fully comprehensible within the confines of the legal hierarchy. Later, however, he interprets it as an image of an eternal truth: "the priestly vestment signifies the capacity to guide spiritually to the divine and mysterious sights, and to consecrate one's whole life. And the girdles are an indication of the control exercised by these intelligent beings over their generative powers. They signify also the practice of gathering together, their unifying absorption, the harmonious ease with which they tirelessly circle about their own identity." This is a pure reading of the passage, one which frees its meaning from the material world. It is the ecclesiastical hierarchy that makes such pure readings possible, by enabling the direct passage from the material to the intelligible within the walls of the church.[86]

The legal hierarchy can only interpret symbols in terms of our temporal condition, whereas the ecclesiastical hierarchy interprets them in such a way that their meanings are freed from it and elevated to the eternal. From this he concludes that the ecclesiastical hierarchy can have nothing to say about political matters in the here and now and that it "only examines the temporal insofar as it serves as a symbolic opening to the eternal."[87]

There is much of value in this critique. Harrington is correct to point out that O'Meara has emphasized rather too much the presence of the political in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in recognizing the parallel between it and the hierarchy in Plato's *Republic*. On the other hand, Harrington rather severely devalues the hierarchy's relationship to political matters in overemphasizing the transition from the legal to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is evident not only in his conclusion but also in his cautious remarks about the continuing presence of the political content of the legal hierarchy. Concerning the latter he writes that "Dionysius does not explain whether he understands the practical and political content of the legal hierarchy to belong only to the past"

84. Ibid, 655.
85. The first interpretation is located at *CH*, 8.2 241B (35.5–6) and the second at *CH*, 15.4 333A (55.2–6).
86. Ibid, 658.
87. Ibid, 660.

and that "On the other hand, nothing in the corpus explicitly prohibits the legal hierarchy from continuing in the present."[88] Dionysius himself is more explicit: "The theology says that our hierarchy is the more perfect initiation calling it the satisfaction of the former one and a sacred inheritance."[89] Harrington seems to have overlooked the importance of both the "inheritance" and the "satisfaction." This requires some explanation.

The fact that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a mean between the angelic and legal hierarchies naturally puts it in a position to actively mediate between them. Indeed, this is what is indicated by Dionysius' reference to it as a satisfaction of the one and inheritance of the other; it takes both hierarchies into itself according to its own mode of activity. Harrington has treated the transition from the legal to ecclesiastical hierarchy as a break rather than as the mediation which it is. In this sense his remarks about the continuing presence of the legal hierarchy are overly cautious. The latter does, in fact, continue to be present in the ecclesiastical hierarchy but with its content perfected—the temporal meaning of the one is fulfilled by the eternal meaning supplied by the other. Thus, to use an example which recalls that used by Harrington to show a break in the hierarchies, when it is recognized by the temporal authorities that someone requires "correction," the authorities, by virtue of the church's teachings now know what true correction is and what it requires. Just as the truth and love which are mediated by the church have the function of leading individual souls to their true selves in living the life of Christ, so too is the political order led up to this life as well. In the revelation given to it by Christ, the church congregation (the ecclesiastical hierarchy) has the true meaning of all political activity, the model on which the political order is to model itself just as it is modeled on the angelic hierarchy.

This brings us back to O'Meara's difficulties. He sees a structural discrepancy between the human and angelic hierarchies because he does not take account of the place and meaning of the sacraments. The parallel which he sees between the structure of the church hierarchy and that of Plato's *Republic* is correct but it does not take into account what it is that elevates the church above Plato's political order, namely the real presence of Christ in the sacraments. That is to say that while the sacraments are, in one sense, ritual ceremonies, they are, in another sense, equally the real, immaterial and intelligent presence of Christ in the hierarchy. It is this permanent presence which the hierarchy embodies and which informs its whole deifying activity. Structurally, then, the church hierarchy is triadic insofar as it is composed of the initiated, the initiators and Christ. While O'Meara could object that

---

88. Ibid, 659.

89. *EH,* 5.2 501C (105.17–18): Τὴν τελεωτέραν δὲ μύησιν ἡ θεολογία τὴν καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς ἱερ– αρχίαν φησὶν ἀποπλήρωσιν αὐτὴν ἐκείνης ἀποκαλοῦσα καὶ ἱερὰν λῆξιν.

this is a different triadic structure than that of the angelic hierarchy, his objection is met by Dionysius himself in a passage where he describes how the organization of the angelic hierarchy serves as a model for that of the human: "The orders subordinate to the first beings, since they are led up through the latter to the divinely-working illumination of the Thearchy, are the initiated ranks and they are truly named ["the initated"]."[90] Here we have the same dyadic division but this time attributed to the angels, the first hierarchy around God which has "its own immaterial knowing of God and divine things, a complete likeness to God and a condition which is imitative of God as much as is fitting"[91] in one division and the remaining orders in a second division of "initiated." Of course, Christ heads this hierarchy as well, a fact which I have shown already and which Dionysius declares clearly at *EH*, 1.1. Thus, the likeness which our hierarchy bears to the angelic is a likeness of the cyclic activity of creation itself, that same activity which is set in motion and completed by the Divine *Erôs*, but especially, in our case, through Christ's *philanthropia*. This answers O'Meara's difficulty since the rank of human initiators (hierarch, priest and deacon) is an image of the highest order of angels (Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones).

What is the significance of this structure which Dionysius has created in the ecclesiastical hierarchy in relation to the structure of Plato's *Republic*? Rather than simply modeling the ecclesiastical hierarchy upon Plato's division of guardians and producers, Dionysius has taken the latter, added a new element, namely Christ, and then has re-presented it as a completed vision of that hierarchy, a vision which elevates all Christians to that which, with Plato (or at least some interpretation thereof), only the philosopher-kings and the guardians had any kind of access at all. The vision to which the ecclesiastical hierarchy leads the political in taking up and completing Moses' legal hierarchy is a vision which must comprehend and inform the full range of our human experience. It is this political dimension of the hierarchy that Golitzin passed over in his own solution to the problem of hierarchical symmetry, despite the fact that he recognized Moses as an archetype of the hierarch.[92]

---

90. Ibid, 5.2 501B (Heil 104.23–105.2): Αἱ δὲ τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν ὑφειμέναι διακοσμήσεις ὡς δι᾽ ἐκείνων ἱερῶς ἀναγόμεναι πρὸς τὴν θεουργὸν τῆς θεαρχίας ἔλλαμψιν αἱ τελούμεναι τάξεις εἰσί τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ὀνομάζονται.

91. Ibid, 5.2 501A (104.17–18): οἰκείαν θεοῦ καὶ τῶν θείων ἀϋλοτάτην νόησιν καὶ τὴν τοῦ θεοειδοῦς ὁλόκληρον καὶ ὡς ἐφικτὸν θεομίμητον ἕξιν.

92. This in fact suggests that the *Mystical Theology* is, in a sense, incomplete; that is to say that it only speaks of the ascent in terms of negation and unknowing and does not include that most important aspect of the ascent, namely its erotic aspect. This is the essence of Golitzin's argument concerning Moses' ascent as archetype of the church (Golitzin, *Et Introibo*, 168–77). The *Mystical Theology* finds its proper context within the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

If this is so, then what kind of political theory can we draw from Dionysius' reflections on hierarchy? Here I have to concede to both O'Meara and Harrington that there is much detail concerning relations between the church and the political regime which is missing from Dionysius' account. Nevertheless, there is also much that is suggestive: for example, Dionysius makes mention of elements of a political regime in a number of places, including justice, kingdom and kingship, although he treats these elements most extensively at *DN*, 8.7–9 893D–897C (justice) and *DN*, 12.2 969BC (kingdom and kingship). In these passages he discusses justice, kingdom and kingship as attributes of God, but they are, of course, exemplary of the same attributes in our own world of human affairs. The striking thing about these passages is that they involve either *erôs* or "beautiful and good things" which are intimately related to it. It seems plausible to suggest that, instead of giving a detailed account of the proper organization of the political realm, Dionysius has instead given us, in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the truth and love which it mediates, a proper foundation for any political theory. He has even given us 'concrete' examples in his rebuke of Demophilus, in Carpus' vision of his own rebuke by Christ,[93] in the hierarchy of spiritual and intellectual ability formed by Hierotheus—Dionysius—Timothy (which can easily be discerned from the texts), in the leading of peers to the hierarch for baptism as an indication of the relations between those lower in the hierarchy, and more.

What would be required, then, for a Dionysian political theory is knowledge of the principles which he has discerned in Christ's revelation and which he presents in his treatises; with the exception of some examples, he seems to have left it to his readers to work out the details. One may object that Dionysius' vision is hardly possible, being as optimistic as it is, but I would reply that Dionysius was well aware of the difficulties: one need only consider Carpus' vision to see that Dionysius acknowledges potential for even the hierarch to relapse.[94] Dionysius' vision is an exemplar of the true relations which humans ought to strive to develop amongst themselves, a vision toward which a striving is entirely possible. In this way, Dionysius has attempted to provide a stronger, more complete vision of human affairs than was presented, if not by Plato himself, then at least by his successors who were interpreting his thought.

---

93. Both examples are taken from *Ep.,* 8 1084A–1100D (171.1–192.2).

94. This recognition constitutes the qualification, which I anticipated in note 39, of O'Meara's remark that the hierarch, like the philosopher-king, must be ethically and politically irreproachable. Dionysius allows for unavoidable relapse.

Closing Remarks

Despite its length, this essay makes only some preliminary outlines of a highly complicated corpus of work and its equally complicated relationship to its intellectual milieu. Accordingly, for every answer which has been given so many more questions arise, and this is especially true of Dionysius' reflections on political affairs. Nevertheless, I believe that I have outlined the consistency of at least one metaphysical principle in Dionysius' thought, namely *erôs*. It has its source in the Trinity and extends from there, in terms of our own human condition, through the higher forms of our relationship to God and the angels as far as to our most basic relationships with one another. For Dionysius, this principle finds its most important expression is in that special and permanent movement, the Incarnation, in which the Son took upon himself our human condition for the sake of his own love of humanity, his *philanthropia*. Contrary to what many scholars have suggested, Christ remains the cornerstone of Dionysius' thought and it is only through him and his entrance into the human condition that Dionysius' reflections have the meaning which they do, reflections which recognize their debt to the Neoplatonists, not as to those who have provided the garb in which Dionysius dressed his own thought, but as to those who *almost* knew the truth but just needed some help to find it.