

Pseudo-Dionysius and Damascius: An Impossible Identification¹

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INTRODUCTION

Usually we introduce an author's work with a short biography that helps us to evaluate how the life influenced the work. This cannot be done in the case of the author of *Corpus Areopagiticum*. Consequently we rely on his texts to better know their strange author. My aim here is to reconsider Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's identity in light of the most recent attempt to give a real name to the person behind the pseudonym.

First, I shall consider the identification of Dionysius with the pagan Neoplatonic philosopher Damascius, an argument set forth by Carlo Maria Mazzucchi,² whose thesis, although fascinating, is not convincing. Second, I shall add some evidence to the extant literature to illustrate how Dionysius diverges from Damascius on crucial points. Third, I shall highlight some typical Christian ideas in Dionysius' thought, in particular the idea of Incarnation and its place in his writings.

While Eric Perl claims that there is "no fundamental opposition between Neoplatonism and Christianity, and hence no need to decide on which side of this supposed disjunction Dionysius belongs,"³ I think that his statement calls for qualification. It is true that there is not always opposition between Pagan Neoplatonism and Christian Neoplatonism, but, since Pagan Neoplatonism is not entirely compatible with Christianity, we must decide to which tradition Dionysius belongs. I agree with Beierwaltes' judgment that

1. This essay was first delivered to a meeting of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies in Haifa (Israel) in 2011, where the argument benefited from the participants' detailed responses and critical questions. I would like to thank in particular Prof. S. Ahbel-Rappe and Prof. P.G. Renczes.

2. C.M. Mazzucchi, "Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum e il dialogo *Περὶ Πολιτικῆς Ἐπιστήμης*," *Aevum* 80 (2006): 299–334. A good review of Mazzucchi's article is by E. Fiori in *Adamantius* 14 (2008): 670–73.

3. E. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Dionysius is “*Christianus simulque vere Platonicus*.”⁴ One must specify, however, in which sense Beierwaltes’ judgment is true.⁵ I think that the concept of “Incarnation” may help us understand to what extent Dionysius “assumed” his philosophical heritage.

I. DIONYSIUS AND DAMASCIUS IN MAZZUCCHI’S ARTICLE

Mazzucchi’s thesis can be summarised as follows: Dionysius did not use themes from the Platonic tradition for his exegesis of the Holy Scriptures—as the Fathers did—or for dealing with a specific problem—as Augustine did with evil—, rather he “translated” Christianity into the Neoplatonic system of thought. At first glance, Dionysius’ efforts appear similar to those of later apologists who aimed to show how Greek speculation is included in and exceeded by Christianity. According to Mazzucchi there is no need for such a detailed fiction to explain Dionysius’ character. He argues that the effort to transpose Christianity into Neoplatonic philosophy can be understood as a last weapon against the Christians, in a battle in which Neoplatonic philosophers were condemned to defeat. Emperor Justinian’s closing of the Academy in 529 confirms the victory of Christianity over Paganism, but Damascius’ genius has allowed Neoplatonism to survive the advent of Christianity. In the *Corpus Areopagiticum* Neoplatonic philosophy is presented as the core of Christianity.⁶

Mazzucchi presents several biographical elements from Damascius’ life to support his argument: a) he was born in Damascus, the city of Saint Paul’s conversion; b) Neoplatonist philosophers were well trained in Judeo-Christian culture and religion (e.g., Marinus, one of Damascius’ teachers, was a Samaritan who was “converted” to Hellenism); c) as Photius⁷ underlines, Damascius had lost all hope of a political restoration of paganism and had listed every attempt made to restore it, starting from Julian the Apostate, all of which failed; d) he never married, although he gave women his full attention (he and other philosophers pronounced a funeral oration in hexameters on the corpse of Edesia, Ermia’s wife, a woman of well-known virtues); e) he was

4. W. Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2001), 84.

5. Eric Perl affirms that Beierwaltes is right considering Dionysius “*Christianus simulque vere Platonicus*,” but Perl judges Beierwaltes’ efforts excessive in arguing for a significant difference between Dionysius and his Neoplatonic predecessors, cf. E. Perl, *Theophany*, 115 n.5.

6. Mazzucchi is not the first to hold this position, which was put forth by Alexandre Kojève. Cf. R.F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 30. See also Eric Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). Although Dodds does not identify Dionysius with Damascius, he views him as a pagan Neoplatonic philosopher presenting his philosophy under the veil of the Christian revelation.

7. Photius, *Library*, cod. 242, 351b27–352a9 Bekker.

inclined to write stories like the *Paradoxoi logoi*, and even in the *Life of Isidore* one can find some fictitious episodes; f) his most characteristic features were self-confidence and an air of superiority. He spared nobody in his attacks, not even his beloved teacher Isidore, whom he accused of being a bad poet.

Mazzucchi argues that traces of these elements of Damascius' life can be found in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. I will consider Mazzucchi's six arguments more closely and respond to each in turn.

(1.1) The first depends on finding similarities between the names of persons in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and those in the *Life of Isidore*. These include the same initials, finals and numbers of syllables and accents (ysyllabia and ysotonia).⁸ Moreover, the name Hierotheos, Dionysius' teacher, was previously almost unknown. The only source besides the *Corpus* is an honorary epigraph found along the way to the Academy.

There are three objections to this argument. First, there is clearly no perfect correspondence between Hierotheos and Isidore on account of the letter "H," which is indicated by the aspiration. Then there is the question of who might be the parallel for Timothy. Dionysius refers to him more often than Hierotheos, and yet there is no one in Damascius' life who could represent this figure. Mazzucchi does not ask this question. It is worth noting that Hierotheos is mentioned only in *The Divine Names*, while Timothy is named in all the treatises and in one letter. According to Mazzucchi, Damascius was so daring and contemptuous of Christians that he ascribed to Hierotheos a book with the same title as Proclus', although declined to the plural (*Theologikai stoicheiôseis*). But since Mazzucchi claims that the attribution to Saint Paul is untenable, it follows that the proportion Paulos:Proclus = Ierotheos:Isidoros is broken. Finally, the first Syriac version of the *Corpus* by Sergius of Reshaina precedes the Greek manuscript tradition and has two different translations of the title *Theologikai stoicheiôseis* appearing in the Greek text, but neither is a literal translation of this title.⁹

(1.2) Mazzucchi's second argument runs as follows: Dionysius rejects all the divine attributes listed by Jesus himself: logos, light, truth and so on. Dionysius' purpose is the same as Damascius': to assert God's unknowability. Accordingly, what Paul tried to do at the Areopagus—as the Acts of the Apostles testifies—had no effect on Dionysius. Dionysius' doctrine and Paul's are not the same; Paul's intention is to reveal the Unknown God, but God remains unknown in Damascius' and Dionysius' theology.

I find this argument unconvincing. Dionysius frequently states that he has dealt with affirmative theology in his *Symbolic Theology*, which has not

8. Παῦλος / Πρόκλος; Ἱερόθεος / Ἰσίδωρος; Διονύσιος / Δαμάσκιος; Ἀσκληπιᾶτης / Ἀπολλοφάνης.

9. I. Perczel, "The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius," *Modern Theology* 24.4 (2008): 557–71.

reached us. Even in *The Divine Names* he affirms the meaningfulness of divine names such as light, life and wisdom; I shall return to this argument in the second part of my article.

In order to show the difference between Christianity and Dionysius, Mazzucchi brings together two seemingly incompatible formulas. The first is taken from Paul: “Now we see only an indistinct image in a mirror, but then we will be face to face. Now what I know is incomplete, but then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”¹⁰ The second text is a passage from Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*:

Ascending higher we say: It is not soul, not intellect, not imagination, opinion, reason and not understanding, not logos, not intellection, not spoken, not thought, not number, not order, not greatness, not smallness, not equality, not inequality, not likeness, not unlikeness, not having stood, not moved, not at rest, not powerful, not power, not light¹¹

I think that Mazzucchi confuses the contexts of these formulas. Paul is speaking about seeing God face-to-face in the next life. By contrast, Dionysius is describing how one can be unified with God in the present life. When Dionysius treats the subject of our knowledge as it will be after the Resurrection he, not unlike Paul, often resorts to the image of light, as in this text:

Now [in our present life] we analogously learn through the sacred veils of the human love of writings and of the hierarchic traditions. These hide both what is intelligible in what is sensible and what is beyond being in beings. These bestow form and shape to the formless and shapeless and multiply and break up the unstructured simplicity by a diversity of divisible symbols. Hereafter, when we have come to be indestructible and immortal and have attained a most blessed and Christ-like repose, “we shall” as the writings say, “be always with the Lord” (1 Thes. 4, 17) and shall be filled with his visible theophany in the holy contemplations which shall illumine us with the most brilliant splendours as the disciples were in that most divine transfiguration.¹²

(1.3) Mazzucchi’s third argument depends on two episodes mentioned in the *Corpus*: the eclipse at the moment of Jesus’ death and the funeral of the Virgin Mary. The first is that during the eclipse Dionysius was with Apollonides in Eliopolis.¹³ Mazzucchi suggests that Eliopolis, near the Libyan mountains, is the place where Damascius and his friend Asclepiades saw a meteorite. Once again, the key element is an extrinsic correlation between

10. I Corinthians 13:12.

11. *The Mystical Theology*, V (1048A). I refer to the division of the text made by B. Cordier in J.P. Migne, *Patrologia graeca* (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1857) vol. III. The English translation is by J.D. Jones in Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 221.

12. *The Divine Names* I, 4 (592B–592C), trans. 111–12.

13. *Letter VII*, 2 (1081A–B).

a name found in the *Corpus Areopagiticum* and one from the *Life of Isidore*. According to Mazzucchi, if Eliopolis is the Egyptian city—as it probably is—it too is allusive, since it was the place where the Phoenix went to die and be buried after giving birth to a son out of her blood. Nevertheless, I see only a vague possibility rather than an explicit allusion to Dionysius.

The second episode is the funeral of the Virgin Mary. Mazzucchi views this as a transposition of the funeral of Edesia, a virtuous woman, during which Damascius and other philosophers raised a hymn to Edesia, as did Dionysius and the Apostles to the Virgin Mary. The link, once again, is too vague to support Mazzucchi's claim. Moreover, the episode of Mary's *Dormitio* is ambiguous. In fact, Dionysius mentions neither Mary nor *Dormitio*.¹⁴ John of Scythopolis is the first to connect the passage to the *Dormitio*; thus Mazzucchi's is not the only possible explanation. Furthermore, since Ritter,¹⁵ several scholars have cast doubts on the attribution of these lines to the episode of the *Dormitio*.¹⁶ Mazzucchi's use of controversial passages from *The Divine Names* does not seem the easiest way to endorse his own thesis.

This third argument—that two episodes of Dionysius' life could be a transposition of two corresponding episodes of Damascius' memories—is tenuous at best, but what is even less acceptable is that Mazzucchi shifts the *onus probandi* on those who think that Dionysius is not in fact Damascius.¹⁷

14. *The Divine Names* III, 2 (681C–681D), trans. 132: "For even among our inspired Hierarchs (when, as thou knowest, we with him and many of our holy brethren met together to behold that mortal body, Source of Life, which received the Incarnate God, and James, the brother of God, was there, and Peter, the chief and highest of the Sacred Writers, and then, having beheld it, all the Hierarchs there present celebrated, according to the power of each, the omnipotent goodness of the Divine weakness): on that occasion, I say, he surpassed all the Initiates next to the Divine Writers, yea, he was wholly transported, was wholly outside of himself, and was so moved by a communion with those Mysteries he was celebrating, that all who heard him and saw him and knew him (or rather knew him not) deemed him to be rapt of God and endued with utterance Divine."

15. A.M. Ritter, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Über die Mystische Theologie und Briefe. Eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen versehen* (Stuttgart: Hiersmann, 1994), XVI–XVII.

16. B. Lourié, "Peter the Iberian and Dionysius the Areopagite: Honigmann—Van Esbroeck's thesis revisited," *Scrinium* 6 (2010): 143–212, at 165. Fiori's hypothesis is that the woman known by Proclus and Peter of Hibernia was the Empress Eudocia Atenaide, who died in 460 and was celebrated August 13, the same date of the *Dormitio* in the Syriac calendar in Jerusalem; cf. Fiori's review, 672. István Perczel states that the Body that is the Principle-of-Life and Receiver-of-God is not the Virgin Mary, but the Eucharist, cf. I. Perczel, "The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius," 558–59. Perczel seems unaware of the debate over his argument, which was made already by M. Jugie, *La mort et l'Assomption de la sainte Vierge. Etude historico-doctrinale* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944), 99ff. This hypothesis was rejected by S.-C. Mimouni, *Dormition et assomption de Marie. Histoire des traditions anciennes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 339.

17. Mazzucchi, "Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum," 328.

(1.4) Mazzucchi's fourth argument is more general; he accuses Dionysius of ignoring some important articles of Christian faith¹⁸ such as the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the freedom of the Creator.¹⁹ He admits that it is possible to solve some difficulties of Dionysius' philosophy in a Christian—i.e., orthodox—manner. This interpretation is strengthened by the many expressions of devotion and right doctrine found in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Mazzucchi points out that Dionysius considers the Trinity only in a few instances and solely with respect to its unity, without saying anything about its inner life, i.e., the procession of the Three Persons. However, Dionysius states that he dealt with the Trinity in the lost work, *Theological Outlines*, so it is not surprising that he does not address the Trinity at length in his extant works.²⁰

A similar situation occurs in the case of the treatise *The Symbolic Theology*. In *The Divine Names* Dionysius says he will write *The Symbolic Theology*, while in *The Mystical Theology* he refers to this work as having been written. Dionysius probably never wrote *The Symbolic Theology*, but the existence of his framework was as important as what he really wrote.

Mazzucchi's doubts about Dionysius' Christianity are too general, especially if one compares them with the detailed work of other scholars who emphasize the orthodoxy of the *Corpus*. The argument *e silentio*—i.e., since Dionysius does not deal with many typical Christian topics, he is not a Christian—is not definitive. It is like accusing Saint Paul of being a Protestant because he does not speak about the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. Paul had other concerns, and so did Dionysius.

(1.5) Mazzucchi's fifth argument is based on the claim that it is possible for a pagan Neoplatonic thinker to pretend to be a Christian. We already have one example: Arsène, a Samaritan at Empress Theodora's service, feigned his Christian belief. On account of the accusations of some Christians, he was forbidden to enter in the imperial palace. So Arsène devised to study Christian dogma to help Emperor Justinian, and in this way he came to be in the latter's good graces again.

(1.6) In his final argument, Mazzucchi stresses some stylistic similarities between Damascius and Dionysius, but this is without reference to primary or secondary sources and essentially is limited to noting that both authors

18. Mazzucchi, "Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum," 308. Even the editor of the Italian translation, E. Bellini, asks himself the same questions, cf. Dionigi Areopagita, *Tutte le opere* (Milano: Bompiani, 2009), 28–31.

19. Fiori misses the point, because Mazzucchi is speaking about the Creator's freedom, while Fiori quotes Dionysius on human freedom.

20. The fact that Dionysius may not have written *Theological Outlines* does not change our assessment of his thinking. The mention of this lost treatise confirms the existence of a well-defined framework for Dionysius' theology.

employ an authoritative tone.²¹ According to Mazzucchi Dionysius is not a theologian who tries laboriously to approach the truth, but rather a *theologos* in Dionysius' own meaning of the term—a prophet, an evangelist, who speaks in the name of God. However, I would reverse Mazzucchi's argument; when Dionysius uses the word “theologian,” he normally refers to the authors of the Holy Scriptures or to the Apostles, and he does not seem to consider himself a prophet.²²

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of Mazzucchi's arguments? While he is a great scholar of the Byzantine world, in this paper he neglects the Neoplatonic side of the story and, more importantly, fails to consider philosophy in his understanding of Dionysius' texts. A more accurate reconstruction of the character of Dionysius must take into account these elements.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIONYSIUS AND DAMASCIUS

While Mazzucchi's arguments are largely historical, there are also philosophical lines of reasoning that support his thesis. Salvatore Lilla²³ and Rosemary Griffith²⁴ have pointed out clear similarities between Damascius and Dionysius. Lilla, with his extensive knowledge of the Fathers and the Neoplatonists, concludes that all the analogies between Damascius and Dionysius can be found in Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus and in a number of the Fathers, in particular the Cappadoceans.²⁵

Here I wish to hint at some differences in order to better understand the proper place of Neoplatonic philosophy in Dionysius' theological Christian plan. Unfortunately there are no complete studies on this topic.²⁶

21. Mazzucchi, “Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum,” 307.

22. *The Divine Names* I, 4 (589D); 6 (596A); 8 (597A).

23. S. Lilla, “Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite, Porphyre et Damascius,” *Denys l'Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident*, ed. Y. De Andia (Paris: Institut d'Etudes Augustiniennes, 1997), 117–52.

24. R. Griffith, “Neo-Platonism and Christianity: Pseudo-Dionysius and Damascius,” *Studia Patristica XXX*, ed. E.A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 238–43.

25. Speaking about the parallels between Damascius and Dionysius found by Ronald Hathaway (the distinction among νοητόν, νοητόν τε καί νοερόν and νοερόν; the use of negative method; the distinction among ἐνιαῖος, ἡνωμένος and πεπληθυσμένος; the use of words beginning with αὐτο-, the expression ἐπέκεινα τῶν πάντων; the obscurity of the exposition), Salvatore Lilla pointed out that “on doit remarquer que presque tous ces parallèles se trouvent aussi chez Plotin, Jamblique, Proclus, chez d'autres représentants de la tradition platonicienne et chez Grégoire de Nysse. L'enquête sur les relations entre Denys et Damascius est donc bien loin d'être achevée”; cf. S. Lilla, “Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite,” 135 n. 100.

26. S. Klitenic Wear and J. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 132: “What exactly Dionysius' philosophical influences were must, we think, remain somewhat uncertain, though further clarity may be hoped for from future research. We can be reasonably certain that he was well acquainted with the writings of

Mazzucchi has raised at least one philosophical argument, which remains undeveloped. At the end of both Damascius' and Dionysius' speculation there is silence: God remains unknown. Mazzucchi quotes the last chapter of *The Mystical Theology* about the negation of all God's attributes,²⁷ but I question whether the Ineffable God of Damascius is the same as the God of Dionysius. There are two differences that challenge their compatibility: the idea of causation and the relation between union and distinction within the First Principle.

The First Principle as Cause

Damascius replaces the One with the Ineffable.²⁸ It is cause and not cause at the same time. Damascius rejects the idea—stated by Proclus—that all that exists proceeds from a single first cause, and raises an unsolvable *aporia* about the First Principle manifesting its ineffability:²⁹

Is the so-called one principle of all things beyond all things or is it one among all things, as if it were the summit of those that proceed from it? And are we to say that “all things” are with the [first principle], or after it and [that they proceed] from it?³⁰

This *aporia*, studied by many scholars, has another consequence, namely that the First Principle loses its absolute transcendence, since it has a constitutive relation with “all things” and is inconceivable without “all things.”³¹

Proclus, but can he also be shown to have been acquainted with those of Damascius? Further close study of his terminology, in comparison with that of Damascius, may well shed further light on this question.”

27. The first lines are enough to demonstrate that Mazzucchi compares the Dionysian idea of God with that of Damascius, see n.16 above. For other references see S. Lilla, “Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite,” 149 and S. Lilla, *Dionigi l'Areopagita e il platonismo cristiano* (Brescia: Marcelliana, 2005), 87.

28. Cf. Damascius, *Traité des premiers principes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986–1991), I, 68.8 (Hereafter *De Principiis*).

29. Cf. S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 200: “At the heart of the Neoplatonists' metaphysical enterprise is a fundamental contradiction, according to Damascius: If all things come from the absolute, then the absolute is a principle or a cause of other things. But if the absolute is a cause, it is no longer the absolute, since it then exists in relation to others.”

30. *De Principiis* I, 1. English translation is taken from S. Ahbel-Rappe, *Damascius' Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65.

31. Cf. V. Napoli, *Epekeina tou henos. Il principio totalmente ineffabile tra dialettica ed esegesi in Damascio* (Catania-Palermo: CUECM, 2008), 139: “Per un verso, se il principio non manifestasse alcun rapporto con le cose che ne derivano, non potrebbe essere principio. Per altro verso, nel manifestare una costitutiva relazione (coordinazione) con esse, il principio sembra smarrire il suo costitutivo carattere di assolutezza, assunta come perfetta trascendenza rispetto ai propri derivati.” Cf. *De Principiis* I, 2.

This *aporia* is an effect of a “reversal of language”³² that makes the Ineffable a paradoxical predicate more than a cause in the proper sense of the word.

This is not Dionysius’ position. Although God remains beyond all things, He is the transcendent cause of everything, as stated in the last chapter of *The Divine Names*.³³ Even in the final chapter of *The Mystical Theology*, at the highest point of Dionysius’ apophatism, God is still named “cause”: “We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique *cause* of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.”³⁴

Another point of divergence is that, according to Dionysius, there is an unspecified correspondence between what we think *about* God and what is actually *in* God. This is especially the case in theological discourse about the Trinity: “Thus in our discourse we strive to unify and differentiate those which are divine even as these themselves are unified and differentiated.”³⁵ In contrast, according to Damascius, human concepts are deficient reasoning, incapable of transcending our intellect. The following passage about the Intelligible Triads is striking:

They therefore must no longer be called three when their being three is added to them, since no otherness is manifest in that realm. Yet unless we speak in a human dialect concerning the most divine principles, we are otherwise not able to conceive them or to name them, except as we are compelled to use reason on behalf of the realities that turn out to be beyond our intellect, life and substance.³⁶

It is true that, like Damascius, Dionysius removes all the attributes from God at the end of *The Divine Names* as they are incapable of properly expressing Divinity, but the passage quoted above shows that when Dionysius deals with Revelation he is forced to include the revealed truth in his position.

32. S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism*, 212: “Language turns back upon itself because its purpose is to negate its own function.”

33. Cf. *The Divine Names* XIII, 2 (977 C).

34. *The Mystical Theology*, V (1048B), trans. 222 (emphasis mine).

35. *The Divine Names* II, 6 (644D), trans. 123. Lilla points out that “Cette phrase de Denys, qui souligne la correspondance parfaite entre le raisonnement humain concernant les «unions» et les «distinctions» et leur présence réelle en dieu, peut être mieux comprise si on la considère comme un censur de Denys à l’égard du scepticisme total de Damascius concernant la correspondance entre la conception humaine de l’un qui est simultanément trine et la nature même de l’un: selon Damascius, les concepts d’unité et de trinité ne correspondent pas au caractère véritable de l’un ou des trois premiers principes (l’un-tout, le tout-un ou multiplicité et l’unifié), mais sont simplement des raisonnements inadéquats que l’esprit humain emploie pour expliquer des réalités qui restent au-dessus de toute intelligence”; cf. Lilla, “Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite,” 148–49.

36. *De Principiis*, III, 140. 12–18, trans. 404.

The truth of this is made evident elsewhere. In order to show the great similarity between Dionysius and Damascius, Lilla quotes two passages.³⁷ The first is from Dionysius: “And hence, when we speak of the All-Transcendent Godhead as an Unity and a Trinity, It is not an Unity or a Trinity *such as can be known by us or any other creature*.”³⁸ The second is from Damascius: “None of these things is true. There is not of this in that realm, not sameness, not otherness, not triad, not monad as distinct from triad.”³⁹ Unfortunately Lilla omits the clause (in italics) that changes the sense of Dionysius’ thought. What for Dionysius is, more than anything, an epistemological problem, is for Damascius ontological; while Dionysius attributes the problem to the weakness of our understanding, Damascius places a contradiction in the First Principle itself.

This comparison of Dionysius and Damascius proves that a linguistic similarity is not sufficient cause to identify the two authors. According to Dionysius, Revelation helps us in dealing even with the most hidden and secret mystery of God, the Trinity. There is no need here to give an example of the importance of Revelation for Dionysius, since the first chapter of *The Divine Names* is entirely devoted to this theme.

Union and Distinction within the First Principle

The mystery of the Trinity leads us to another difference between Dionysius and Damascius. Dionysius often speaks of unions and distinctions. There are unions and distinctions in the union (*monê*), namely the Thearchy and the Three Persons of the Trinity. There are also unions and distinctions in the distinction (*próodos*), namely the Creation and the Incarnation of the Logos:

What is said to be differentiated is the beyond-being name and “thing named” of the Father, Son and Spirit; no exchange or commonness is to be introduced into these. In addition, the all-complete and unchanged constitution of our Jesus as well as all that which refers to the essential mystery of his love for man is said to be differentiated.⁴⁰

37. S. Lilla, “Pseudo-Deny l’Aréopagite,” 148 n.146–47.

38. *The Divine Names*, XIII, 3 (980D) (emphasis mine): “Διὸ καὶ μονὰς ὀνομαζομένη καὶ τριάς ἢ ὑπὲρ πάντα θεότης οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲ μονάς, οὐδὲ τριάς ἢ πρὸς ἡμῶν ἢ ἄλλου τινὸς τῶν ὄντων διεγνομέν,” cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, ed. B.R. Suchla (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1990), 229. I have quoted the old translation, C.E. Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London: Society for Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1920), 116. I consider Jones’ translation less clear on this point: “Thus the divinity beyond all is celebrated as one and trinity; it is neither unity or trinity, or what is conceived by us or any other being.” (J.D. Jones, *The Divine Names*, 205).

39. *De Principiis* III, 133.22–24, trans. 400.

40. *The Divine Names* II, 3 (640C), trans. 119–20.

Contrary to this, Damascius excludes any distinction (*diakrisis*) in the Unified: “Nor is there any difference, nor otherness, nor even differentiation in the absolute Unified.”⁴¹ The same doctrine is present in Plotinus and Proclus.⁴² It is also worth noting that this passage refers to the third principle, namely the Unified, and not to the Ineffable; even at this level Damascius excludes any distinction.

Another passage—considered by John Dillon—confirms that the Ineffable is not equivalent to the God of Dionysius. Dillon compares a passage from *De principiis*⁴³—where Damascius deals with the “One Ineffable” beyond the “One,” the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*—and a passage from Dionysius’ *The Mystical Theology*.⁴⁴ Dillon rightly points out that “the two passages also differ in so far as Dionysius denies the levels of the second hypostasis, including Being and Life, as well as the genera he attributed to God in the *Divine Names*, while Damascius denies names of the henadic realm—Henad, Limit and Infinity, and he is careful to separate the One Being from the One.”⁴⁵

3. SOME CHRISTIAN IDEAS IN DIONYSIUS’ THOUGHT

The fact that Dionysius diverges from Damascius on some crucial points does not in itself prove Dionysius to be a Christian. In this final section I shall present some elements that are illustrative of a Christian way of thinking, such as the vocabulary taken from the Gospels. I shall focus particularly on the Incarnation and its place in Dionysius’ works.

41. *De Principiis* III, 132.5–6, trans. 399. Other references in S. Lilla, *Dionigi l’Areopagita*, 89.

42. S. Lilla, “Pseudo-Deny l’Aréopagite,” 148 n. 178.

43. *De Principiis* I, 55, 9–25, trans. 105: “That One is the principle of all things. And Plato also having returned to that principle did not need another principle in his arguments. For that ineffable is not a principle of arguments nor of knowledge; for it is not a principle of living beings nor of beings nor of henads, but of all without qualification, posited beyond all thought. Therefore he did not make any indication about that principle, but starting from the One, he made negations of all other things except the One itself. For ultimately he denied that it is one but he did not deny the One. Moreover he denied even the negation, but not the One, and he denied every name and thought and knowledge; and what else further could one say? He denied the whole and entire Being, yes, even the unified and the unitary and, if you wish, Infinity and the Limit, those two principles, but he did not in the least deny the one that is beyond all those.”

44. *The Mystical Theology*, V (1048 A–B), trans. 221–22: “It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding. Nor is it speech *per se*, understanding *per se*. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding.[...] We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.”

45. S. Klitenc Wear & J. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, 124.

Christian Vocabulary

It is well known that Dionysius, unlike other Neoplatonists, uses the word “agape,” deriving from the New Testament to describe the love of God. Less familiar is the other word that acquires significance in the *Corpus*, namely “peace” (εἰρήνη). Evangelhos Moutspoulos has written about the relation between the Dionysian and the Proclean conceptions of peace.⁴⁶ However, Moutspoulos is unconvincing in his argument regarding Dionysius’ dependence on Proclus. In fact, he does not quote a single passage where Proclus uses the word “peace,” but finds an analogy in the fact that one of the features of peace, according to Dionysius, is the composition/assimilation of the opposites, an attribute present in Proclus’ philosophy. I do not find this argument convincing, especially given that Moutspoulos ignores the fact that “peace,” as Dionysius himself acknowledges, is a Christological name.⁴⁷

Incarnation

To conclude I will examine the relationship between Christian theology and Neoplatonic philosophy in Dionysius in light of the Incarnation. Christian Schäfer has proposed the metaphor of “baptising Neoplatonism” to characterise the philosophy of Dionysius, and yet he himself recognised the limits of this image.⁴⁸ The incarnational movement may better explain how Dionysius faced his philosophical background. There is no need here to discuss the Christology of Dionysius and the age-old question of its orthodoxy;⁴⁹ it is sufficient to maintain that “Incarnation” refers to the fact that the *Logos* assumed a body. Though one can hardly call Dionysius’ theology Christocentric, he mentions the Incarnation in each of his treatises and two of his letters. I shall demonstrate two points: (i) Dionysius deals with the theme of Incarnation at key points in his system of thought; (ii) the process of Incarnation itself mirrors the way in which Dionysius’ beliefs “assume” the Neoplatonic philosophy. In order to prove my thesis, I shall quote four crucial texts.

46. E. Moutspoulos, “La conception dionysienne de la Paix et son fondement ontologique chez Proclus,” *Platon* 51 (1999–2000): 17–24.

47. *The Divine Names*, XI, 5 (953A–B).

48. C. Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), 7–9.

49. This subject is beyond the scope of this paper, but I do not accept Evans’ assertion that Dionysius chose that pseudonym to pass on his heretical Christology, cf. D.B. Evans, “The Christology of Pseudo-Dionysius The Areopagite,” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 41 (2001): 147–55, at 148–49. I believe that the studies of René Roques (not cited by Evans) are still fundamental on this subject, cf. R. Roques, *L’Univers dionysien. Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 319–35. Roques argued for a substantial orthodoxy of Dionysius’ christology.

The first text shows that the event of Incarnation stands between the two pillars of his theology: the ineffability of God and our lack of knowledge of Him.

Further, the divine formation of Jesus, which is revealed in every theology, is ineffable to every logos and unknowable to every intellect, even those of the most honoured among the highest angels.⁵⁰

Rosemary Arthur has recently studied the theological meaning of these kinds of passages,⁵¹ and claims that Dionysius wrote the *Corpus* in order to emphasise God's unknowability and consequently to appease the theological debate about Jesus' nature. Should this thesis be demonstrated persuasively,⁵² it would confirm the Incarnation as a pivotal point in Dionysius' thought.

In the second text, Dionysius states that the absolutely simple God, through the Incarnation, enters into composition with matter to become perceivable by us.

For the "one" and "simple" and "hidden" of Jesus, the most supremely Divine Word, by His incarnation among us, came forth, out of goodness and love towards man, to the compound and visible⁵³

Something analogous happens to Revelation when the purity of Revelation comes into contact with philosophy in order to become comprehensible. Though this comparison might seem loose, it is supported by Dionysius' pseudonym itself. It is not by chance that this unknown author chose the name of the man converted by Saint Paul at the Areopagus. Charles Stang has demonstrated that the pseudonym of the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* suggests that he took on the same task as Paul at the Areopagus, namely to show the correlation between pagan wisdom and Christian faith.⁵⁴ As the Incarnation made the Son visible and perceivable to men, so the categories of philosophy have structured Dionysius' theology and his understanding of Revelation.

50. *The Divine Names* II, 9 (648A) trans. 124.

51. R.A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist. The Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

52. I agree with E. Fiori, who considers this thesis not improbable, but remains unmoved by the argument; cf. his review in *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 25.2 (2008): 216–20.

53. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* III, III, 12 (444A), trans. C. Lubheid & P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1987), 225.

54. C.M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite. 'No longer I'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Another text in the same vein:

I perceive that even Jesus Himself, the superessential Cause of the superheavenly Beings, when He had come to our condition, without change, did not overstep the good order which becomes mankind, which Himself arranged and took, but readily subjected Himself to the dispositions of the Father and God, through Angels.⁵⁵

Through the Incarnation, the *Logos* submitted Himself to creaturely laws, the Highest submitted Himself to an inferior order. This is a mirror of what happens in the case of the Revelation; even though it comes from a superior order of knowledge, it submits itself to human rules—founded by philosophy—in order to be understood by men. This Dionysian project was already noted by his contemporaries; for example, the sophist Apollonphanes accused Dionysius of using philosophy to explain Revelation.⁵⁶ The fusion of philosophy and Revelation does not contradict Dionysius' warning that when we speak about God we are not allowed to say something different than what was revealed by the Scriptures;⁵⁷ in fact, Dionysius himself does not strictly follow this rule.⁵⁸

The boundless Loving-kindness of the supremely Divine goodness towards man did not, in Its benevolence, withdraw from us Its spontaneous forethought, but having truly participated sinlessly in all things belonging to us, and having been made one with our lowliness in connection with the unconfused and flawless possession of Its own properties in full perfection, It bequeathed to us.⁵⁹

As Jesus took on every aspect of the human condition except sin, Dionysius accepted—or “assumed”—every aspect of human reasoning, excluding only that which might contradict Revelation. This explains both how far he went in using the vocabulary and the structure of the Neoplatonic system of thought, and where he differs from it.

Beierwaltes is right about Dionysius when he calls him “Christianus simulque vere Platonicus”; as Jesus unified in himself divine and human natures, Dionysius unified divine Christian Revelation and human Neoplatonic philosophy in his writings. At the end of this inquiry I can conclude that the One/Good of Dionysius is the God of Christians not the Ineffable of Damascius, *pace* Perl.

55. *The Celestial Hierarchy* IV, 4 (181C), trans. 158.

56. *Letter VII*, 2 (1080A–B).

57. *The Divine Names I*, 1 (585B).

58. *The Divine Names IV*, 11 (708B–C).

59. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy III*, III, 11 (441A), trans. 221.

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulty of situating Dionysius within the history of ideas, we must avoid two extremes. On the one hand there is Mazzucchi, who identifies Dionysius with a pagan philosopher, since Dionysius and Damascius have very different conceptions of God. On the other there are Lourié and Perczel, who hold that the numerous correspondences—doctrinal, verbal and stylistic—between Damascius and Dionysius “should be attributed to the general atmosphere of the school to which both authors belonged, rather to any literary dependence.”⁶⁰ However, the parallels between Dionysius and Damascius, or between Dionysius and other Neoplatonist thinkers, are too close to be simply an expression of the zeitgeist.

60. B. Lourié, “Peter the Hiberian,” 170.