Theurgy, Prayer, Participation, and Divinization in Dionysius the Areopagite

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The nature of the relationship between the soul and the body, or the mind and the body, is of central concern for numerous religious traditions. In many ways the definition of this relationship within a tradition informs the way in which that tradition treats the areas of philosophy, theology, mysticism, and ritual practice.

In the post-Enlightenment modern world we have tended to divide these areas. Philosophy has been aligned with human rationality over and against religion which is seen to have theology and ritual as its main concern; mysticism, furthermore, has become something reserved for the select few who individually and privately achieve a feeling or state which is seen as outside of the realm of either philosophy or religion. Such is the result of imposing a fundamental division between thinking and acting, which is often reiterated as the division of body and soul.

This division has forced those who have studied ancient religious and philosophical traditions, during the last two hundred years, to work under the assumption that a similar dichotomy existed among ancient thinkers. The modern faith in human reason coupled with the distrust—or even condemnation—of anything vaguely suggestive of cultic practices, or of the supernatural, meant that any such work was *de facto* excluded from the accepted canon of Western philosophy. This separation between thought and action has often led to a deep misreading of ancient religious and philosophical authors. The sixth-century philosopher and theologian Dionysius the Areopagite is among these misinterpreted authors.

In light of recent scholarship on the role of theurgy in Dionysius' Neoplatonic predecessors, much work has been done to re-read the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (*CD*) in order to overcome modern assumptions which inevitably cloud the interpretation of any ancient text. The following treatment of the role and place of theurgy in the work of Dionysius is an attempt to continue this work and to bring out the inherent connections between cultic practice, philosophy and mysticism in the *CD*.

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THEURGY IN THE NEOPLATONIC TRADITION

Dionysius' frequent use of the word theurgy (θεουργία) warrants a brief discussion of its origin and reception in the Neoplatonic tradition. Hans Lewy, in his extensive text on the Chaldaean Oracles and theurgy, provides a thorough account of the meaning and history of the term. He suggests that the term θεουργός was formed from the contraction of οἱ τὰ θεῖα ἐργαζόμενοι; thus θεουργοῖ are those doing divine things.[1] The Chaldaean Oracles are preserved exclusively within the Neoplatonic tradition,[2] which believed that they contained divine revelations transcribed by the Chaldaean theurgists.[3] Porphyry was the first Neoplatonist to have recourse to the Chaldaean Oracles and he does so in several of his works; his successors Iamblichus and Proclus also made significant use of the Oracles.[4]

The term "theurgy" suggests a complex system of meanings, and as we shall see, its complexity is the cause of much debate surrounding Dionysius' understanding of the liturgy. While the definition of the term is broadened and reinterpreted throughout its history—especially in the works of Iamblichus and Proclus—it will be helpful, first, to consider the influence of religious patterns in general on the work of the preeminent Neoplatonist, Plotinus.

E.R. Dodds asserts that the term theurgy is not found anywhere in Plotinus' *Enneads*.[5] Further, he assumes that Plotinus did not know of the Oracles, for "had he known about them he would presumably have subjected them to the same critical treatment" which is found with respect to the Gnostics at *Ennead* 2.9.[6] Zeke Mazur, however, has argued that Plotinus' critique of the Gnostics here was based on two points which do not necessarily apply to the Oracles directly. Plotinus believed: (1) that the Gnostics were attempting to manipulate the celestial world; (2) that the Gnostics were suggesting that incorporeal deities were affected by material rituals.[7] Mazur concludes that, "Plotinus criticizes the Gnostics not for their use of ritual *per se*, but for what he sees as their arrogant, impious, and entirely futile attempts to manipulate

1. H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy,* 461. The authorship of the Chaldaean Oracles themselves is attributed to two men: a father and son, both named Julian. The first Julian is "the Chaldaean," and his son is called "the Theurgist." The elder Julian was "a contemporary of Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines"(Lewy, 5). The younger was "born at the time of Trajan and lived in Rome in the second half of the 2nd century" (Lewy, 4).

2. Ibid., 5–7.

3. Ibid., 6.

4. Ibid., 8. As Lewy notes, Porphyry indicates that he referenced the Oracles in his treatise, *On the Return of the Soul*, of which we have only quotes from a Latin translation by Augustine. He also argues that Porphyry relied on the divine sayings in his *On the Philosophy of the Oracles* although Porphyry does not seem to make this entirely clear from what we have of the text.

5. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 285.

6. Ibid.

7. Z. Mazur, "*Unio Magica II,*" 37.

their superiors."[8] Plotinus' assessment of Gnostic ritual does not extend to his Neoplatonic successors, for whom theurgy was clearly not an attempt to manipulate the gods. This reading of Plotinus' critique of the Gnostics opens the possibility that his condemnation of the Gnostics was not at all a rejection of all ritual practice.

Mazur notes that Plotinus has generally been characterized as rejecting "ritual in favour of a solely 'contemplative' union with the One."[9] He further argues that such a distinction between theory and *praxis*, between contemplation and theurgy, is not satisfactory, either in the Plotinian worldview or in many of his predecessors. *Theoria* and *theurgia* are, as he points out, ambiguous categories that admit of some overlap. *Theoria*, or contemplation, cannot be understood as simple intellection, just as *theurgia* does not merely designate external or material ritual practices. Mazur maintains that "Plotinus' curious notion of productive contemplation dissolves the apparent dichotomy between thought and action, and thus blurs the distinction between philosophical and ritual praxis."[10] He argues that Plotinus' mysticism can be understood as comprising a kind of "inner ritual." This category, he suggests, "would thus occupy a liminal position between the cognitive process employed in discursive philosophy and the physical actions which comprise religious ritual."[11] This inner ritual is not anything other than contemplation in Plotinus' definition of the term. Following Gregory Shaw, Mazur indicates that Plotinus' highest level of contemplation is "structurally homologous" to and, in fact, derived from "certain theurgical rituals."[12] Thus, Plotinus is advocating a form of ritual praxis as a path to mystical union that is interior and based in contemplation. Through such interiorization, ritual actions are understood as contemplative, though they do not admit of the discursive nature associated with intellection.

The philosopher, theologian, and theurgist Iamblichus was a follower of Plotinus and a student of Porphyry. In his *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus sets out to defend theurgy against Porphyry's attacks through careful theological, philosophical, and theurgical argumentation.[13] At I.11 Iamblichus defends

8. Ibid., 38.
9. Ibid., 38.
10. Ibid., 42.
11. Ibid., 44.
12. Ibid., 45.
13. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis (DM)* I.2 (7: 3–9). All translations are by E. Clark, J. Dillon, and J. Hershbell (unless otherwise noted). The Des Places text page and line numbers are given in brackets after the book and chapter numbers for convenience. Here Iamblichus asserts that he will give explanations in the mode which is proper to the question, i.e., theological questions will be answered theologically, theurgical ones theurgically, and philosophical ones philosophically.

theurgy against the view that it is an attempt to manipulate the gods. He is clear that theurgy, unlike magic or sorcery which rely on sympathies within the material world, is dependent only on the divine will of the gods. The gods are not moved by the ritual, as though through the passions, for they are not subject to such alterations; instead, through theurgy a certain affinity with the gods is established.[14] Rather than affecting the gods, theurgy serves to raise the human soul, to align the soul with the gods.[15] For example, the divine invocations do not affect the gods; rather, they affect the human soul as it is enlightened by the light given by the gods—a light which calls the embodied soul to turn from externals and to focus on the divine principle within.[16] This, Iamblichus says, is the method of the salvation of the soul; it is accomplished because of the divine love which holds all things together. The rites, given by the gods, dispose the human mind to participation in the gods and bring it "into accord with them through harmonious persuasion."[17]

These rites include prayer in similar way. Prayer functions to elevate the divine element in the human being and when this element is aroused it "strives primarily towards what is like to itself, and joins itself to essential perfection."[18] Prayer, as established by the gods, unites humans to the gods through an internal connection. In the case of the divinely established prayers "the divine is literally united with itself, and it is not in the way of one person addressing another that it participates in the thought expressed by the prayers."[19] Thus, as supplicants, through prayer we are made like to the divine "by virtue of our constant consorting with it, and, starting from our own imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine."[20]

Although Iamblichus discusses theurgy in one way or another throughout his treatise, the final goal of theurgy is most clearly defined at II.11. Here Iamblichus states that he will provide a theurgical account of the idea that knowledge of being is directed towards the gods whereas ignorance descends to non-being. He clearly suggests that the only way for the soul to accomplish its return to divine union is through theurgy. It is not pure thought that unites the theurgists to the gods, and "theoretical philosophers" cannot hope to enjoy such union. It is not thought but rather, "the accomplishment of acts… [and] the power of the unutterable symbols… which establishes theurgic union (τὴν θεουργικὴν ἕνωσιν)." Theurgic union is not accomplished

14. *DM* I.11 (37: 13–16).
15. *DM* I.11 (38: 8–10).
16. *DM* I.12 (41–42).
17. *DM* I.12 (42:11).
18. *DM* 1.15 (46:11–12).
19. *DM* 1.15 (47:7–9).
20. *DM* 1.15 (48:1–3).

through intellection because then it would only affect the intellect and its efficacy would be dependent upon the capacity of the subject:

> For even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognizes the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought …. Effective union (ἡ δρασικὴ ἕνωσις) certainly never takes place without knowledge, but nevertheless it is not identical with it.[21]

Thus, the knowledge of divine things, as attained through philosophical reasoning, is not unimportant, but it is not that through which divine union takes place. Divine union is achieved only through the practice of the divine rites provided by the gods for the salvation of the soul.

Knowledge cannot be the only means of the soul's salvation for Iamblichus because the human soul is fully descended and therefore the intellect alone is not capable of raising the human to the gods. Shaw explains that "the agent of the soul's descent [is] *prohairesis*, its 'free will,' 'choice,' or 'disposition.'"[22] This disposition is what must be altered in order for the salvation of the soul to be accomplished:

> This is why Iamblichus says that theurgy [does] not act through the intellect but through one's entire character to allow the soul to exchange one life for another, to sacrifice its mortal life for the life of a god. Theurgy transform[s] the soul's *prohairesis* by conforming it to the divine *actions* communicated in theurgic symbols: the sacred stones, plants, animals, prayers, and names that 'preserve the will of the gods.'[23]

Thus, although knowledge plays a significant role in the soul's movement toward the gods, it is not that by which the soul is united to the gods. The soul attains divine union only through theurgic activity which brings about the transformation of the whole person, effecting theurgic union.

In his account of sacrifice, Iamblichus states clearly that its efficacy is not derived from its power to affect the universe through the manipulation of latent cosmic sympathies. Rather, he understands the efficacy of sacrifices to lie in a relationship of "friendship and affinity (φιλίαν καὶ οἰκείωσιν), and in the relation that binds together creators with creations and generators with their offspring."[24] This bond encompasses the "totality of beings through an ineffable process of communion."[25] All beings are brought to completion by their causes: hence, soul by intellect and nature by soul. This process of

21. *DM* II.11 (96:14–97:7; 98:6–7).
22. G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul,* 69.
23. Ibid.
24. *DM* V.9 (209:9–10).
25. *DM* V.10 (211:13–15).

affinity liberates the human soul from the bonds of generation, makes her "like to the gods and renders [her] worthy to enjoy their friendship, and turns round [her] material nature towards the immaterial."[26] Thus, for Iamblichus, the soul, through theurgic acts, invocations and sacrifices, is brought into participation with the divine activity and made god-like because of the divine love which permeates the whole of the universe.

Theurgic activity is not necessarily material. In his article "Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus," Gregory Shaw has pointed out that for Iamblichus there were different types of theurgies associated with different levels of the soul's coordination with the All.[27] This coordination was effected first by material theurgies, then by intermediate theurgies, which contained both material and immaterial elements, and finally by immaterial theurgies that "employ mathematical images, not as conceptual abstractions but as noetic signatures of the gods, Pythagorean hieroglyphs of intelligible reality."[28] Shaw suggests that for both Plotinus and Iamblichus "the experience [of this immaterial theurgy] is a kind of not-knowing in which noetic realities do the work, not the soul."[29] As immaterial mental practices these activities are understood as theurgy as they are not reliant on the mental capacity of the practitioner, but rather on the same divine love which provides for the accomplishment of material theurgy.

Proclus takes up the Iamblichean tradition insofar as he adopts the Platonic dialogues and the Chaldaean Oracles as the basis for his theology. He also follows Iamblichus in maintaining that the human soul is fully descended, with no part of it remaining at the level of *Nous*; the same assertion had led Iamblichus to insist on theurgy as the only path to divine union. Proclus also suggests that theurgy is necessary in order to attain divine union. At I.25 of his *Platonic Theology* Proclus concludes that there are three characteristics which fill all divine beings and extend throughout all the levels of divinity; these are: goodness, wisdom, and beauty. Further, he says that there are three characteristics that join all of these together, which are below these, and yet extend across all the divine worlds: belief, truth, and love. Love binds all things together; truth illuminates all those in the process of intellection, and the highest truth unites the intellect with its object; belief is that which indescribably unites all levels of divinity, all daemons, and all blessed souls with the Good. The Good, for Proclus, is not attainable by intellection, but he rather insists that it is necessary to abandon oneself to the divine light

26. *DM* V.12 (216:4–6).
27. G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos," 134.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 138.

and, by closing the eyes, "to be established in the unknowing and secret henad of being."[30]

The assertion that it is not possible to attain divine union solely through intellection, but that there is something else necessary—a faculty beyond discursive intellection which allows for such union—prompts Proclus in the following section to insist on the priority of theurgy:

> Through these [love, truth, and belief] all is saved and is joined together with the primary causes, that is through erotic madness (τῆς ἐρωτικῆς μανίας), divine philosophy (τῆς θείας φιλοσοφίας), and theurgic power (τῆς θεουργικῆς δυνάμεως). This last is more powerful than all human wisdom and knowledge (σωφροσύνης καὶ ἐπιστήμης), having gathered together the good of the prophetic and the purifying powers of the perfection of the rites, and equally all activities of divine possession.[31]

For Proclus, theurgic activity consists in all aspects of human connection with the divine. It encompasses prophecy, purification, ritual, and all things derived from contact with the divine. After enumerating the tasks and modes of theology Proclus says that "he who is revealing the same truth of the gods according to itself by divine inspiration is most clearly among the highest of the theurgists (τοῖς ἀκροτάτοις τῶν τελεστῶν)."[32] Thus, for Proclus the practice of revealing the gods by divine inspiration, namely through theurgy, is considered to be not only among the modes of theology, but one of the highest.

Proclus concludes the first book of his Platonic Theology with a discussion of the divine names. He describes how, just as the demiurgic mind brings into existence images of the primary forms in matter, images of eternal realities in time, and images that exist as shadows from those things that truly are, so:

> … in the same way, I believe, our knowledge, modeled on the intellective activity, creates according to this logic the likeness of all other things and especially of the gods themselves; among them it represents the un-compounded according to the compounded, the single according to the diverse, and the unified according to the many. And thus forming the names of the gods it shows the uttermost icons; for each it brings forth each name just as a statue of the gods; and as theurgy according to some symbols calls forth the generous goodness of the gods in the illumination of the created statues, and certainly in the same way the intellectual knowledge of the gods by the compositions and divisions of echoes discloses the hidden being of the gods.[33]

30. *Pl. Th.* I 25 (110). All translations from the *Platonic Theology* are my own.

31. *Pl. Th.* I 25 (113).

32. *Pl. Th.* I 4 (20). Hans Lewy describes how in *In Tim.* III, 6, 8 Proclus says that the title τοῖς ἀκροτάτοις τῶν τελεστῶν refers to those who "consecrate, vivify, and 'move' the statues of the gods" (Lewy, 495–96).

33. *Pl. Th.* I 29 (124).

Here Proclus connects the illumination of divine statues through symbols in theurgic rites with the effects of conceptualizing divine names: both activities, *in the same way*, make present the divine which is hidden. Proclus is clear on this important point: theurgic activity is not defined by its materiality, but rather by its effects—its ability to make the divine present to the soul of the practitioner.

Jean Trouillard has written extensively on Proclus and his work provides invaluable insight into Proclus' attitude towards theurgy. At the conclusion of his discussion of Proclus' philosophy in *L'Un et L'Âme Selon Proclos* Trouillard turns his attention to theurgy and its place in the Proclean system. Trouillard insists that for the Neoplatonists the final lesson of the *Parmenides* is the limit of the mind. Yet, because of the power of love which drives dialectic for Plato, the limit of formal reason is not the limit of thought or of action; love expresses itself most fully in myth.[34] Trouillard tells us regarding myth: "Ne croyons pas que le mythe soit réservé aux enfants ou aux hommes incultes. Car il y a un usage pédagogique du mythe et un usage initiatique."[35] Trouillard asserts that for Proclus myth is related to theurgy insofar as "le rite est un mythe en acte."[36] Ritual, he adds, is the primary expression *of* and communication *with* the divine. Reason can justify it but it cannot rival it.[37] Trouillard explains: "La théurgie est avant tout chez Proclos *un procédé de diéfication*. Elle couronne la contemplation, comme l'activité prénoétique domine la vie noétique et la dépasse en efficacité."[38] In this sense theurgy is prior to contemplation as the source of all contemplation. Theurgy is not thought in action as much as contemplation is action in thought. Finally, he insists that: La théurgie "n'est pas la liturgie des imparfaits, mais des parfaits. Elle est appeleé par la théologie négative et se place entre la contemplation et l'union mystique, afin de réveiller celle-ci."[39] Thus, theurgy is the vehicle of mystical union which surpasses contemplation by bringing the initiate into the life of the divine which is beyond contemplation.

Trouillard's description of Proclean theurgy avoids the many difficulties encountered by modern commentators. These difficulties stem, fundamentally, from an inability to abandon the strict privileging of contemplation over and against ritual activity. Moreover, it represents their consistent desire to distinguish contemplation from action completely. This is seen clearly in the

34. J. Trouillard, *L'Un et L'Âme*, 171.
35. Ibid., 172.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 174.
39. Ibid., 177.

more recent work of authors such as Andrew Smith[40] and Anne Sheppard.[41] Both of these scholars, in their discussions of Neoplatonic theurgy, attempt to distinguish between what they call "high theurgy" and "low theurgy." Although both choose different points at which to make these distinctions, neither is able to avoid imposing a false distinction between first, material and immaterial ritual, and second, internal and external theurgy.

In his treatment of this question with respect to Iamblichus, Gregory Shaw maintains that both Smith and Sheppard (though Smith to a lesser degree) reduce Neoplatonic theurgy "to a mysticism imagined as progressive mental abstraction, denying materiality and corporeality to advanced degrees of spiritual union."[42] He insists that Smith's treatment of the 'inner disposition' of the practitioner is "a critical criterion of theurgy, but it is one which distinguishes theurgy from non-theurgy rather than high theurgy from low."[43] Finally, on this note I think it necessary to take up Shaw's suggestion that, "in order to understand [Neoplatonic theurgy] properly, we should, like Trouillard, follow the principles of the Neoplatonists themselves as guides for studying their work. This demands that we learn to share their sacramental world-view, not in opposition to the intellectual rigors of Platonism (or of Platonic scholarship), but as the matrix which, they believed, nourished their intellectual tradition."[44]

As we shall see below, Dionysius draws from this rich Neoplatonic tradition in order to develop his particular vision of theurgy. By attempting to understand his predecessors according to their own principles we are given a better opportunity to understand Dionysius' appropriation and adaptation of their principles.

Theurgy in the Dionysian Corpus

The term θεουργία and its cognates appear some 48 times in the Dionysian corpus, including 31 times in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.[45] Various attempts have been made to separate Dionysius' use of the term from his pagan predecessors' by charging them with using theurgy in an attempt to manipulate the gods.[46] Dionysius predominantly reserves the word theurgy itself for his descriptions of the work of God in human salvation. That Dionysius apparently does not use the word theurgy to refer directly to ritual

40. See A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place,* 81–141.

41. See A. Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy."

42. G. Shaw, "Theurgy," 10.

43. Ibid., 25.

44. Ibid., 10.

45. M. Nasta and CETEDOC, *Thesaurus Pseudo-Dionysii Areopagitae Textus Cum Translationibus Latinis,* 53.

46. See A. Louth, *Denys*.

actions performed by the members of the ecclesiastical, or "our," hierarchy as he calls it, has led some to rigidly limit Dionysius' understanding of theurgy to a description of "the divine acts," particularly "the [historical] divine acts or works that Jesus performed as incarnate."[47] However, this account does not take into consideration the larger range of meanings that theurgy denotes both in the Dionysian corpus and in the Neoplatonic tradition more generally. For example, Dionysius frequently refers to divine illumination as "theurgic lights (θεουργικὰ φῶτα)," [48] "theurgic knowledge (τὰς θεουργικὰς ἐπιστήμας)," [49] or "theurgic understanding (τῆς θεουργικῆς γνώσεως);" [50] he also uses the phrases "theurgic communion (θεουργοῦ κοινωνίας)," [51] "theurgic participation (τὰς θεουργικὰς μετουσιάς)," [52] "theurgic likeness (τὴν θεουργικὴν ὁμοίωσιν)," [53] "theurgic virtues (ταῖς θεουργικαῖς… ἀρεταῖς)," [54] and he refers to the sacred oil used for consecrating as "the most theurgic myron (τῷ θεουργικωτάτῳ μύρῳ)." [55]

Dionysius tells his reader that God has resolved to ensure the salvation of all rational beings, both human and angelic. He explains that this salvation "is the ability of the saved to become nothing other than divine. And *theosis* [divinization] is being made similar to God and in union with God as far as possible." [56]

The notion of hierarchy, frequently associated with Dionysius, provides a helpful starting point for his understanding of *theosis* (divinization or deification). In the first section of the *Celestial Hierarchy* Dionysius explains: "I believe that hierarchy is sacred order (τάξις ἱερὰ), knowledge (ἐπιστήμη),

47. A. Louth, *Denys* 74 and A. Louth, "Pagan Theurgy," 435.

48. *DN* I.4 592B (113:12): *CH* VII.2 208C (29:12), my translation. Greek text from: B. R. Suchla, (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum I. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De divinis nominibus* and G. Heil, und A. M. Ritter (eds.), *Corpus Dionysiacum II. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae.* The citation refers to (1) chapter, section and paragraph number, (2) *Patrologiae Series Graeca*, ed. J.P. Migne column number, (3) the page and line numbers in brackets refer to the Schula or Heil and Ritter edition. All translations are from C. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* unless otherwise noted.

49. *CH* VII.2 209 (30:3); *EH* I.1 369A (63:4), my translation.

50. *CH* VII.2 209C (30:15), my translation.

51. *EH* II.2.8 404D (78:18–19), my translation.

52. *CH* VII.2 305C (48:18), my translation.

53. *CH* VII.2 209C (29:11), my translation.

54. *CH* VII.2 208C (29:14): ταῖς θεουργικαῖς…ἀρεταῖς (my translation).

55. *EH* II.2.7396D (73:5), my translation. Myron refers to the oil which is consecrated in the third sacrament discussed in the *EH* and which is used to bless the water for baptism and to consecrate the altar for the celebration of the eucharist. Dionysius suggests that it is the most theurgic because its presence is required for each of the other sacraments to be effective. It is only the hierarch who can consecrate the oil and use the oil to consecrate.

56. *EH* I.3 373D–376A (66:11 – 13), amended translation.

and activity becoming as much as possible like the divine form (ἐνέργεια πρὸς τὸ θεοειδὲς ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοιουμένη)."[57] Thus hierarchy itself, as it comprises these three elements, is the means by which each rational being is given the possibility of being as like as possible to God. Dionysius describes this possibility as an imitation of God, and as a reflection of the workings of God as it is specifically an imitation of God's activity. This imitation is a function of the hierarchic order in that it is proportionate to the individual's place within the hierarchy.[58] Thus, as each level of the hierarchy takes on the roles of purified and purifying, illuminated and illuminating, and perfected and perfecting, within the hierarchy "each will actually imitate God according to its role (κατὰ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον)."[59] Dionysius reiterates this at the beginning of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: he says that having imitated our angelic superiors as much as possible and "illuminated by the understanding of visions, we shall be able to become consecrated and consecrators of this mystical knowledge, images of light; theurgic: perfected and ones who perfect (θεουργικοὶ τετελεσμένοι καὶ τελεσιουργοὶ)."[60] In this way *theosis,* the goal of all hierarchy and of theurgy, is each member's proportionately full participation in the divine activity.

In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, all the members of each order are capable of *theosis* or divinization insofar as they are assimilated as much as possible, or proportionately, to the divine activity—that is, insofar as they are perfect according to their position. Were this not the case, the perfection of the cosmos would amount to the collapse of all hierarchy, and the eradication of the means of *theosis*. One does not climb the Dionysian hierarchy like a ladder to reach *theosis*. The hierarchy itself mediates deification by its very existence as a manifestation of the divine.[61]

Insofar as each member of the hierarchy is called to deification, each participates in the divine activity, thus becoming *theurgic*. At each level union with God is possible, in that *theosis* consists in becoming God-like as much as possible. Just as each member of the angelic hierarchy has a share in every moment of the divine activity according to its own mode, so each member

57. *CH* III.1 164D (17:3), amended translation.

58. This notion of proportionality is evident in the Neoplatonic tradition. See in particular Proclus' *Elements of Theology* Proposition 103: "*All things are in all things, but in each according to its proper nature.*" In his discussion of the nature of Being, Intelligence and Life, Proclus is not suggesting that these three moments are confused; rather he explains that each term is "characterized by its substantial predicate." Thus, "Life and Intelligence are present there after the mode of Being, as existential life and existential intelligence …." (*El. Th.* 103. Translation E.R. Dodds, 93).

59. *CH* III.2 165BC (19:2–3), amended translation.

60. *EH* I.1 372B (64:11–14), amended translation.

61. A. Louth, *Denys*, 105–06.

of the human hierarchy also shares in each activity, but always according to its proper mode and ability.

As a reflection of God, the order of the hierarchies is a manifestation of God's activity, and God's activity is directed towards the divinization, or perfection, of all creation. Dionysius insists on the central place of the sacraments within the hierarchies and even suggests at one point that each hierarchy consists first in sacraments, comprised of initiators and initiated.[62] The sacraments of the Ecclesiastical hierarchy are reflections of the activity of the angelic and the legal hierarchies and ultimately of the divine activity itself. In his discussion of the sacrament of illumination, Dionysius explains that the rites are made up of images. These images, he says, "are sacred perceptible imitations of intelligible things."[63] Thus in the sacraments the material and the immaterial are united as a reflection of the divine activity which is beyond both.

Images, or sacred perceptible imitations, are not means to a merely intellectual understanding of God. They are precisely the means of participation in the divine activity, as the material and immaterial elements are themselves theurgic. It is through the perfecting activity of the sacraments, including the actions—as performed by the hierarch and participated in by the people—and the elements, that one is perfected. Specifically, Dionysius describes how the hierarch and the priest must become like the sacrament. By becoming like the sacraments in purity and conforming as much as possible to them, the hierarch and the priests "will be illuminated by brighter divine theophanies (τὰς θεοφανείας) in the transcendent rays which send forth their splendour in mirrors made in their image in order that the image of radiance pass through more thoroughly and more brilliantly."[64] As mirrors, made in the image of the divine rays, those who perform the divine sacrament of the eucharist are themselves called to become like the ritual, in order that they should become like God.

The human person is not called out of the material world so as to achieve a god-like imitation. Rather, humans are called to become God-like both materially and immaterially, as is their proper proportion, in imitation of the complexity of the sacraments. Just as it is human nature to be both physical and spiritual, so it is the nature of the divine rites to comprise both intellectual and material elements. Together these elements are to be comprehended and imitated, and in so far as one achieves that imitation, one participates in the divine activity and is divinized.

62. *EH* V.1.1 501A (104:14). This is the only place where the author describes hierarchy as consisting of sacraments. See C. Luibheid, *The Complete Works*, 233, note 142.

63. *EH* II.2.2 397C (74:9), amended translation.

64. *EH* III.2.10 440 (90:1–3), my translation.

The activity of the sacraments allows for such participation precisely because it is beyond intellectual activity. This is especially clear in Dionysius' reflection on the sacrament of myron, the consecration of the sacred oil:

> These divine beauties are concealed. Their fragrance is something beyond any effort of the understanding and they effectively keep clear of all profanation. They reveal themselves solely to minds capable of grasping them. They shine within our souls only by way of appropriate images, images which, like themselves, have the virtue of being incorruptible. Hence virtuous conformity to God can only appear as an authentic image of its object when it rivets its attention on that conceptual and fragrant beauty. On this condition—and only on this condition—can the soul impress upon itself and reproduce within itself an imitation of loveliness.[65]

Capable of entering into the divine mysteries through the sacraments, the soul itself becomes an image of God. This passage indicates that God is hidden from our understanding, like the oil which is covered during its consecration, but also that the virtuous soul, which is an image of God, conceals that image within itself; in effect, the divine person is the hidden image of God in the same way that the sacrament is a sacred image of the divine. In the case of both the human and the sacrament, the nature of this image is to consist of both the material and the immaterial. The immaterial image is at once concealed within the material and revealed though it. Dionysius' uses of this interplay between revealing and concealing suggests that he does not see the image as something outside of or higher than its manifestation in the material. This suggests that the source of the image is not itself solely immaterial but also material—that insofar as it is the source of both it contains and transcends both.

For Dionysius, the materiality of an image does not hinder its capacity to communicate the divine. In the course of his discussion of evil in the *Divine Names*, he makes it clear that neither our bodies, nor the material world in general, are to be seen as the source of evil:

> And there is no evil in our bodies, for ugliness and disease are a defect in form and a lack of due order. What is here is not pure evil but a lesser beauty. If beauty, form, and order could be destroyed completely the body itself would disappear. It is also obvious that the body is not the cause of evil in the soul. Evil does not require a body to be nearby, as is clear in the case of demons. Evil in minds, in souls, and in bodies is a weakness and a defect in the condition of their natural virtues.[66]

65. *EH* IV.2.1 473B (95:23–96:5).

66. *DN* IV.27 728D (173:17–174:3). See J. Opsomer and C. Steel, "Introduction" in *Proclus On the Existence of Evils* for a discussion of Dionysius' treatment of Proclus' text. Dionysius deviates from Proclus by claiming that evil does not exist in bodies by nature (5).

In this way, the body is subject to the same ordering as the soul; thus, together with the soul, it is called to achieve its own proper order in relation to the Good which is its source. Further, Dionysius affirms that the perfection of the human person within the cosmos does not require an escape from the body, but rather, Life, he says, "has promised us that it will transform what we are—I mean our souls and the bodies yoked to them—and will bring us to perfect life and immortality."[67] Moreover, Dionysius strongly rejects any notion that matter in itself can be understood as evil. He says: "There is no truth in the common assertion that evil is inherent in matter *qua* matter, since matter too has a share in the cosmos, in beauty and form."[68] That matter itself has a share in the divine is what allows Dionysius to preserve his notion of the body's perfection and the capacity for the material sacraments to be themselves both the highest participation in the divine activity in the Ecclesiastical hierarchy, and also the means through which the human person, body and soul, imitates God and therefore fulfills its place in the cosmos. Thus material symbols and the rites which they contain are elevated into the divine and are not divided by their materiality from the more immaterial forms of theurgy. The unity of the material and the real—of thought and activity—in the notion of theurgy can be seen in both the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and in what has traditionally been understood as one of Dionysius' more philosophical and therefore less religious texts, the *Divine Names*.

Prayer as Theurgy

The unity of thought and action in the Dionysian conception of theurgy and in Neoplatonic theurgy can be seen in an examination of the role of prayer in the divinization of the soul. In this section, I will examine the construction of prayer as effective or active contemplation within the Neoplatonic tradition and then within the Dionysian corpus, with specific reference to the *Divine Names* and also with reference to important passages in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

Plotinus' notion of productive contemplation was examined above, as was his notion of inner ritual. This notion of inner ritual is especially helpful in a discussion of the place of prayer in the *CD*. There are two key places in *Ennead* VI where Plotinus describes vision or contemplation of the Good in terms which suggest the type of inner theurgy that was discussed above.[69] In the first passage Plotinus describes the soul's movement toward contemplation of the One as an ultimate rejection of the intelligence or the intelligible symbols. He provides us with the image of a person entering a beautiful and richly adorned house. Inside, the visitor contemplates the

67. *DN* VI.2 865D (192:1–3).
68. *DN* VI.28 729A (174:4–5).
69. See also Z. Mazur, "*Unio Magica*"; and G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos."

beautiful contents of the house, yet when he finally sees the master, who is worthy of "genuine contemplation" (ἄξιον τῆς ὄντως θέας), he recognizes him and turns his attention solely to him: "… by the continuity of his contemplation [the visitor] no longer sees a sight, but mingles his seeing with what he contemplates, so that what was seen before has now become sight in him, and he forgets all other objects of contemplation."[70] The visitor rivets himself to his vision of the master; he no longer looks down to the image of the master in the house and its ornaments, but now his sight is raised to a vision of his own nature and of the master above him. Whereas initially he had received knowledge about the master from the objects within the house, now he sees the master directly in a contemplation which is beyond sight and thought—the distance between the visitor and the master is overcome in this genuine, unitive contemplation.

In the second passage Plotinus describes the union of the seer and the seen at the moment of mystical union. He suggests that this union, both of the seer to himself and of the seer to the Good, is to be understood as when an initiate enters into the sanctuary of the god and contemplates him directly. Yet he says that the vision within the shrine is not a contemplation, but a kind of ecstatic seeing, whereas the vision of the statues outside the shrine were properly considered contemplations. Entering the sanctuary, he says, "makes contemplation real (ἀληθινὴν… τὴν θέαν)."[71] Here Plotinus relies not only on images or metaphors from religious cult but also on the very fundamental idea of mystical union as contemplation beyond knowledge. These activities are what Shaw and Mazur have called internal ritual or contemplative *praxis*.[72]

Iamblichus speaks more directly about prayer itself and its function within theurgic activity. Gregory Shaw has discussed at great length Iamblichus' notion of mental theurgy which is centered around Pythagorean and mathematical symbols elevating the soul above all conceptions. Here, however, I wish to explore briefly Iamblichus' discussion of prayer in the *De Mysteriis* and how it prefigures Dionysius' discussion in the *Divine Names*. In the first book of the *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus discusses the nature and purpose of all prayer. The object of prayer is to raise the supplicant up towards the gods through what he calls "harmonious persuasion." Iamblichus identifies this harmonious persuasion with the source of the efficacy of all prayer and all ritual: "And it is for this reason, indeed, that the sacred names of the gods and the other types of divine symbol that have the capacity of raising us up to the gods are enabled to link us to them."[73] Here, Iamblichus first refers

70. *Ennead* VI.7.35.13–17 (trans. Armstrong).
71. *Ennead* VI.9.11.29–30.
72. See Z. Mazur, "*Unio Magica*"; and G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos."
73. *DM* I.12 (42:11–13).

to the sacred names as divine symbols. It is as symbols, and not as arbitrary cognitive or cultural conventions, that the names of the gods bear the power to join the soul to the gods, to elevate the soul towards union.

Prayer is especially important in its relation to ritual, specifically the ritual of sacrifice. In this Iamblichus defines three types of prayer: the first he calls "introductory," the second "conjunctive," and the third "perfected."[74] The third type, "the most perfect, has as its mark ineffable unification."[75] Thus, prayer itself is for Iamblichus a way of attaining divine union. Moreover, Iamblichus insists that "…prayers serve to confer the highest degree of completeness upon sacrifices, … as it is by means of them that the whole efficacy of sacrifices is reinforced and brought to perfection…."[76] In conjunction with sacrifice, prayer provides the perfecting activity of the ritual. However, prayer also functions alone in the Iamblichean system:

> Extended practice of prayer nurtures our intellect, enlarges very greatly our soul's receptivity to the gods, reveals to men the life of the gods, accustoms their eyes to the brightness of divine light, and gradually brings to perfection the capacity of our faculties for contact with the gods, until it leads us up to the highest level of consciousness (of which we are capable); also, it elevates gently the disposition of our minds, and communicates to us those of the gods, stimulates persuasion and communion and indissoluble friendship, augments divine love, kindles the divine element in the soul, scours away all contrary tendencies within it, casts out from the aetherial and luminous vehicle surrounding the soul everything that tends to generation, brings to perfection good hope and faith concerning the light; and, in a word, it renders those who employ prayers, if we may so express it, the familiar consorts of the gods.[77]

The effects of prayer are countless, since prayer essentially contains all the effects of theurgic activity. Yet, ultimately prayer is always linked to ritual, and Iamblichus even goes so far as to say that the connection of prayer to sacrifice [or any ritual activity] is the "total unity of spirit and action that characterises the procedure of theurgy …."[78] Theurgy is not simply the ritualistic, or active aspect of Iamblichus' system; it is the union of the contemplative and the active.

Iamblichus also discusses the traditional use of the names of the gods both within prayer and within theurgic ritual. The names are symbols like a statue or a sacrificial victim; the divine names, as passed on from the gods themselves to the hieratic priests of traditional peoples (namely the Egyptians), though unknowable to us, are "united to the gods either intellectually or rather inef-

74. See E. Clarke *et. al., De Mysteriis* 275, note 355.
75. *DM* V.26 (238:3–4).
76. *DM* V.26 (237:7–8).
77. *DM* V.26 (238:12–239:10).
78. *DM* V.26 (240:9–10).

fably, and in a manner superior and more simple than in accordance with intellect."[79] That these names are linked to the gods thus allows for them to be a means or path of the soul's return:

> And moreover, we preserve in their entirety the mystical and arcane images of the gods in our soul; and we raise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as is possible when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods.[80]

Thus, we maintain our connection with the gods through the names, to which they are united and which the soul carries deep within it.

The names are united to the gods specifically because of their nature as symbol. As symbol the names are the bearers of meaning beyond themselves. Moreover, because they themselves have the capacity to unite word and reality, material and immaterial, they are able to function as the means of our participation in that same unity. It is for this reason that Iamblichus is careful to preserve the traditional names, in the traditional language. "For if the names were established by convention, then it would not matter whether some were used instead of others. But if they are dependent on the nature of real beings, then those that are better adapted to this will be more precious to the gods."[81] Even if none of these names are able to be understood intellectually by the initiate, the efficacy of the prayer or the sacrifice is not diminished. Indeed, their very inability to be comprehended intellectually or cognitively actually preserves the symbol's capacity to transcend its literal meaning and reach towards the unity which encompasses it. In such a situation the intellect cannot hinder the ability of the soul to move beyond intellectual contemplation to pure vision.

In the Iamblichean system, prayer is not an immaterial theurgy which surpasses ritual action. On the contrary, an investigation of the place of prayer in the *De Mysteriis* suggests that prayer is necessarily coupled with ritual—specifically sacrifice—as its perfecting movement. Moreover, with respect to the divine names, Iamblichus cannot help but set up that discussion as a treatment also of theurgy. The names are symbols, and therefore the contemplation of the names themselves is a participation in theurgic activity.

Following Iamblichus, Proclus also discusses the place of the divine names. Proclus explicitly connects theurgic ritual (specifically the illumination of a statue by the god) with the enlightenment that is achieved through the contemplation of the divine names in the mind. Proclus entreats his reader to follow the example of Socrates in worshipping the divine name. Further,

79. *DM* VII.4 (255:3–5).
80. *DM* VII.4 (255:4–256:2).
81. *DM* VII.5 (257:3–6).

he says that we must worship even those most dissimilar of names, as echoes of the divine, because even they will help us reach the gods. It is by the worship of the divine names, that "we establish ourselves at the highest level of the models of the names."[82] Thus, for Proclus, the names function as the focus of an internal theurgic ritual which raises the practitioner through the name to the divine.

In his *Divine Names* Dionysius is clearly drawing on this tradition within the Neoplatonic schools. On its own the *Divine Names* can be seen as an example of the threefold movement of remaining, procession, and return. Dionysius begins his discussion with the Good as it proceeds out of itself because of its love for creation. From the Good, Dionysius goes on to discuss the Beautiful and the all the names of God, down to the most unlike or dissimilar to God. From here he rises up again and in the end he contemplates God as he is in the eternal moment of his remaining, as One. The structure of the *Divine Names* is carefully designed—indeed the very structure, or form, of the treatise is a mirror of its content. However, this mirroring is more than just a reflection of our author's philosophical acumen; the structure itself reveals the nature of the text as prayer. More importantly it is a theurgic prayer. In its very structure the text images and therefore participates in the divine's procession, remaining, and return. In so doing it participates in the divine activity and becomes theurgic. Thus, the prayer, like all theurgic ritual, allows for our participation, through it, in the divine activity. The activity of prayer in the *DN* is importantly not our naming of God, or even God's naming of himself; it is more properly a naming which takes place in *us*. Through this naming we ourselves become theurgic participants in the divine life, a recreation of the procession and return of all things.

The idea of an internal ritual was certainly not foreign to Dionysius. In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, for example, he equates the way in which an artisan creates a statue by always looking to the original, with the way a practitioner should always keep the original in his "sight" as he creates the image in his mind. The artisan reproduces the reality of the archetype in the image of its likeness, by remaining undistracted and undivided in his vision. So, too, the virtuous practitioner whose vision is unwavering is able to produce an image and likeness of God. This likeness is the image of God in the soul which is nurtured and shaped by contemplation of the sacred oil.[83] Following both Plotinus and Proclus, Dionysius conceives of the conceptual image of God in the sacred oil itself as a statue, or at least as containing the same efficacious power as statues. I suggest that this internal theurgy is similarly taking place in the *Divine Names*.

82. *Pl. Th.* 1.29 (125).
83. *EH* IV.3.1 473CD (96:5–16).

Like Iamblichus, Dionysius does not believe that the divine names can be a matter of invention or of convention: they are revealed to us by the divine itself. For Dionysius, this revelation takes place in scripture. Thus, he claims that the names he uses are all taken from scripture. This is important because it suggests that the author does not see himself as writing a philosophical exploration of God, but rather participating in an active theurgic rite which is connected to God though God's self-revelation. This self-revelation comes in the tradition of the church:

> This is the kind of theurgic illumination into which we have been initiated by the hidden tradition of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with scripture. We now grasp these things analogically, and as they come to us, concealed in the sacred veils of that love toward humanity with which the scripture and the hierarchical traditions cover the intelligible with the perceptible.[84]

Thus, the tradition of the divine names comes to Dionysius through his inspired teachers and is also contained within scripture. Dionysius explains how, by relying on the divine names revealed in scripture and in the tradition, "we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one."[85] This elevation cannot be accomplished through intellectual activity; its goal is ineffable and we are not capable of contemplating it. The divine names themselves are symbols which accomplish this elevation. Our use of them does not constitute knowledge; instead, the use of the names is a theurgical activity which raises the soul above knowledge to union.

Dionysius is careful here to stress the unsuitability of our human knowledge to the divine object. We cannot have knowledge of the divine things in themselves; what we can have is participation in the divine activities:

> For the truth is that everything divine and even everything revealed to us is known only by way of whatever share of them is granted. Their actual nature, what they are ultimately in their own source and ground, is beyond all intellect and all being and all knowledge. When, for instance, we give the name of "God" to that transcendent hiddenness, when we call it 'life' or 'being' or 'light' or 'Word,' what our minds lay hold of is in fact nothing other than certain activities apparent to us, activities which deify, cause being, bear life, and give wisdom.[86]

The activities, which we "lay hold of" with our minds are not themselves the direct objects of human knowing; rather they are that through which we are united to God in a union which is beyond intellection. Our laying hold of them is not our comprehending of them, but rather our coming-to-be in

84. *DN* I.4 592B (113:12–114:3), amended translation.
85. *DN* I.4 592C–593A (115:6–18).
86. *DN* II.7 645A (131:5–10).

the divine activity and the divine's coming-to-be in activity in us. Through the naming of the divine activities we ourselves become united to them in activity, we are thus deified, begotten, given life, and illuminated. Moreover, these very activities take place in us through our participation in prayer.

Dionysius begins Chapter Three of the *Divine Names* with a discussion of the power of prayer. He reflects on the inability of the human mind to grasp the nature of the Trinity: "But," he says, "if we invoke it with prayers that are holy, with untroubled mind, with a suitability for union with God, then we are surely present to it."[87] In this Dionysius also follows Iamblichus by insisting that prayer does not affect God, but rather serves to raise us towards the divine:

> That is why we must begin with a prayer before everything we do, but especially when we are about to talk of God. We will not pull down to ourselves that power which is both everywhere and yet nowhere, but by divine reminders and invocations we may commend ourselves to it and be joined to it.[88]

For Dionysius, the human is raised up to the divine through prayer.

The goal of both prayer and also of theurgy is union. This union with or participation in God is attained through man's assimilation to God, or his becoming like God. This process is undertaken in several ways including material rites and internal ritual, or prayer. These two methods are structurally homologous for many of Dionysius' Neoplatonic predecessors. In a similar way, Dionysius does not seem to differentiate between the *way* material images function and the *way* mental signs function:

> The truth that we have to understand is that we use letters, syllables, phrases, written terms and words because of the senses. But when our souls are moved by intelligent energies in the direction of the things of the intellect then our senses and all that go with them are no longer needed. And the same happens with our intelligent powers which, when the soul becomes divinized, concentrate sightlessly and through an unknowing union on the rays of 'unapproachable light.'[89]

Both sensible images and mental or intelligible signs move the soul towards God and both sensible images and mental signs are ultimately overcome in a union which is beyond both sense perception and intellection. This can be compared to Plotinus' claims with respect to the cultic statue and the inner sanctuary. Plotinus and Dionysius both insist that despite the need—indeed, the necessity—of images and signs, both conceptual and sensible, mental and real, their proper function is to reveal themselves as symbols. As sym-

87. *DN* III.1 680B (138:7–9).
88. *DN* III.1 680D (139:13–16).
89. *DN* IV.11 708D (156:13–19).

bols these images and signs unite the sensible and conceptual and allow us to transcend that very division in order to reach union with the first cause which is itself beyond them both.

Prayer, as theurgic activity in the *Divine Names*, relies on words and concepts as symbols to enact this type of inner ritual. Just as with respect to the liturgical sacraments where Dionysius understands that the symbols contain at once their material reality and their divine, transcendent reality, so too with the divine names:

> The human mind has a capacity to think, through which it looks on conceptual things, and a unity which transcends the nature of the mind, through which it is joined to things beyond itself. And this transcending characteristic must be given to the words we use about God. They must not be given the human sense. We should be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God, since it is better to belong to God rather than to ourselves. Only when we are with God will the divine gifts be poured out onto us.[90]

The unity here refers to the soul's remaining with God which is the source of its return to God. Similarly, the divine names also remain in God, as an effect remains in its cause. The words themselves, as symbols, contain a "transcending characteristic" which allows us to realize their power as vehicles of God's activity. Through our participation in the creative activity of naming we are able to move, together with the symbols, through and beyond the accretions of sense perception and cognitive activity towards divine union.

The *Divine Names* cannot be divided from the rest of the Dionysian corpus, especially not from Dionysius' hierarchical writings. It is not essentially a work of metaphysics, ontology or epistemology; it touches on all of these because fundamentally it is concerned with the salvation of the human as created and loved by God. For this reason it must be understood within a theurgic context.

I argue that the text of the *Divine Names* itself is not *about* prayer, but rather it *is* prayer. It is itself a participation in the very process, together with baptism, the eucharist, and the sacrament of myron, through which we become theurgic and enter into the activity of the divine life in which the conceptual and sensible are taken up and united. The nature of this text as prayer is clear at several points, yet it becomes even clearer towards the end as Dionysius begins his ascent out of the dissimilarities and towards the One. As his journey proceeds the language becomes more sacramental. He ends the Chapter Ten by proclaiming "Amen."[91] This suggests that he sees himself as engaged in the activity of prayer. In Chapter Eleven he begins with

90. *DN* VII.1 865D–868A (194: 10–15).
91. *DN* X.3 940A (217: 4).

an invitation to worship: "With reverent hymns of peace we should now sing the praises of God's peace, for it is this which brings all things together."[92] Following this, Chapter Twelve begins with the call to "offer up a hymn of praise to the God of infinite names."[93] The treatise ends with the author's own supplication, where he asks: "May what I do and what I speak be pleasing to God."[94] In the preceding text Dionysius has done both—he has spoken, and through the theurgic nature of the prayer he has also acted—and so he prays that his work may be pleasing to God, that it may be a real participation *in* and union *with* the One.

Union with God, as the perfection of the creature, is its most perfect existence. The creation exists only insofar as it responds to the divine love in procession by turning toward God in the process of reversion. Thus prayer, as our participation in creation's reversion towards God in creative love, is the creature's coming-to-be in God as its perfection. Moreover, insofar as the creature's love for God *is* God's love for himself, the theurgic prayer of the *Divine Names* is God's very act of creative love as the practical activity of the divine—which is itself unmoved—within the creature.[95] Through the theurgic activity of the *Divine Names* God creates and re-creates in us.

As with theurgic ritual as presented in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, so too with prayer in the *Divine Names*, Dionysius expresses the soul's capacity for union with God. The text of the *Divine Names* itself is fundamentally a prayer in that it is theurgic. It does not draw God to us through invocations, but rather by the invocation of the divine names the divine activity happens in us; creation comes forth and returns to God in the creature. This conception of prayer is found throughout the Neoplatonic tradition and in his corpus Dionysius preserves that tradition. Here, the prayer itself *is* a divine union—a participation in the divine activity.

Conclusion

The unity of thought and action found in ritual activity and prayer is fundamentally the unity of the sensible and the intelligible. This unity is fully realized when Dionysian theurgy is understood in its proper relation to the Neoplatonic tradition. In taking up this tradition, Dionysius relies on the language of divinization and participation in order to situate ritual activity and prayer as an imitation of and participation in the divine work of God. As participants in the divine activity, each member of the hierarchy is shaped, by their active participation, into a more perfect reflection of God. Through

92. *DN* XI.1 948 D (217: 5–6).
93. *DN* XII.1 969A (224: 1–2).
94. *DN* XIII.4 984A (231: 6).
95. See E. Perl, "Metaphysics of Love."

the unity of thought and action, the sensible and the intelligible, the faithful become united within themselves, amongst each other, and to God.

In his letter to Titus, Dionysius considers the interpretation of Biblical symbols. He insists that symbols are not the place of imagination. They are not set out somehow to be decoded and understood; these, he says, are childish fantasies. Rather the real lovers of holiness "alone have the simplicity of mind and the receptive, contemplative power to cross over to the simple, marvelous, transcendent truth of the symbols."[96] The symbol serves as the threshold; it enables the initiate to come into contact with the divine by way of the sensible and the intelligible. For a symbol is both. The most theurgic ointment is a symbol, as is the divine name Good, or One. Moreover, each is at once sensible and intelligible. Dionysius adds:

> We have therefore to run counter to mass prejudice and we must make the holy journey to the heart of the sacred symbols. And we must certainly not disdain them, for they are the descendents and bear the mark of the divine stamps.[97]

The symbol bears the mark of the divine stamp in the same way that the human soul itself bears that mark, as though in wax. The human soul itself is a symbol of the divine; it is indeed *the* symbol, for in it God and creation are both reflected and contained. Thus, ultimately the journey into the heart of the symbol is the journey into the heart of the self, and the end of that journey is the perfected, sightless vision of the One.

96. *Ep*. 9 1105C (197:5–8).
97. *Ep*. 9 1108C (199:9–12).

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