

---

# GANZ NOTES ON DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE (C. 500 CE)

---

**Version:** 23, 27 October; 2, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 November 2020

**Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite** (fl. c. 500). Author who assumed the name of Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in Acts 17:34, and who composed the works known as the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (or *Dionysiacum*). These writings were the foundation of the apophatic school of mysticism in their denial that anything can be truly predicated of God.<sup>1</sup>

**Dionysius (6) the Pseudo-Areopagite** (c. 500), mystical theologian. The name given to the author of a *corpus* of theological writings to which the supporters of \*Severus (Patr. of Antioch, 512–18 CE) appealed at a colloquy at Constantinople in 533 CE, attributing them to Dionysius (1) of Athens. Though at an early date Hypatius, Bp. of Ephesus (c. 520–40 CE), rejected the attribution, it was normally accepted until, and even after, the 16th cent. Since the author draws on \*Proclus (410/2–85 CE) and is first cited by Severus, he is believed to have written in the early 6th cent. (perhaps as late as the 520s CE), probably in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

---

## ACCESSIBLE STUDIES

---

---

<sup>1</sup> [\*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Introduction and Biographic Information\*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 502.

Patr. Patriarch.

Bp. Bishop.

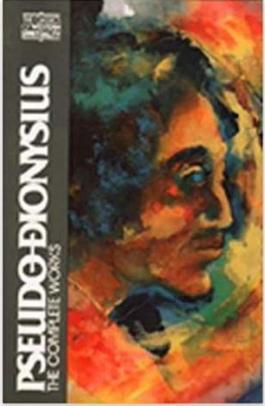
cent. century.

cent. century.

<sup>2</sup> F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., [\*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church\*](#) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 488.

The text below is the most accessible version of all of the published works of Dionysius the Areopagite, which includes also excellent Introductions. The most accessible of his works to those unfamiliar with him is *The Mystical Theology* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*. But be prepared to be genuinely puzzled by him. He is subtle, brilliant, and incredibly deep. This is why reading the Preface to this edition by Roques and the first of the three Introductions to this edition is a good idea.

Books > History > World



**Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works (Classics of Western Spirituality (Paperback))** Paperback – January 1, 1987

by Pseudo Dionysius (Author), Paul Rorem (Translator), Karlfried Froehlich (Introduction), & 1 more

★★★★☆ 58 ratings

> See all formats and editions

Hardcover \$153.38	<b>Paperback</b> <b>\$22.00</b> ✓prime
-----------------------	---

7 Used from \$111.77    37 Used from \$8.98  
25 New from \$19.73

"Reading these books one is brought yet again to hope that our society as a whole will be seriously drawn to a more systematic study of the deeper aspects of man's life..." A.M. Allchin Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works translation by Colm Luibheid forward, notes, and translation collaboration by Paul Rorem preface by René Roques introductions by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean Leclercq, and Karlfried Froehlich "Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name." Pseudo-Dionysius (5th or 6th century) There are few figures in the history of Western Spirituality who are more enigmatic than the fifth or sixth-century writer known as the Pseudo-Dionysius. The real identity of the person who chose to write under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite is unknown. Even the exact dates of his writings have never been determined. Moreover the texts themselves, though relatively short, are at points seemingly impenetrable and have mystified readers over the centuries. Yet the influence of this shadowy figure on broad range of mystical writers from the early Middle Ages on is readily discernible. His formulation of a method of negative theology that stresses the impotence of humans' attempt to penetrate the "cloud of unknowing" is famous, as is his meditation on the divine names. Despite his influence, relatively few attempts have been made to translate the entire corpus of his written into English. Here in one volume are collected all of the Pseudo-Dionysius's works. Each has been translated from the Migne edition, with reference to the forthcoming Göttingen critical edition of A.M. Ritter, G. Heil, and B. Suchla. To present these works to the English-speaking public, an outstanding team of six research scholars has been assembled. The lucid translation of Colm Luibheid has been augmented by Paul Rorem's notes and textual collaboration. The reader is presented a rich and varied examination of the main themes of Dionysian spirituality by René Roques, an incisive discussion of the original questions of the authenticity and alleged heresies in the Dionysian corpus by Jaroslav Pelikan, a comprehensive tracing Dionysius's influence on medieval authors by Jean Leclercq, and a survey by Karlfried Froehlich of the reception given the corpus by Humanists and sixteenth-century Reformers.

See all 3 images

**Follow the Author**

 the Areopagite Pseudo-Dionysius [+ Follow](#)

## ACTS 17 – ST. PAUL AT THE AREOPAGUS

---

See my Notes on this biblical text.

The picture of the city painted by Luke has impressed different scholars as being remarkably true to life or as a brilliant literary product. There was in fact at Athens a blend of superstitious idolatry and enlightened philosophy. Paul's speech, which is delivered before the philosophers, has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to their concerns, since it was directed more against popular idolatry. **In fact, however, it would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic.** Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; **the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man.** What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough.<sup>17 3</sup>

**Although Athens had once been the intellectual centre of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation.** When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry. 'He found himself confronted by a veritable forest of idols', with vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and especially at the entrance to the *agora* (RSV *market place*) through which he probably walked.<sup>19 4</sup>

**Hermes** was one of the most popular and frequently represented, if most complex, of the Greek Olympian deities. Identified by the Romans with **Mercury**, he was associated from the archaic through the Hellenistic periods with cunning and theft, music and eloquence, travel and commerce, and (especially as the Hellenistic Hermes Trismegistus) magic, alchemy and astrology. In the Bible, Hermes occurs as a divine

---

<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, 'Paul's Speech on the Areopagus', in M. E. Glaswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke, *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London, 1974), pp. 69–77.

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.

RSV American Revised Standard Version, Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, Second Edition, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> R. E. Wycherley, 'St Paul at Athens', *JTS* 19, 1968, pp. 619–621.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

name in Acts 14:12, and as the name of an otherwise unknown Roman Christian greeted by Paul in Rom 16:14.<sup>5</sup>

**Their initial impression of Paul was not favourable. They dismissed him contemptuously as a *babbler*; the word designated a bird picking up scraps in the gutter, and hence came to be used of worthless loafers (the kind of person who today would pick up cigarette ends and smoke them) and also of persons who had acquired mere scraps of learning.** There would appear to be a deliberate echo of the tradition about Socrates when Paul is said to proclaim strange *divinities*; here the word ‘demon’ is used in its neutral, Greek sense. The divinities in question were *Jesus* and *Resurrection*, the latter possibly being understood as the name of a goddess, although a contemptuous dismissal of the idea of resurrection, as taught by Paul, is just as likely an interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

**Verses 33-34** – This verdict is confirmed by the fact that after Paul had left the gathering he did gain some converts. **One in particular was a member of the Areopagus called *Dionysius*. This indicates that Paul’s audience certainly contained members of the court of the Areopagus, whether or not we identify the occasion as a meeting of the court.** Nothing certain is known about Dionysius, although later tradition turned him into the first bishop of Athens (a fair inference since the first converts often became the leaders of the church, 1 Cor. 16:15f.). Later still he was credited with the authorship of some fifth-century Neoplatonic writings. Along with the men converted there was also a woman called *Damaris*, about whom we again know nothing. Whether a church was formed at this stage is doubtful; Paul describes some of his Corinthian converts as the ‘first fruits of Achaia’ (1 Cor. 16:15).<sup>7</sup>

---

## IDENTITY OF DIONYSIUS

---

**It seems valid to conclude that the author of the *Corpus* was a Syrian Christian who lived long at Athens, where he enthusiastically followed—and was profoundly influenced by—the**

---

<sup>5</sup> L. H. Martin, “[Hermes](#),” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 405.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301.

<sup>7</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.

**courses of \*Proclus and \*Damascius. An indication of his affective ties to Athens is his choice as a pseudonym, among the many options, of the Athenian Dionysius the Areopagite, and that in the titles of his works he calls himself the bishop of Athens.** In the 5th c. the Athenian school was frequented by various Syrians: Damascius was from Damascus; Salustius, Odenathus, Uranius, Hilary and Mara were of Syrian origin; Marinus, Proclus's successor, was a Palestinian who abandoned Judaism for Hellenism (*Vita Is.* 141, p. 196). The author of the *Corpus* must have been part of this circle.<sup>8</sup>

**Han Urs von Balthasar** – “First, that this writer, like no other, is ‘indivisible’ and that his person is wholly identified with his work; in other words, that there is nothing ‘made-up’ about him, that he is no ‘pseudonym’ for another. **And then, that such power, such radiance of holiness streams forth from this unity of person and work—as the Middle Ages sensed immediately—that he can in no case be regarded as a ‘forger’, not even as a clever ‘apologist’ pulling off a trick.** From the first it follows that it is this indivisibility that has made the theology of Denys, whatever the influences are—Neo-Platonic or Christian, Alexandrian or Cappadocian—into an original whole of such character and impact that none of the great theological thinkers of the following ages could avoid him, could escape a fascination to which the supposed august authorship may have contributed something, but which could scarcely have had less influence, had there been no claim to apostolic authority. Or is one to say that Scotus Eriugena, the Victorines, Bernard and his followers, Albert, Bonaventure and Thomas, Eckhart, Tauler and Ruysbroek, Gerson and Nicholas of Cusa, the Spanish mystics up to and including John of the Cross, Bérulle and Fénelon have all fallen victim to a crass forgery without which the theological substance and power of the CD would never have had any influence? **All one needs to do to be convinced of this explosive and yet constructive originality is to listen to the unmistakable sound of gifted self-consciousness which, in union with the deep humility of the author, echoes throughout the *Corpus*, above all in the letters, where the man appears most strongly as he responds to questions and**

---

\* articles within the EAC

\* articles within the EAC

c. “century” or “centuries”

<sup>8</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 718.

CD Corpus

doubts raised in the course of the systematic work: a tone the genuineness of which has nothing to do with so-called literary fiction.”<sup>9</sup>

## SUMMARY OF THE WORKS

---

The texts themselves are not long, although their dense style has given many that impression. They are here presented in the order suggested by the author’s internal allusions, since there are no dependable historical references. *The Divine Names* uses the various biblical names for God, such as “Good,” “Being,” and “Life,” as a starting point for a thorough philosophical discussion of the divine attributes. Yet whatever is affirmed about God must also be denied. *The Mystical Theology* provides an extremely brief summary of the author’s method of affirmative and negative theology and its spiritual goal. It begins with Moses ascending into the dark “cloud of unknowing” and ends with the negation of all presumed attributes of the transcendent God. *The Celestial Hierarchy* considers the three triads of angelic beings, as described in the scriptures. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* presents the rites and offices of the church: the three sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, and consecration of the *myron*-ointment), the three ordinations (of the hierarch or bishop, priests, and deacons), monastic tonsure, and funerals. To describe the relationship of the hierarch to those below him, Dionysius invented the word “hierarchy.” The nine *Letters* consider different aspects of these same topics.<sup>10</sup>

In the cross-references and the index, the treatises are abbreviated as follows: DN = *The Divine Names*, MT = *The Mystical Theology*, CH = *The Celestial Hierarchy*, EH = *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and Ep. = one of the *Letters*. The column numbers and letters are taken from the Corderius edition in Migne with the line numbers often supplied as well. Thus DN 1 588A 2–5 indicates *The Divine Names*, chapter one, column 588A, lines two through five. The biblical citations are noted and indexed according to the divisions used in the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), including its numbering of the Psalms. The notation LXX (for Septuagint) indicates a

---

<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, [The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics II: Clerical Styles](#), trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (San Francisco; New York: Ignatius Press; Crossroads Publications, 1984), 147.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Rorem, [“Foreword,”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

quotation or allusion that is not identifiable in the RSV translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, but only in the Greek Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

---

## THEOLOGY AS “THEOS” AND “LOGOS”

---

The first meaning of “theology” back when the word was coined did not refer to an academic discipline as in “I am studying Theology.” **It was the combining into one the two divine names of the Father – God, *ho theos* – and of the Son – the Logos, *ho logos*.**

**It meant *a relationship of love* that lay at the very center of reality: the love of the Father and the Son.**

It would be like us Ganzes referring to our parents as *FatherMother*, the Source from which all six of us children proceeded (*próodos*).

Jesus was very early referred to as “the Logos” (*ho logos*), because it was in Jesus the God-Man that all things have their “reason” or “cause” (logos means “reason or cause, or *explanation*”<sup>12</sup>).

Thus later on it may not be surprising that Theology came to mean “the study of God”, the *giving of reasons* why God, for what Purpose God, etc.

---

## THEOLOGY AS PERCEPTION OF ARCHITECTURE

---

In our Age, and for many centuries, Theology, sometimes in olden days called the “Queen of the Sciences”, considered as its formal object *the study of God* within the Trinity (**immanent**; Who God is; the THEARCHY) and what has proceeded from the Trinity (**economic**; What God does; the HIERARCHY).

In Greek the noun *archē* means: “the beginning, the source, the origin” and with the preposition *ek-* it means “from the beginning, from of old, from the first.” As a result, an *archē* in Philosophy meant “a First Principle”. And it does not surprise us that eventually an *archē*

---

RSV Revised Standard Version

<sup>11</sup> Paul Rorem, [“Foreword.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>12</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to explain**” - *transitive*. “To describe or **give an account of in order to bring about understanding**, to explicate; to give details of, enter into details respecting.”

meant **something of pre-eminent importance or significance or value**, and even **first in power or influence**.

And yet for Dionysius, Theology is first and foremost about perceiving **the overall structure of reality** as expressive – a luminous vision – of the kindly God. And this structure, especially the HIERARCHY is, as Paul Rorem writes, “This three-fold definition of hierarchy as order, understanding, and activity could and does serve as the organizing principle for a comprehensive treatment of the hierarchical structure of the Dionysian universe”, exists for one purpose, as Paul Rorem explains: “The entire purpose of the arrangement called hierarchy is to enable the imitation of God and conformity to God.”

A way of considering this VISION OF THE WHOLE that Dionysius lays out is as a UNIFIED FIELD THEORY, about which Britannica summarizes: “Unified field theory, in particle physics, is an attempt to describe all fundamental forces and the relationships between elementary particles in terms of a single theoretical framework. In physics, forces can be described by fields that mediate interactions between separate objects. In the mid-19th century James Clerk Maxwell formulated the first field theory in *his theory of electromagnetism*. Then, in the early part of the 20th century, Albert Einstein developed general relativity, *a field theory of gravitation*. Later, Einstein and others attempted to construct a unified field theory in which electromagnetism and gravity would emerge as different aspects of a single fundamental field. They failed, and to this day gravity remains beyond attempts at a unified field theory.”

## THE KINDLY PROVIDENCE

---

*The Celestial Hierarchy* – “Of course this ray [the Light which pours forth from the Father; Jesus is the first (in principle) manifestation of this Light] never abandons its own proper nature, or its own **interior unity**. Even though it works itself outward to multiplicity and proceeds outside of itself as befits **its generosity**, doing so to lift upward and to unify those beings for which it has a **providential responsibility**, nevertheless it remains inherently stable and it is forever one with its own unchanging identity. And it **grants to creatures the power to rise up**, so far as they may, **toward itself and it unifies them** by way of its own simplified unity. However, **this**

divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.<sup>7</sup>[121C]<sup>13</sup>

## REMAINING, PROCESSION, RETURNING

---

I think essential for understanding, or beginning to understand, what is meant by the divine “outpouring” that becomes “distinct existences” – the multiplicity of all created things – is to understand how an Artist “goes out” of himself or herself into his or her painting or poem or novel. The “work of Art” is genuinely distinct from the Artist, but it does not deplete, or fracture the unity (the “abiding” or “remaining”) of the Artist as it becomes distinctly other. In fact, the “work of Art” causes the Artist to become more fully himself or herself.

### *The law of monē, proodos and epistrophē.*

The Greek *monē* means “abiding, tarrying” or by association “persistence”, which derives from the Greek verb *menein*, “to remain or abide.”

The Greek *próodos* means “going onwards, advancing” or by association “progress”, but it also means “coming out of a house” and more importantly in the Neoplatonic literature “proceeding forth, **emanation.**” But this Greek noun as a combination of the preposition pro- gives the meaning to this noun “farther along the way; forwards.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**emanation**” (Latin compound *ex-* “out of” and *mānāre* – “to flow”) – “The process of flowing forth, issuing, or proceeding from anything as a source. *literal* and *figurative*. **Often applied to the origination of created beings from God; chiefly with reference to the theories that regard either the universe as a whole, or the spiritual part of it, as deriving its existence from the essence of God, and not from an act of creation out of nothing. Also, in Theology, used to denote the ‘generation’ of the Son, and the ‘procession’ of the Holy Ghost, as distinguished from the origination of merely created beings.**”

---

<sup>7</sup> This entire paragraph echoes the full Neoplatonic structure of remaining, procession, and return. See note 4, above. The veils that “upliftingly conceal” are the scriptures and the liturgy, as indicated in the rest of this chapter and in DN 1 592B 20–27.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 146.

The Greek *epistrophē* means “turning about; turning or wheeling about; turning towards” but especially in the Neoplatonic literature it means “return” to the Source.

*Monē* refers to the absolute transcendence of the first principle: motionless, detached from everything, unalterable and always the same (*De div. nom.* 9,8,916B), and practically identical with *henōsis*<sup>14</sup> (*De div. nom.* 2,4,640D). *Próodos* indicates its emanation—or overflowing—due to the superabundance of its energy, both when it produces beings by multiplying itself and when it manifests its providence and love toward them: it is thus identified on the one hand with *diakrisis*<sup>15</sup>, *pollaplasiasmos*<sup>16</sup> and creative activity, and on the other with *prónoua* and *ἔρω* (*De div. nom.* 4,4,712C). Yet *próodos* in no way alters the stable unity of *monē*. Finally, *epistrophē* means the return of *próodos* to its original source (*De div. nom.* 2,11,549B), as well as the conversion of beings—produced by *próodos* toward the first principle and their tendency to unite to it: well considered, this second aspect of *epistrophē* is nothing but a particular case of the first, **since all beings emanate from the “one” and are thus part of the divine *próodos*.**<sup>17</sup>

While *monē* is the original source and the point from which emanation starts and to which it returns, *próodos* and *epistrophē* represent **a genuine cyclical movement of the divine energy that emanates from the transcendent “one” and returns to it** (*De div. nom.* 4,14,712D–713A). These three moments were already fundamental in Neoplatonism.<sup>18</sup>

**“Unions” and “distinctions.”** These two basic concepts are widely illustrated in the second chapter of the *Divine Names*. On a more general level, while union (*henōsis*) refers to the deity considered in his absolute transcendence (*monē*) distinction (*diákrisis*) regards his emanations

---

<sup>14</sup> *Henosis* means “combination into one; union”.

<sup>15</sup> *Diákrisis* means “separation, dissolution” but here it means “differentiation” meaning that something comes from its source with enough distinctness in itself to be recognizably different from its Source.

<sup>16</sup> *Pollaplasiasmós* is a word from the works of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, who was so influential in the thought of his student Dionysius, and which means “multiplication”.

<sup>17</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 719–720.

<sup>18</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

(*próodoi*), manifestations (*ekphanseis*<sup>19</sup>) and multiplications (*pollaplasiasmói*), which produce the various real existents.<sup>20</sup>

## GOD'S "REAL PRESENCE"

---

*The immanence of the deity in the universe.* If, considered in its *monē*, the deity remains absolutely transcendent, **considered in its emanation (*próodos*)—which is both providential and creative—it pervades everything, reaches all beings and is therefore immanent in the universe (see, e.g., *Cael. hier.* 1,1, 12B 4).** This *emanation*—which becomes a genuine “transmission” (*diadosis*<sup>21</sup>, *chorēgia*<sup>22</sup>)—comes about as a result of the overflowing (*ekblyzein*, *hyperblyzein*) of the infinite power (*dynamis*) of which **God is immeasurably full (*Cael. hier.* IV, 1,177 C 13–14; *De div. nom.* VIII, 8,892B1 etc.). **The doctrine of the divine power that pervades (*diēkei*) the universe and holds it together (*synēchei*) is characteristic of Stoicism and is also found in \*Hellenistic Judaism, \*Middle Platonism, \*Neoplatonism and \*Gregory of Nyssa.** The idea of the **immeasurably full divine principle** whose infinite power overflows of its own accord, originating the emanation that reaches everywhere, is typically Neoplatonic.<sup>23</sup>**

---

<sup>19</sup> The Greek noun *ekphansēis* meaning “showing itself” but more appropriately here it means “bright-shining”, what in the Old Testament is called the glory of God – not God Himself (unknowable, unseeable by humans) but the “bright-shining” from God’s Self.

<sup>20</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek *diadosis* means “distribution,” or “communication” in the sense that creation is how God “communicates” Himself to the whole universe.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek *chorēgia* means “abundance” in the sense of God having an “abundance” of resources ever-flowing outward.

\* articles within the EAC

<sup>23</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

Despite, however, this infinite multiplication or subdivision of the divine *próodos*, the original Source—corresponding to *monē*—**suffers no alteration or diminution either in its superessential unity or in its superabundant energy, remaining always the same in its unmoving identity** (e.g., *De div. nom.* II, 11,649B 6–7; 9–11; 12–14).<sup>24</sup>

A corollary of this “real presence” of God to the created world is we human beings through love become “really present” to God while suffering no alteration or diminution in our unity and energy as persons. Rather, by “going out” (*próodos*) in love to God, we more than ever establish our essential unity as persons.

---

## THE TRINITY

---

*The three persons of the Trinity.* The superessential unity of the first principle comprehends in itself, in a manner that surpasses human understanding, the persons of the Trinity who, as we have seen, represent the *diakrisis* [the “differentiation”] at the heart of the transcendent deity’s *henōsis* [“unity”]; while remaining clearly distinct and admitting no reciprocity or confusion between their roles (640C, 641A 12–13, 641D), the three persons nonetheless exist in one another in such a way as to form a higher unity, just as the lights of different lamps merge into one light.<sup>25</sup>

---

## THEOLOGY – AFFIRMATION & NEGATION

---

Language, while an extraordinary gift by which who we are on the inside, for example, can manifest itself to others, needs much careful thought. For example, how often we stumble and imagine that our words *for* things *are* what those things are.

---

<sup>24</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

<sup>25</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

Deny's theology is profoundly *dialectical*<sup>26</sup>. Dialectical is a method of thinking through something, from unknown to known. It assumes that the truth of the still unknown object of thought – of the reality one seeks to know – *requires the tension of opposites to cause the truth to appear* as the fruit of that tension of thought. An famous example of this is in Aristotle's discussion of the virtues, where a virtue is *the middle way between two extremes*, rather than the opposite of a vice: the vice at one extreme; the virtue at the other extreme.

According to ps.-Dionysius, the two "ways" do not contradict one another: whereas negative theology considers the deity in his absolute transcendence (*monē*) and stresses his difference from beings, positive theology considers it as the cause of all beings, i.e., the principle from which all beings emanate by virtue of *próodos* and in which they are thus potentially contained. Whereas **positive theology**, through *próodos* considers the descending process from the deity to beings, **negative theology** rises from beings to the first principle, which remains always detached from them. **These two methods also explain how the deity can be simultaneously nameless and the object of all possible names**—a doctrine also found in the *Corpus Herm.* V, 10.<sup>27</sup>

The *via negativa* is one of the main characteristics of the theology of the whole Platonic and patristic tradition. Ps.-Dionysius's words in *Cael. hier.* II, 3 140D 5–6, "which designate not what is, but what is not," should be compared with \*Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* V, 71,3 (CGS II, 374, 13–15) and with Plotinus, *Enn.* V, 3,14 (V, 68,6–7 Bréhier).<sup>28</sup>

**The absolute transcendence of the deity.** The natural consequence of the application of the negative concepts of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* to the divine *monē* is the stress put on the transcendence of the first principle. The most characteristic motifs of the Pseudo-Dionysian doctrine of divine transcendence are these: God is formless and untouchable; he is above all beings; he is unlike any being; he is above being; he is a nonbeing; he is above mind; he is above thought and knowledge, and is thus absence of thought and unknowable; the

---

<sup>26</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "dialectical" – "In Hegelian and Marxist thought: subject to or driven by **the interaction of the contradictory or opposing forces or impulses held to be inherent in the world**; or of relating to this phenomenon. More generally: characterized by the existence or operation of opposing forces, tendencies, etc."

<sup>27</sup> Salvatore Lilla, "[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#)," ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

\* articles within the EAC

<sup>28</sup> Salvatore Lilla, "[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#)," ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

knowledge that we can have of him is the same as ignorance; he is above words, and so ineffable, without names and above every name: he is above every state (including those of quiet and movement) and every affirmation and negation; he is above infinity and limit; he is at the same time identical to infinity in a threefold sense (because he includes everything potentially in himself, because he is provided with an infinite number of creative powers, and because he is unknown); he is above time and eternity.<sup>29</sup>

The same doctrines, therefore, characterize the theology of the whole subsequent Platonic tradition—until the last, Neoplatonism—and that of Philo and the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>30</sup>

---

## A TRIADIC PATTERN

---

Dionysius illustrated in his own way the Platonic and Neoplatonic pattern of the three classes, three functions, and three levels. **In his eyes, indeed, all reality is hierarchic and triadic.** Thus the angelic universe includes three **triads**, each subdivided into three **orders**, which are themselves partitioned into three **levels** of intelligences, each of which corresponds to the ternary structure. In each one of these triadic groups, the function of *perfection or union* pertains to the first term, that of *illumination* to the second, and the function of *purification* to the third. The distribution of orders and functions is largely identical in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>31</sup>

---

## DESCENT AND ASCENT

---

**The totality of *this twofold universe*, the angelic and the human, constitutes a sacred order, an understanding, and an activity, all regulated by the law of hierarchical mediations, both in the sense of the “descent” of divine *illumination* and in that of the “ascent” of**

---

<sup>29</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720–721.

<sup>30</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

<sup>31</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Roquemore, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 5.

*divinization. The harmony and the rigor of the whole and of the parts demand that each triad, each rank, and each intelligence remain strictly in its proper place and there perform entirely and uniquely its proper function.* In sharp contrast with most visions of the world, that of Dionysius includes only those intelligences able to be divinized, and excludes anything that may be closed to divinization. This explains why the stability, the movement, and the efficacy of the Dionysian hierarchy are entirely dependent on the divine “Thearchy,” the source and goal of all divinization.<sup>32</sup>

Recall Piccarda’s reply to Dante in *Paradiso*, Canto III (see immediately below). She perfectly captures the Dionysian insight about the *contentment* of each created thing, when it understands its particular place, role, duty, in the functioning of the whole.

About this text from *Paradiso*, Hollander has this comment: “In a sense it contains a central message of Piccarda’s speech in that it insists on the relationship that binds all saved Christians in their fellowship in God, a sense that overcomes the inevitable hierarchical distinctions found among them in this life. The love that governs their will is nothing less than charity, with the result that it is impossible for them to want advantage over their brothers and sisters in grace. **To wish things other than they are, to desire one’s own “advancement,” is nothing less than to oppose the will of God. And thus all members of this community observe the gradations among themselves, but find in them the expression of their general and personal happiness.**” [Dante. *Paradiso* (The Divine Comedy series Book 3) (Kindle Locations 27508-27513). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.]

---

<sup>32</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 5–6.

'But tell me, do you, who are here content, →  
desire to achieve a higher place, where you  
66 might see still more and make yourselves more dear?'

Along with the other shades, she smiled, →  
then answered me with so much gladness  
69 she seemed alight with love's first fire: →

'Brother, the power of love subdues our will →  
so that we long for only what we have  
72 and thirst for nothing else.

'If we desired to be more exalted, →  
our desires would be discordant  
75 with His will, which assigns us to this place.

'That, as you will see, would not befit these circles  
if to be ruled by love is here required  
78 and if you consider well the nature of that love.

'No, it is the very essence of this blessed state →  
that we remain within the will of God,  
81 so that our wills combine in unity.

'Therefore our rank, from height to height,  
throughout this kingdom pleases all the kingdom,  
84 as it delights the King who wills us to His will.

'And in His will is our peace. →  
It is to that sea all things move, →  
87 both what His will creates and that which nature makes.'

---

## GOD WHO REVEALS AND HIDES

---

The approach to God will come about through the hierarchy, in the midst of which the divine “names” will be elaborated and purified. Whatever the origin of these names—biblical or philosophical—all are related to the same method, to a **double and apparently contradictory axiom that the whole creation reveals God (Rom 1:20), while on the contrary no one has ever seen God (Ex 33:20; Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12)**. Hence, God will receive many names, an infinity of names (“polyonomos,” “apeironomos”); or, on the contrary, he will remain without a name, above every name (“anonomos,” “hyperonomos”). More precisely, from the viewpoint of the creative procession, it will be possible to qualify or name God by means of his total work (*affirmative or cataphatic theology*); from the viewpoint of the divinizing return, it will be necessary to eliminate every name (*negative or apophatic theology*). From the latter point of view, the truest according to Dionysius, it will become necessary even to contest the validity of the essential terms of trinitarian dogmatics (unity, trinity), those same terms that John the Scot

(Eriugena) will oppose even more radically in his critique of the notions of relationship and love.<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxically, then, the divinization of the intelligence is dependent on this same intelligence renouncing its own output, its order of thought, and, more radically, its own self.<sup>34</sup>

*Divine Names* [588A] – Let us therefore look as far upward as the light of sacred scripture will allow, and, in **our reverent awe** of what is divine, let us be drawn together toward the divine splendor. For, if we may trust the superlative wisdom and truth of scripture, **the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness is such that, out of concern for our salvation, it deals out the immeasurable and infinite in limited measures.**<sup>35</sup>

Notice how in contemporary American culture the very idea that people have different capacities for excellences of different kinds is regarded with deepest suspicion or it is outright rejected as “unfair” to those with “less capacity” for excellence.

---

## IMAGES “DISSIMILAR” AND “SIMILAR”

---

Perceptible symbols will be but a particular field of this same method. The intelligence must interpret, correct, straighten out, “reduce,” and deny the images, forms, and schemes in which are materially represented the divine realities they are unable to contain.<sup>36</sup>

For Dionysius, **scriptural symbolism is intended first of all for teaching.** It is educational, and thus temporary, and it is divided empirically into two groups, which are treated in slightly different ways and which seem at first to have different degrees of efficacy. **“Similar” symbolism—beautiful, simple, agreeable to the senses—seems better adapted to the**

---

<sup>33</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>34</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 6–7.

<sup>35</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, [Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works](#), ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 49.

<sup>36</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 7.

education of beginners. “Dissimilar” symbolism, on the contrary, through its very dissimilarity, its ugliness or monstrosity, and by the natural repugnance it inspires, proves from the very first to be better adapted to the method of negation that it demands. That is why it is much preferable to the similar symbolism, since it avoids the naturalistic and aesthetic obstacles by engaging the intelligence more directly in the way of negation.<sup>37</sup>

It occurs to me that at the center of the Christian mystery is the most monstrous of “dissimilar” images: a crucified God-Man! At the center of any Christian theological system is an ugliness so monstrous that “all our teacup talk of God” (as Hafiz puts it), our theological language come crashing into pieces.

I recall, and sometimes painfully recall, how so many of my Theology professors got bewitched by their own sophisticated intellectual systems that they actually believed that they knew God, were experts. But what kept striking my awareness with many of them is how dull, un-alive these Professors were, how filled with insecurities and hyper-sensitivity to being challenged. Their whole manner *proved* that what they knew was a lot, but it was not God. I am guessing that Dionysius perceived the same thing among all of those from whom he sought wisdom, from whom he desired to learn about God. But what he discovered was what Qoheleth discovered: “All is vanity.” Dionysius recognized the danger of theological language that asserted far too much.

---

## THE CELESTIAL HIERARCHY

---

The following translations represent a variety of genres, all of which comment on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius). Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy* was most likely written at the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth (though the writings themselves locate the writer in the first century, a companion of Paul). Today, the identity of the writer of the Dionysian corpus is completely unknown. However, Dionysius’s apostolic credentials were unquestioned throughout most of the period of writings represented in this volume. Dionysius was considered to be the Dionysius of Acts 17:34. In the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius’s apostolic authority and wisdom were invoked not only on the subject of angels but also on the proper method of interpreting symbols, the process of procession and return to God, the nature of hierarchy, what we might call spiritual enlightenment, the theology of beauty or aesthetics, and even architecture. By the time of the rise of humanism, the authorship of the Dionysian corpus began to be questioned, and it is generally agreed that the denial of Areopagitic authorship by the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla dealt such a blow to

---

<sup>37</sup> René Roques, “[Preface](#),” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Roem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 7.

interest in Dionysius that by the time of the Reformation the reformers, as a rule, had little use for him. Today, while there is universal agreement denying the authorship of the Areopagite from Acts (hence the often-used “Pseudo”), interest in the Dionysian corpus is at a near revival pitch, and the literature on the corpus is almost overwhelming.<sup>1 38</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A few recommended works on Dionysius that focus especially on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and are particularly helpful are Paul Rorem’s commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and his survey of Dionysius’s reception in the medieval period in Rorem, *P-D*, 47–90; Andrew Louth’s helpful volume, *Dionysius the Areopagite* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 33–51; the introductory material and notes in Classics of Western Spirituality Series volume on Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); and Chase, *Angelic Wisdom*, especially the sections on Dionysius’s symbolic theology, apophatic methodology, and angelology. Helpful studies on the subject in French include Dionysius, *Hiér. cél.*, lviiff., on the Christian sources of Dionysian angelology, and René Roques, *L’univers Dionysien* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 135–67, on angels and intellectual hierarchies.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard McGinn, ed., [Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of Angels](#), trans. Steven Chase, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 159.