

Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite ¹

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A frequent tendency in the study of Neoplatonism and its relation to Early Christianity is to examine the thought of Church Fathers, and other Christian thinkers, on the premises of mere appropriation of, or response to, or even distortion of, the originality of Neoplatonist tradition. A particular instantiation of this tendency is to see the works of Dionysius the Areopagite through the lenses of the Neoplatonic currents of his times. Modern research offers relatively few opportunities of a *per se* consideration and evaluation of the Areopagitic contributions to Late Antique and Early Christian thought. It seems that a consensus has been established in the scholarship. That is, to resort to Procline, or Iamblichean, or other Neoplatonic influences, in order to ground an inquiry into Dionysius' philosophical and theological paths.

This practice becomes evident, for instance, in the study of the central ritualistic activity in Late Antiquity, that of *theurgy* (θεουργία). In his introduction to the first edition of *Aristotle Transformed*, in 1990, Sir Richard Sorabji made a substantial statement on the relation between Iamblichus and Dionysius. He said that Pseudo-Dionysius “appropriates Iamblichus’ ideas for Christianity”, and “he even applies his [Iamblichus’] word ‘theurgy’ to the Christian sacraments”. Moreover, in his article ‘Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite’ (1999), Gregory Shaw established that: a) there is no real distinction between Iamblichean and Dionysian theurgy, b) a proper understanding of Iamblichus suffices for grasping the Christian theurgy of the Areopagite as an example of theurgy that is already defined in *De Mysteriis*, and c) that Christian Ecclesiology develops at odds to the cosmos.

The present chapter offers a novel insight into Dionysius the Areopagite’s notion of theurgy, both with respect to the metaphysical principles that connect with theurgy and the particular sacramental reality that emerges from it. Despite the linguistic affinities and several conceptual appropriations, Dionysius’ premises remain radically different from that of Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the wider Christian metaphysical contours he adheres to. A central line of the argument in the chapter is built on the remark that, throughout *Corpus Dionysiacum*, *theurgy* is a term exclusively used by the author to refer either to the works of Christ in His earthly historical presence, or to the whole divine providential, creative, sustaining and divinizing activity and work of God. Consequently, for Dionysius a *theurgist* could not be anyone else but Christ himself. This conclusion is analyzed further, and a series of considerations that show fundamental metaphysical divergences between Platonism and Christian thought are offered.

As a corollary to the chapter’s main theses the reader should anticipate as well: 1) a discussion about the premises on which any appropriation of Platonism by Christian thinkers should be considered (metaphysical and epistemological principles, linguistic affinities, etc.), 2) a consideration both of the common achievement (Greek language) and the different references and traditions (viz. Platonist and Christian) that people of the same time and place possess and adhere to, respectively, 3) certain prerequisites that protect the reader from the fallacy of confusing aspects of different worldviews, thus saving him from resulting in conclusions opposed to textual evidence.

¹ Summary of the homonymous chapter in: P.G. Pavlos, L.F. Janby, E.K. Emilsson, and T.T. Tollefsen (eds.) *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, London: Routledge (forthcoming).