

Dionysios the Areopagite

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DIONYSIOS HAS A GOOD CLAIM to be called the 'Father of Mystical Theology'; he is, at any rate, the first to use the expression 'mystical theology', the title he gave to one of his treatises. But, as we shall discover, what he meant by 'mystical' is rather different from what that term has come to suggest in the West since the end of the Middle Ages.

Who was Dionysios?

We must, however, start by asking: who was Dionysios the Areopagite (or Denys, or even Dionys)? The immediate answer is: the judge of the court of the Areopagos in Athens, before whom the Apostle Paul defended Christianity by appealing to the Athenians' devotion to an 'unknown god' (*agnostos theos*), whom he claimed to be the 'God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth' (Acts 17:24; see the whole passage, 17:16–34); one of the very few Athenians who was convinced by Paul's teaching and became a Christian (verse 34). But it was not the historical Athenian judge who wrote the collection of four treatises and ten letters, attributed to 'Dionysios the Areopagite', that surfaced in the early sixth century. We have, in fact, no idea of the identity of the author of these treatises; it is likely that he was an early sixth-century Syrian monk, but no attempt at any greater precision has ever convinced more than a minority of scholars. For this reason, the author of these treatises is generally referred to as 'Pseudo-Dionysios', with the implication that these treatises are forgeries. But that is, I think, misleading in a different way: these forgeries are not like other patristic forgeries, an attempt to infiltrate the recognized canon of one of the great Fathers, such as Athanasios or Chrysostom, for we know no other works by 'Dionysios the Areopagite'. Rather, one should think of a Syrian monk taking the monastic name of Dionysios, and seeking to articulate his vision of the Christian faith as genuinely 'Dionysian'. And what might that be? Just as the historical Dionysios (who very probably became the first bishop of Athens, a tradition preserved by Eusebius the Church Historian: III. 4. 10; IV. 23. 3) was an Athenian converted by Paul's preaching about the unknown God, so the author of the Areopagitical works presented a

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vision of the cosmos, in which the unknowable God (for so also can *agnostos theos* be translated) manifests himself, in terms of the elaborate ideas of the Athenian neo-Platonism of his day: the neo-Platonism we associate with the names of Proklos (the Platonic 'successor' in Athens 437–85) and Damaskios (the last 'successor' or *diadochos*, expelled by the Emperor Justinian in 529, and very likely a contemporary of our 'Dionysios'). It is this dependence on late neo-Platonism that enables us to date the Areopagitical writings, which were taken to be authentic works of the historical Dionysios from their emergence in the sixth century until the Renaissance, and even later. But it is a great mistake to suppose that the fame of the Areopagitical writings was simply because they were successful forgeries. It was rather the brilliance of Dionysios' vision that captured the Christian mind for more than a millennium, beginning with such great Byzantine theologians as St Maximos the Confessor, and including most of the great names of the Middle Ages, such as, in the West, St Bonaventure and St Thomas Aquinas, and in the East, St Gregory Palamas.

This vision is expressed in four treatises and ten letters: the *Celestial hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical hierarchy*, the *Divine names* and the *Mystical theology*, all addressed to the 'fellow elder Timothy' (presumably to be taken as the disciple of Paul, by tradition first bishop of Ephesos: Eusebius, *HE* III. 4. 5), the letters being addressed to a monk Gaios (*epp* 1–4), a deacon Dorotheos (*ep* 5), a priest Sosipater (*ep* 6), the bishop Polycarp, presumably the martyr of Smyrna (*ep* 7), a monk, in fact an abbot, Demophilos (*ep* 8), the bishop Titus, presumably Paul's companion and first bishop of Crete (*ep* 9), and the apostle John during his exile on Patmos (*ep* 10). It is, as is evident, not just the Athenian convert with whom our Dionysios wished to identify, but the whole apostolic Church of which Dionysios became a member (for knowledge of which our Syrian monk drew on the New Testament and Eusebius' *Church history*).

Dionysios' vision

His vision can be summarized in two parts. Firstly, it is a cosmic vision, mediated through the liturgical worship of the Church. The church building itself, not least in the Byzantine world, was seen as a microcosm of the cosmos: the dome and the sanctuary represented heaven, the nave represented earth, the whole movement of the liturgy represented the divine economy, God's saving plan for his creation, mediated by the celestial powers. Secondly, the whole cosmos is seen as a manifestation of God's love, a love calling the whole created order

into being, and through the beauty of that order calling the whole of creation, and each individual human being, back to union with Him. Dionysios represents, perhaps in an extreme form, the contrast between eastern and western Christianity; unlike the West, Dionysios does not dwell on the disaster of the Fall, rather his vision looks beyond, to the enduring love of God, constantly calling all into union. Unlike the West, which tends to see the divine economy as a kind of arc stretching from Fall to Redemption, Dionysios represents the tendency of the East to dwell on the greater arc (within which the lesser western arc is included) that stretches from Creation to Deification.

The celestial realm

We can unfold this vision by following the order of the treatises given above (which is the commonest order in the manuscripts, and is, I think, the order intended by Dionysios, as I shall henceforth call our anonymous Syrian monk). The *Celestial hierarchy* is an account of the ordered hierarchies of the heavenly realms: the spiritual, or intellectual, or immaterial realm, where we can behold God's love in all its purity. There Dionysios sees nine ranks of celestial beings, in three ranks of three. The highest rank (in descending order) consists of Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; the middle rank of Dominions, Powers, Authorities; the lowest rank of Principalities (in Greek: *archai*), Archangels, Angels. The names of the celestial beings are familiar, especially from the Old Testament and St Paul's epistles, and also from the Fathers of the Church. What is novel about Dionysios' presentation is the idea of three ranks of three (an idea he probably drew from neo-Platonism). Dionysios, as we shall see, is fascinated by threes, triads. This is partly because of his belief, as a Christian, in God the Trinity (whom he generally refers to as *Thearchy*, 'originating Godhead'). But there is a deeper reason: like the neo-Platonists (and this is perhaps the most important element in his affinity with them), Dionysios saw *relationship* as fundamental. Everywhere, Dionysios looks for relationship and reconciliation, and this for him implies triads: one thing, another, and what relates them. It is because of his concern for relationship, reconciliation, and being drawn into union, that his whole vision is expressed through triads.

Hierarchy

It is this idea of relationship and reconciliation that lies behind his notion of hierarchy, which does *not* primarily mean, for Dionysios, subordination of rank. Since, indeed, Dionysios himself coined the

word, we should have the grace to listen to what he meant by it, and not impose on his word a much later usage. In the *Celestial hierarchy*, Dionysios defined hierarchy thus:

Hierarchy is, as I understand it, a sacred order, knowledge and activity, which is being assimilated to God as much as possible and, in response to the illuminations that are given it by God, is raised to imitation of Him in its own measure. (*CH* III.1)

It involves order, certainly, but equally knowledge and activity, a knowledge and activity that make for union with God, that is, deification, being assimilated to God as far as is possible. Dionysios' vision of the heavenly realms (and of the whole cosmos) is of glittering hierarchies that draw us back to God, to the source of all. It is the glittering *beauty* of the cosmos that strikes Dionysios, and like Plato, he derives the Greek word for beauty, *kallos*, from the verb to call, *kalein*: for beauty calls out and draws us back to God. The beauty of the celestial beings is a pure beauty, that strikes us as fearful, awesome. As the poet Rilke put it:

For the beautiful is nothing
But the onset of the fearful, which we can just bear,
And we are amazed, because it disdains,
To destroy us. Every angel is fearful.

An awesome beauty – requiring, demanding, calling – and yet also making us hold back in fear and awe of the holy: Dionysios' idea reminds us of Rudolf Otto's idea of the holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

There is another aspect of Dionysios' understanding of hierarchy, and his fascination with triads, and that is his understanding of their activity, which operates through a threefold process of *purification*, *illumination*, and *union* (or *perfection*): hierarchy works by purifying, illuminating and leading to perfection or union, that is, deification. This is the origin of the western mediaeval notion of the 'Three Ways', the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways, but Dionysios' understanding is much broader: the whole cosmos is perceived as a threefold process leading to union with God.

Church and liturgy

If the *Celestial hierarchy* introduces the principle of hierarchy, the next treatise, the *Ecclesiastical hierarchy*, shows how this principle operates in the Church on earth, conceived of primarily as a sacramental community. The hierarchies here below do not have the simple three ranks of three we have seen in the celestial realms, and this is at least partly to do with the fact that the Church is on earth, and therefore both spiritual and material. There are two hierarchies of beings mirroring those in the heavens and they are (in ascending order), first, the clerical order of deacons, priests and bishops (though Dionysios uses a more Greek vocabulary of ministers, priests and hierarchs), and then the 'lay' order of catechumens (and others in need of purification, penitents and the possessed), the 'contemplative order' of baptized laity and monks (or servants/worshippers, *therapeutai*, a term taken from Eusebius' *Church history* II. 17, where Eusebius takes Philo's description of probably the Essenes to be an account of early Christian monks). These two orders are complemented by three rites of baptism, the Eucharist and the sacrament of consecrated oil (or chrism), presented as anterior to the two ranks of members of the Church. The picture Dionysios presents is of a mutually supportive community, in which the different ranks enable the community as a whole to fulfil its role of reaching out and drawing into union with God. Much of the *Ecclesiastical hierarchy* is concerned to explain the significance of the sacramental rites of the Church. It is not possible here to go into all this in much detail. But what is striking is the emphasis Dionysios lays on *movement*. He tells us little about vestments or decoration, though it is evident that there were images or icons marking the boundary between the sanctuary and the nave (though not separating them as with a modern iconostasis), but we learn about the movement of the sacred ministers, and even the movement of the incense swirling upwards. But the central movement is that between the nave and the sanctuary, back and forth: the movement from the sanctuary to the nave suggesting God's movement outwards in love and creation, and the movement from nave to sanctuary suggesting our return in love and union. It is this union with God and also with one another that is symbolized, that is, effected through being represented, in the sharing in the one bread of the Eucharist.

A theology of praise

But as well as movement, there are songs and prayers in the Church's liturgy, as Dionysios presents it. In our worship we praise God and sing

hymns and songs in his name. What is it to praise God? Recall the words of the psalmist: 'It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord: and to sing praises unto thy Name, O most Highest. To tell of thy loving kindness early in the morning and of thy truth in the night season . . . O Lord, how glorious are thy works; thy thoughts are very deep' (Ps 91, 92). The psalmist praises God by recounting his works, by dwelling on his qualities of goodness, loving kindness, power, and the ineffability of his plans, his providence, and by praising his Name. But Dionysios also saw himself as an heir to the religious tradition of classical Greece, where the gods were praised by reciting their qualities, their names. This leads Dionysios to unfold what it is to praise God by expounding his names. He devoted a whole treatise to this, his *Divine names*, in which he begins, first, with the names that tell us about God in himself and in his relationship to us through the Incarnation, pre-eminently the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then deals with a whole sequence of names, beginning with goodness, continuing through life, wisdom, peace, power and so on, finally ending by discussing his name as the One, or Unity.

Where do these names come from? There is no doubt that Dionysios has been influenced by the theology of divine names developed by neo-Platonic philosophers like Proklos. But Dionysios himself insists that these names come from God's works, the works that are recited in the eucharistic prayer (or the anaphora), and are themselves witnessed to in the Scriptures. These divine works (Dionysios is fond of referring to them by a compound word, *theourgia*) are the history of salvation, culminating in the Incarnation, exactly as it is expressed in the eucharistic prayer (especially in the Eastern forms, with which Dionysios would have been familiar), but in fact everything is evidence of God's works, for he is the creator of everything. Everywhere, therefore, we find names of God. But none of the names exhausts the nature of God, they only point to an aspect of his activity, for he is beyond any of his names, and transcendent over any image or concept that we may form of him. This double movement of thought – affirmation of God's manifestation and transcendence of any divine manifestation by denying or negating its ultimacy – is fundamental for Dionysios. To express it, he again borrows from the neo-Platonists and their language of *kataphatic* theology (that is, theology of affirmation) and *apophatic* theology (that is, theology of negation), asserting that apophatic theology is more ultimate, more profound, because God is always greater:

Therefore God is known in all things, and apart from all things; and God is known by knowing and by unknowing . . . He is none of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; he is all things in everything and nothing in anything; he is known to all from all things and to no-one from anything. (*DN* 7.3)

The act of negation of qualities of God does not mean that God lacks these qualities, but that he transcends them: to deny that God is good is not to assert that he is bad, but that he transcends any conception we might have of goodness. Sometimes Dionysios calls this 'negation of negation': in this case, negation of both the propositions, 'God is good' and 'God is not good', thereby acknowledging the transcendent reality of God. Another example can be found in his assertion that God is both light and darkness: negating both we assert, with Henry Vaughan, that God is a 'dazzling darkness', the darkness of a light that overwhelms because it is an excess of light.

'Mystical' theology

There is in God (some say)
A deep but dazzling darkness

Those lines of Henry Vaughan are a good introduction to the last, and briefest, treatise by Dionysios, the *Mystical theology*, as it is usually known, though the title it was given in the Middle English translation by the author of the *Cloud of unknowing* is more accurate: *Hid Divinitie*. Here Dionysios speaks, not about the rich detail of the human response to God's call and self-manifestation: that is the subject of the other treatises, which expound the notion of hierarchy, how this hierarchical activity operates among human kind and the nature of God revealed in his names. Here he goes beyond this to reflect on the nature of the process of deification itself: the hidden meaning, so to speak, of what he is concerned with in all his treatises.

In the *Mystical theology*, Dionysios makes two striking remarks:

So the divine Bartholomew says that the whole of theology is very brief, and the Gospel broad and deep and also cut short, to me it seems that this was a transcendent thought, that the good cause of all is spoken of at once in a multitude of words, and also very briefly and without words at all (*MT* 1.3). There [in the earlier treatises] the word descended from above to the lower and the further it descended the broader it became; now, going up from below to the transcendent, the more it ascends the more it is constricted until it becomes completely mute and is completely united to the ineffable (*MT* 3).

It is a matter of an ascent into silent wonder, in silence united with the ineffable God, who is the cause of that wonder. The *Mystical theology* has often been read in the West in isolation from the other treatises (and some modern Orthodox theologians, such as Meyendorff and Schmemmann, have followed this example), with the result that Dionysios is seen as the archetype of the solitary mystic, rapt from the world in ecstatic contemplation. But this is not what Dionysios meant by the 'mystical'. He goes to great pains to make clear the unity of his whole work (summarizing it in the *Mystical theology* before the second quotation above). What he is concerned with in the *Mystical theology* is, it seems to me, the *inner* (or *hidden*) *meaning* of the life lived in praise of God: a meaning discovered through participation in the eucharistic liturgy and in the Christian community, including its outreach to those not yet touched by the vision of God. This is something open to everyone, as the inner reality of what it is to respond to God's call mediated through the Incarnation, the Scriptures, the beauty of the liturgy, and indeed the beauty of the whole cosmos.

Dionysios provided much of the terminology for later western 'mysticism', as we have seen, but it seems to me that he was misunderstood when his *Mystical theology* was isolated from the rest of the Areopagitical corpus, the individual isolated from the community and indeed from the cosmos (for hierarchy is, for Dionysios, a cosmic principle before it becomes an ecclesiological one), and the 'mystic' turned into a solitary, often opposed to the community of the Church, a kind of religious expert, different from the ordinary run of Christians. That, it seems to me, was not Dionysios' message at all. Rather he had a cosmic vision, in which to be is to be loved by God and to be a vehicle of his love, a love which is lovely in the sense of beautiful, drawing us by wonder back to union with God, and in God with all our fellow human beings, indeed all our fellow creatures. This is a much larger vision that we need to recover: the real message of the mysterious Dionysios the Areopagite, rightly, I think, called the 'Divine Denys'.

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