

# Colloquium Dionysiacum

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## Summaries

Ari Ojell (Helsinki), The ethical significance of the divine names from Gregory of Nyssa to Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita

The presentation is an analytic, comparative survey on the issue of the ethical significance of the divine names in Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. In Gregory, it can relatively easily be shown, the names that are derived from the divine operation and apply, therefore, to something that can be known concerning (peri) the divine nature even as there can be no knowledge of God according (kata) to his essence, have a distinctive ethical significance for a man who is created “in the image and likeness of God” and is called, as Gregory has learned from St. Paul, into “imitation of God” through the “imitation of Christ”. In *Divine Names*, Dionysius refers to “returning to him [God] in imitation as far as possible” in a process where the “power of the divine similarity returns all created things toward their Cause”: the things drawn toward God are then reckoned to be “similar to God by reason of the divine image and likeness”. Besides this somewhat “cosmic” and impersonal reference to divine likeness and imitation of God, does Dionysius see any more particularly or “properly” ethical value in the divine names he discusses, a value that would manifest itself in the moral decisions of the human agents, active in realizing their “likeness” in the divine image? What continuities and discontinuities there are between Gregory and Dionysius in the issue?

Anniken Johansen (Oslo), Dionysius the Areopagite and the Origenist movement

In this paper I will explore whether there are parallels between certain aspects of Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierachy* and an Origenist work such as *Book of the Holy Hierotheos*. A conspicuous feature of the earliest Syriac reception of *Corpus Areopagiticum* is that the relevant characters were all dedicated to the Origenist movement. A question that arises is whether this also indicates that Dionysius could have been affiliated with an Origenist milieu himself and his work influenced by this teaching. I presume Dionysius knows about *Book of the Holy Hierotheos* (probably written by an Origenist monk, Stephen Bar Sudhaili) and is refuting some of the Origenistic doctrines there. *Book of the Holy Hierotheos* tells of the ascent of mind through and beyond many levels of intellects before its arrival at the Good from where it fell. *The Book* has many similarities with the *Angelic hierachy*, and scholars have in the past thought it to be written after the *Hierarchy* and dependent on it. This paper will argue for that it is more logical to consider Dionysius to have created the *Hierarchy* after bar Sudhaili’s *Book* and to have written it as a direct response to the *Book*.

Emiliano Fiori (Bologna), The topic of mixture as a philosophical key to the understanding of the *Divine Names*: Dionysius and the Origenist monk Stephen bar Sudaili

Thanks to Sergius of Resh’ayna’s Syriac translation of Dionysius’ works, a substratum emerges from the Semitic language which was not evident in the Greek, and allows to fruitfully compare the Areopagite’s Syriac text to other relevant *testimonia* stemming from a

Syriac milieu. The common topic around which all these texts can be compared is that of mixture, already a major Proclusian but also Evagrius' theme.

1) In a letter to two Edessenian priests, the Syriac bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523) warned about the danger represented by the heresy of a monk, Stephen bar Sudaili, who maintained the idea of an eschatological radical union of all creatures with God *by essence and nature*, and of the final passing away of the differences between the divine persons themselves. This kind of union, Philoxenus said, is nothing else than a confusion; this idea would have been inspired to Stephen by Evagrius' eschatological doctrines.

2) The other Syriac key-text is the *Book of the Holy Hierotheus* attributed by a long tradition to the same Stephen, and actually containing a doctrine which is quite similar to that condemned by Philoxenus. This book is commonly dated to the midst of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, it is than surely posterior to the *Areopagitica*, whose first public appearance was at the *collatio cum severianis* in Constantinople, 532. The new element in the *Book* as regards the presentation of Stephen's doctrine given by Philoxenus is that the final condition of rational creatures is technically described as a mixture with God, which is explicitly considered superior to the simple union.

3) The study of Dionysius' Syriac translation of the *Divine Names* leads to the remark that, in the Areopagite's text, the concept of union and that of confusion in God and between the creatures are sharply opposed, as if Dionysius had been sensible to Philoxenus' warning; and this opposition is obtained by exploiting the polarity between two different concepts of mixture, the good one (*krasis*), identified with the cosmological (and not eschatological) union of creatures, and the bad one (*mixis*), identified with confusion. Now, the Syriac term identifying the bad mixture is exactly the same as that denoting the supreme mixture in the *Book of Hierotheus*.

What we will try to argue in our paper is that Dionysius actually taken up Philoxenus' warning, and elaborated the polarity of mixture as an instrument to neutralize Stephen's radical interpretation of Evagrius' doctrine of the eschatological mixture, by opposing to it the Proclusian concept of good mixture as union *without* confused mixture, a concept which worked in Proclus, and does work in Dionysius, as the pivotal element not of an eschatological, but of a metaphysical equilibrium which will not be deleted in the *eschaton*.

Torstein T. Tollefsen (Oslo), "The Doctrine of Creation according to Dionysius the Areopagite"

In the fifth century an orthodox doctrine of creation would normally hold (i) that the world is created by a distinctive act of divine will, (ii) that it is created out of nothing, (iii) and that it is created in such a way that it has a temporal beginning for its existence a definite number of time-units ago. Measured by such measures, it does not seem that Dionysius has an orthodox doctrine of creation. I will try to show how this is, and ask for critique of my position.

Ivan Christov (Sofia), The Two-Level Emanation of Divinity and the Plurality in Mystical Vision

An attempt at distinguishing two levels of emanation in *DN* (cap. II, IV and V) will be made. The first of them generates the Divine ideas and leaves them at a state of *mone*. The second, turns them into eternal reasons of creation which are still within the Divine Mind, "before" and not correlated to it. Against this background the distinction of *causal* and *superlative* Divine names will be reassessed and further parallels with Proclus' *Theologia Platonis* and *The Commentary on "Parmenides"* will be made. It is this distinction that explains the particular nature of *agnōsia* and the plurality in mystical vision.

Václav Němec: Übernahme und Umdeutung der neuplatonischen Metaphysik der „gestuften Transzendenz“ bei Dionysios

Der Vortrag befasst sich mit der Art und Weise, auf die Dionysios Areopagites die neuplatonische bzw. Proklische Metaphysik der „gestuften Transzendenz“ in sein theologisches Konzept integriert. Die Aufmerksamkeit wird vor allem der Schrift *De divinis nominibus* gewidmet, wo die affirmative Theologie im Anschluss an die Proklische Exegese der zweiten Hypothese des Platonischen *Parmenides* entwickelt wird. Es soll insbesondere untersucht und gezeigt werden, wie Dionysios das Proklische System der hierarchischen Seinsordnungen entsprechend der christlichen Theologie umdeutet, indem er den ganzen in sich gestuften göttlichen Bereich des Seins, Lebens, Denkens *etc.* in Gott bzw. in das Eine selbst hineinnimmt und die einzelnen Seinsstufen zugleich als die „Hervorgänge“ dieses Einen Gottes in die Welt hinein betrachtet, welche als verschiedene Attribute der in sich differenzlosen „übergeinten Einheit“ insofern unterschieden werden können, als Geschöpfe an ihnen teilnehmen.

Lenka Karfíková (Praha), „Der Alte der Tage“. Gott als Zeit nach *DDN* 10,2-3 vor dem Hintergrund des platonischen *Parmenides*.

Der Beitrag erörtert den Namen „der Alte der Tage“ (*Dan.* 7,9), der eine interessante Kollage des biblischen und des neuplatonischen Stoffes enthält. Es wird allgemein vorausgesetzt, dass Dionysios in seinen *Göttlichen Namen* das Eine der ersten und der zweiten Hypothese des proklischen *Parmenides*-Kommentar verbinden wollte, um vom christlichen Gott auf dem Weg der negativen bzw. positiven Theologie sprechen zu können. Der Name „der Alte der Tage“, der in Dionysios' Deutung die Benennung Gottes als Ewigkeit und *Zeit* ermöglicht, ist daher interessant als Beleg, dass die angeblich „intelligiblen“ göttlichen Namen der beiden ersten Ebenen der proklischen Hierarchie nicht ganz konsequent entsprechen und wahrscheinlich auch auf keine Ontologie ausgerichtet sind, sondern eine Theorie der *Aussagen* von der Gottheit aufgrund ihrer Wirkung entwickeln wollen. In den Ausführungen Dionysios' wird zugleich eine von der neuplatonischen abweichende Auffassung der Zeit spürbar.

Staae Johannes Kristiansen (Bergen), Iconic participation. Dionysius' symbolic theology and its relevance for the art historical discourse on interpretation of pictures.

In this paper I will present one of the main themes and results from my doctoral dissertation, which will be completed just a few months after our colloquium in Prague. In my dissertation I try to show that most historians of early Christian and medieval art to put all emphasis on the Areopagite's *positive* thinking on icon and symbol, disregarding his more negative icon theology – the discussion on similar and dissimilar similarities in DN 9.7 and CH 2-3 etc. Although I give a positive evaluation of the emphasis these historians put on the importance of his positive thinking on symbols, at the same time I try to show how this more positive icon theology must be viewed in dialectic with his radical apophaticism. In fact I am suggesting that this negative foundation was and is necessary for developing a positive theology on icons. My point here is that the central *dialectic* between cataphatic and apophatic theology in *Corpus Areopagiticum* makes Dionysius an even more interesting figure for the art historical field. Not just in understanding medieval and byzantine icon theology, but even more in the postmodern discourse on how to approach images – the question of meaning and truth in images.

As part of this project, I hope in this paper to give a reflection on the methodological principle of *hymnein* i DN, the so called “third way” in the dionysian dialectics. I will try to develop the argument that sees this method as an “aesthetic” alternative to more conceptualizing theologies (“Scripture and hierarchical tradition cover the truths of the mind with things derived from the realm of the senses.” 592B-C). As textual starting point I have chosen DN 1.1-4, Dionysius’ introduction to his book on the names. Here he underlines that we must “not dare to apply words or conceptions to this hidden transcendent God”; and at the same time he says that God or the Good is “not absolutely incommunicable”. God communicates with us and makes possible participation through what we could call a language of images.

I will try to actualize Dionysius’ hymnic method in relation to postmodern theories of the relation between beholder and image. Here, as in my more general thesis, I relate to Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological interpretations of the Areopagite, especially his distinction between *idol* and *icon*. The interesting momentum here is what one could call *iconic participation*. What role is there between activity and passivity in this participation?

Jaroslav Rytíř (Prague), Is there any idolatry of mind?

It was on more occasions that modern theologians found Dionysius to mark the way of releasing the true theology from the traditions of philosophies or theologies, this way coinciding more or less definitely with that of the negative theology. Professor Marion compares the release of theology to the recovery from idolatry. He conforms to the Fathers when recognizing the thrust for idolatry working deep in human minds, being brought into effect not only with desires of affective life but also with intentions of cognitive activity. Marion’s recognition originates with his critique of Cartesian and ultimately of any subject-centred, even Dasein-centred, philosophy, so it is the cogitatio that he considers as the exemplar for, so to say, idolatry of mind and the cogitata, correlative and immanent to the cognitive activity of mind, as that for mental idols. Leaving aside his interpretations of modern philosophy, I will follow Marion’s view of idolatry back in Dionysius’ theology that also distinguished itself from „the philosophical misuse of the divine gifts“, however it is a different philosophy Dionysius was seeking to get over. I will argue that, in Dionysius’ view, idolatry can only pertain to the doxastic mind, fallen and self-reaffirming, either yielding to persuasion or methodically substantiated by virtue of the dialectics. There is as little place for that in the Dionysian elevation of soul and church as for the opinions, even for the right ones. That is why the theological negation is not intended to suspend any human and possibly idolatrous concepts – the affirmation has not introduced any. Intelligible to human minds, the divine names to which the negation applies still do not represent a conceptual achievement but make the intermediate or revelatory part of the divine self-presentation, while on the other side, repeated, expounded and understood by the initiates, they turn into a theological hymnology. That is where Jean-Luc Marion can indeed see a convergence with his theory of saturated phenomena.

Gorazd Kociančič (Ljubljana), The Name of God and the name of the Author

The first part of the presentation shall attempt to question the ontology of contemporary scientific historiography and hermeneutics, which dominate the modern understanding of Dionysius’ identity and still represent the most common and basic horizon for the interpretation of his works. In the second part it is argued that the crucial question of the identity of Dionysius - and also the question of our genuine understanding of the text of the treatise *On Divine Names* - can be approached only by and through complete philosophical reversal,

in which a specific textually-structured "identity" (*tautótes*) of >divine name< becomes a key to our understanding of the author's historicity.