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*Cover:* Detail of a map by Nicolas Sanson D'Abbeville, Paris 1665. Finnish Institute at Athens

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# From Chaos to Cosmos – Interpreting the Hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius

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It has been said that the ancient Greek philosophers were in a constant search for unchangeable structures in an ever-changing, chaotic world.<sup>1</sup> Thus, some thinkers postulated a certain ἀρχή, a kind of starting point explaining things on earth, while others presupposed eternal and unchangeable ideas, etc. In the early sixth century AD, a corpus of hitherto unknown writings, later called the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, was mentioned for the first time,<sup>2</sup> in which the longing for fixed structures reached a new culmination. The opinions of the unknown author, often called Pseudo-Dionysius, were dominant in the Christian world for a whole millennium, and his ideas can still be seen in church architecture and iconography in Europe. One reason for this success was that the author was believed to have apostolic authority, since he was regarded as an Athenian convert of St. Paul<sup>3</sup> and was known also as Dionysius the Areopagite (Fig. 11).<sup>4</sup>

## The single centre of the universe

The logical starting point for St. Dionysius was, typically enough, simultaneously theological and philosophical. He postulated an utterly transcendent principle, a logical necessity, often called God by the peoples of the world, but by St. Dionysius preferably named τὸ Ἐν, the One, or sometimes τὸ Καλόν. This One can be compared to the centre of a circle, as it does not exist in the usual sense of the word but its postulation is nevertheless necessary.<sup>5</sup> The centre explains the circle, and possible concentric circles, and this is how Pseudo-Dionysius brings order into the universe. Whatever exists in the intelligible or physical world, all are defined by their position

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<sup>1</sup> E. Stenius, *Tänkens gryning*, Helsingfors 1975<sup>2</sup>, 20 - 21. Erik Stenius was Professor of Philosophy from 1949 to 1963 at Åbo Akademi, the Swedish-speaking University of Turku, and from 1963 to 1974 at the University of Helsinki.

<sup>2</sup> *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta* 4:2, 172. J. Alberigo et al (cur.), Bologna 1973.

<sup>3</sup> *Acts* 17, 34.

<sup>4</sup> P.E. Rorem, s.v. Dionysius the Areopagite, and J. Dillon, s.v. Mysticism, in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown, & O. Grabar (eds.), Cambridge MA and London 1999, 410-411 and 599-600. The basic study on Pseudo-Dionysius is still R. Roques, *L'univers dionysien: Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le pseudo-Denys*, Paris 1954.

<sup>5</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 2, 5.



Fig. 11. Dionysius the Areopagite, a detail from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century wall painting in the narthex of the church of The Presentation of The Virgin, in the Monastery of Kaisariani, near Athens.

in relation to the One. To put it another way, they are all situated in concentric circles closer to or further from the centre. Everything in existence thus has its given place in the structure around the One. Consequently, the One is called the source of all unity.<sup>6</sup> This expression reveals unquestionably that Pseudo-Dionysius, like the ancient philosophers, is in search of cosmic order, or to put it differently, in search of cosmos in a world of chaos. The One is also called *ἐνοποιὸς δύναμις*,<sup>7</sup> unifying power, bringing forth the same longing for order. An analogy from nature serves St. Dionysius' purposes, too. The One is like the sun: it explains everything, it gives life to everything, for example to a plant, but from our world of living beings, e.g. from a plant, one can never deduce what the sun is like. The One enlightens all beings in proportion to their nature.<sup>8</sup> This analogy emphasizes once again the unknowability of the One, but also the necessity of its (utterly different) existence.

## The structure of the universe

From the principle of a single centre of the universe, Pseudo-Dionysius advances towards an explanation of the structure of the universe, firstly by the aforementioned idea of concentric circles, having the One as their coordinating feature. But one more factor must be added in order to give the ordered universe a Dionysian structure: the principle of the holy number *τρία*. Each concentric circle consists, as it were, of three entities, structured in this way by the influence of the One. The Christian doctrine of a

<sup>6</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 1,1.

<sup>7</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 1,4.

<sup>8</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 1,2.



triune God, a doctrine clearly expressed as early as the second century,<sup>9</sup> certainly influenced St. Dionysius in structuring the universe in the way he did, but it does not explain why everything else, in addition to the Godhead, must be structured into groups of three. Beginning from the highest point of the hierarchy there is, then, the triune God. The Three-in-One is thus the single feature that it is possible to affirm positively about the One, which, beyond this point, is unknowable altogether. The borderline between an apophatic (negative) and a cataphatic (affirmative) theology thus runs between the One and the Trinity. In other words, nothing higher can ever be stated of God than He is triune, but many lower and less appropriate things can of course be said of Him.

From the Trinity downwards, Pseudo-Dionysius continues the division of all things into units of three. The angels closest to God are divided into three choirs: Cherubs, Seraphs and Thrones. The next grouping of three angelic orders consists of Dominations, Virtues, and Powers. Closest to the world of human beings we find Principalities, Archangels and Angels. All these names of angelic beings can no doubt be found in the Holy Scriptures, but certainly not in this three-times-three arrangement of choirs. A systematist has been at work, endeavoring to organize beings where there was previously no arrangement.

The heavenly hierarchy described above has a parallel on earth, a visible image of the invisible world. This hierarchy on earth is described in Dionysius' treatise *de ecclesiastica hierarchia*. As the title suggests, the structure continues in the Church, visible and weakened, but nevertheless it continues, based again on the holy number three. Interestingly enough, it is not a high ecclesiastical dignitary who has the seat of honour in this structure. In 5<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantium, the Patriarch of Constantinople was certainly temptingly at hand, but the closest link between the heavenly hierarchy and its earthly counterpart is not a person at all, but a sacrament. The fragrance of myrrh, the Eucharist and baptism constitute the first and highest triad of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Only then come ecclesiastical dignitaries: the bishop first, then the presbyters, followed by the liturgists, that is, the deacons. Since the ecclesiastical hierarchy reflects the heavenly, it must also consist of three-times-three classes. The ecclesiastical hierarchy therefore continues with three more: the monks, ordinary lay Christians and the catechumens. This weighty construction of hierarchies provides a structure to all that is of importance in Dionysius' world. It could be called a worldwide web, or rather a universe-wide network, but lacking the chaotic nature of present-day data information.

From an ideological point of view, Pseudo-Dionysius has made maximum use of a Neoplatonic structure, which was both hierarchical and built on triads as is the Dionysian hierarchy. From an ontological point of view the structure is Neoplatonic. Dionysius, however, has communicated this structure to his 5-6<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine contemporaries, who lived in a world where the Church was the centre of life and the bishop the centre of the Church. The system of Proclus, the Athenian Neoplatonist, has been modified to explain the world in which most Byzantines lived. There was no place whatever for the Church in Proclus' system of triads, but Dionysius provided a theoretical model where the Church was legitimately the centre of the empirical world, and the bishop the unquestioned authority he actually was.

<sup>9</sup> The term *τριάς* occurs for the first time in *ad autolyicum* 2,15 by Theophilus of Antioch, a second-century apologist.

## Distribution network

The hierarchies, however, serve many more purposes than that of an explanation of the present situation in Byzantine reality. In the way they are presented by Dionysius they may with good reason be called a distribution network. They are not ends in themselves, but they have a function. The distribution, it seems, is primarily in just one direction, from the top downwards. Many things could, theoretically, be imagined to flow down in this way through the hierarchies. If the structure were of military nature, orders and duties could be distributed thus. If it was mainly an ontological structure, real being, that is, existence, could be delivered along these distribution lines. Dionysius' emphasis, though, is elsewhere. He speaks of God's goodness flowing over.<sup>10</sup> This overproduction of goodness is distributed from higher beings to lower ones. The distributors vary, the contents always being the same. Other things besides goodness are distributed too, though they clearly belong to the same category of entities. Thus, light and love are also said to be transmitted through the hierarchies.<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius could also have said that the hierarchies transmit grace, salvation and other typically Christian values. But he prefers expressions from a foreign ideology, intelligible also to Christians. From a Neoplatonic structure of an ontological nature, Pseudo-Dionysius has made a rather weighty but comprehensible system for the delivery of spiritual gifts of all kinds. The hierarchies provide us with the story of how God blessed the Byzantine man, through angels, sacraments and the ministry of the Church, a story presented in Neoplatonic terminology and structures. From the Unknown God – an Athenian concept! – the flow progresses down to the local church, unbroken, though somewhat weakened by the long journey.

## The idea of hierarchy

Pseudo-Dionysius, a lover of neologisms, created a new word *ἱεραρχία* for the structure he had conceived. He was in fact obsessed by words from the stem *ἄρχ-*, and made frequent use of them. His term designating a bishop, *ἱεράρχης*, was in itself not quite new, since it had already been used in the Eleusinian mysteries – again a link between Pseudo-Dionysius and Athens – but he introduced the word into Christian usage. The bishop is the most important human being in the hierarchy. His position within this structure, between the angels and mysteries on the one side, and the congregation with all its dignitaries on the other, certainly aimed at increasing his significance, legitimizing at the same time the honour and wealth (of all kinds) he already enjoyed. But the very idea of a hierarchy maintains that no-one can simply enjoy their position. A position is a call to action. To expound on this theme, Pseudo-Dionysius again utilizes a Neoplatonic concept, that of a three-fold movement, or, perhaps better, of the three-fold status of each member of the hierarchy. Everyone has his or her own

<sup>10</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 2,11.

<sup>11</sup> *de coelesti hierarchia* 3,2; *de divinis nominibus* 4,13. As for love, Pseudo-Dionysius cautiously prefers the (Neoplatonic) term *ἔρως* to (the Johannine) *ἀγάπη*, well aware of the opposition he encounters from many Christians. For Pseudo-Dionysius, Eros is not a poor demon or demigod lacking everything, as in Plato's Symposium. Eros is an aspect of God himself when creating and taking care of all that exists.



identity; the act of exercising one's own identity is called by St. Dionysius *μονή*, remaining. The task of all is to take care of those lower in the hierarchical structure. This care-taking activity is called *πρόοδος*, that is, procession. This term is not, then, to designate any kind of progress, it is, on the contrary, a movement downwards in order to assist others. Therefore Pseudo-Dionysius can characterize it as a *φιλάνθρωπος πρόοδος*, an act of philanthropy.<sup>12</sup> A bishop pastoring his congregation makes *πρόοδος* from his own privileged position on behalf of his flock. But, the mission being completed, he returns to his own level, to his own identity. This return to one's own level is called *ἐπιστροφή* by Pseudo-Dionysius. Christ himself is, of course, the ultimate example of this three-fold movement: the pre-existence in heaven is the *μονή*, the incarnation the *πρόοδος*, and the ascension back to heaven the *ἐπιστροφή*. According to this system, nobody can live exclusively for himself, but has to act *προνοητικῶς*, like Providence towards others. The hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius thus have a strongly ethical character, containing an agenda for each and everyone.

When the hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius are understood Neoplatonically, an aspect other than the philanthropic is at issue: the hierarchies are considered from the point of view of mysticism, the obligation of every human being to ascend to God and become deified. This programme of ascension towards God, so central in Byzantine devotion, is certainly central in the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius too, but the question is how it fits into the system. All movement within the hierarchical structure seems to be either a preservation of the status quo, *μονή*, or a downward movement, *πρόοδος*. Nevertheless, Pseudo-Dionysius even claims that the mystical *θέωσις* is the *raison d'être* of the whole hierarchical structure. He writes, "The aim of the hierarchy is the likeness and union with God..."<sup>13</sup> and makes use of an analogy from nature. All living beings turn towards the sun, each one in its own way. In the same way all beings in Creation turn towards God, also the centre and origin of everything.<sup>14</sup> We could say that the light and warmth of the sun reach men through the intermediation of the hierarchies, and thus men become motivated to begin their journey towards God. The Dionysian hierarchical structure provides the means for mystical ascent, but it is not a description of this ascent.

From the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius in general, and from the hierarchies in particular, a programme of ecclesiastical art and architecture is easily deduced. It is hard to say whether Pseudo-Dionysius himself regarded his theological writings in this way, but his text itself offers itself for this purpose. This is more particularly so since the texts are strongly liturgical, placing their reader within a Byzantine church, as it were, and as participants of the liturgical drama conducted there. Although the church of Dionysius the Areopagite in Athens<sup>15</sup> has wall paintings with themes from the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, it is only partially realized according to Pseudo-Dionysian theology as far as art and architecture are concerned. True, the lowest levels of the walls are dedicated to images of the lowest categories of the Dionysian hierarchies. The bishops are placed higher and the angels still higher, but this is traditional, not

<sup>12</sup> *de ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3.

<sup>13</sup> *de coelesti hierarchia* 3,2: Σκοπὸς οὖν ἱεραρχίας ἐστὶν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσις τε καὶ ἐνωσις...

<sup>14</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 8,8.

<sup>15</sup> The only church in Athens dedicated to Dionysius the Areopagite is situated on Skoufa street 34, in Kolonaki. The current building is from the 1850s.



particularly Dionysian. From Pseudo-Dionysius' theory of similar and dissimilar symbols it can be concluded that the upper levels of a church should be covered with dissimilar symbols, and by ever increasing light. The forty windows in the cupola of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople are much closer to the intentions of Pseudo-Dionysius than is the Athenian church dedicated to him.

### An optimistic cosmos

The hierarchical structure created by Pseudo-Dionysius is filled with light and harmony; it presents a cosmos. It is timeless, too, in a sense, since it is concentrated on beholding the eternal liturgy of Cherubs and Seraphs before God. Alluding to the words of Pseudo-Dionysius himself, this hierarchical world has been called γανυμένη, smiling.<sup>16</sup> This world of his is, admittedly, deeply optimistic. Even Evil itself belongs to the system, occupying the lowest part of the hierarchical construction.<sup>17</sup> He takes little notice of the disharmony and innumerable problems encountered by Byzantine man. The empirical world plays at most a subordinate role. Neither the holy Byzantine state, nor its emperor, is mentioned in the whole of *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Rather, it presents a universe, an orderly cosmos, as it appears when meditating and celebrating within the walls of a Byzantine basilica. It has an atmosphere filled with symbolism, with the singing of hymns, with the scent of holy incense. For those taking part it provides a rationalization, both philosophical and theological, of the existing state of affairs, it explains the world and provides the faithful with a programme for action within that world.

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<sup>16</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 12,3: Καὶ γὰρ ἐξ αὐτῆς (τῆς αἰτίας ὧν, τὸν Θεὸν) ἐν ἐνὶ καὶ ἀθρόως ἐκπέφυκε καὶ διανεμένηται πᾶσα ἀμιγῆς ἀκρίβεια πάσης εἰλικρινοῦς καθαρότητος, πᾶσα ἡ τῶν ὄντων διάταξις τε καὶ διακόσμησις ἀναρμοστίαν καὶ ἀνισότητα καὶ ἀσυμμετρίαν ἐξαρίζουσα καὶ εἰς τὴν εὐτακτον ταυτότητα καὶ ὀρθότητα γανυμένη καὶ περιάγουσα τὰ μετέχειν αὐτῆς ἡξιωμένα . . . From it (the Cause of everything, God) has come every law and ranking of all things which gets rid of all disharmony, inequality, and disproportion, which rejoices in well-ordered consistency and rightness.

<sup>17</sup> *de divinis nominibus* 4,19: Καὶ ἔσται τὸ κακὸν εἰς τὴν τοῦ παντὸς συμπλήρωσιν συντελοῦν καὶ τῷ ὅλῳ τὸ μὴ ἀτελὲς εἶναι δι' ἑαυτὸ παρεχόμενον.

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