PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. XIV

GRAPTA POIKILA II

Saints and Heroes

edited by
Leena Pietilä-Castrén and Vesa Vahtikari

HELSINKI 2008

ISSN 1237-2684
ISBN 978-951-98806-9-3

Printed in Finland by Ekenäs Tryckeri.

Cover: Reverse of a Sicyonian coin from the reign of Caracalla 202–205.

Layout: Vesa Vahtikari

Contents

The Doctrine of Creation according to Dionysius the Areopagite

Torstein Theodor Tollefsen

In this article I shall discuss Dionysius the Areopagite's doctrine of creation. This doctrine shows that the Areopagite's thought was deeply shaped by Neoplatonic philosophy. One might think this problematic from the point of view of orthodox Christianity. However, this is not necessarily the case, even though it could be so in relation to the topic of creation. The primary object of this investigation is to discuss Dionysian cosmology as it is found in the written *corpus*. I will, however, try to point out which adjustments could be made to adapt Dionysius' doctrine to an orthodox system of thought if such an adaptation is necessary. I do not follow this procedure for apologetic reasons, but because important representatives of orthodoxy in Late Antiquity accepted his teachings as sound. First and foremost St. Maximus the Confesssor. Whether Dionysius himself would have accepted these adjustments, remains an open question.

If the Dionysian *corpus* belongs to the last decades of the fifth century, there are reasons to state that the author did not have an orthodox Christian doctrine of creation. Before we move on we should ask what would be required of a doctrine of creation in the fifth century to be understood as "orthodox". In the first instance one should expect it to be consistent with the teaching of the Creed. The Creed professes that the Father is the Creator of heaven and earth, of all things both seen and unseen (*ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων*), and, further, that all things came to be through the Son of God the Father (*δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο*). In several texts Dionysius clearly states that God is the Creator of all things other than God. God, he says, "bestows being on the essences, and brings forth the totality of essences" (*δωρεῖται δὲ τὸ εἶναι τοῖς οὖσι καὶ παράγει τὰς ὅλας οὐσίας*).[1] The basic idea is clearly that God is the sole origin of all beings, and to this extent Dionysius is in agreement with the Creed. The same is true when he says that God "makes all things, perfects all things, holds all things together, converts all things" (*πάντα ποιεῖ, πάντα τελειοῖ, πάντα συνέχει, πάντα ἐπιστρέφει*).[2] Dionysius, clearly, remains on the safe side. In a third text it is said that the straight motion of God means both (i) the procession of His activities (energies) and (ii) "the coming-into-being of the whole encompass of things from Him" (*τὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τῶν ὅλων γένεσιν*).[3] Dionysius is obviously in agreement with the conciliar definition if we cling to the rather weak interpretation given above that the whole world of intelligible and sensible beings have

---

[1] *De divinis nominibus* (= hereafter *DN*) 2.11, *PG* 3.649b. I have used the text from *PG* 3 and B.R. Suchla (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum* I. *De divinis nominibus* (Patristische Texte und Studien 33), Berlin 1990. I have consulted three translations: C.E. Rolt (transl.), *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, London 1986 (first published 1920); B.R. Siechler (transl.), *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: Die Namen Gottes* (Bibliothek der Griechischen Literatur 26), Stuttgart 1988 and C. Luibheid (transl.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (The Classics of Western Spirituality 54), New York 1987.

[2] *DN* 4.10, *PG* 3.708a–b.

[3] *DN* 9.9, *PG* 3.916c.

The mosque of Fetihie Çami at the northwest corner of the Roman Agora was used as the Church of Dionysius the Areopagite during the short Venetian presence in Athens in 1687–1688.

their sole origin in God. On the other hand, the wording of the Creed is rather sparse, and it could be interpreted in a much stronger sense than as above.

In the fifth century a specifically Christian doctrine of creation would need to fulfil three further requirements to be in agreement with an orthodox interpretation of the Creed. These are: (i) God created out of His own free will; (ii) He did not create out of some eternally pre-existent substance, and (iii) He created the world (matter and form) in the way that it had a temporal beginning. The last requirement means that the world has existed for a limited span of time and that it began to exist, let us say, a definite number of years ago.

It is not easy to say when these requirements first originated. However, they were made explicit by some of the central figures of the orthodox tradition of the fourth to the fifth centuries: Athanasius, Basil the Great, Ambrose and Augustine.

St. Athanasius' doctrine of creation may be gathered from his treatises *Oratio contra gentes* (*CG*), *Oratio de incarnatione verbi* (*De incarn.*) and *Orationes contra Arianos* (*CA*). The first two treatises seem to be two parts of a single work. The *CG* contains refutations of pagan ideas on the divine and argues that monotheism is the only reasonable religion. Once St. Athanasius has established the existence of the one God, he moves on in the *De incarn.* to show that the world originated from this God. He criticises the view that God created the world from "pre-existent and ungenerated matter"

(ἐκ προϋποκειμένης καὶ ἀγενήτου ὕλης).[4] God should not be likened to a human carpenter who, in his weakness, needs wood to be able to make something. Those who think that God was in need of pre-existent material in order to create, viz. the Platonists, impute weakness to God. According to St. Athanasius, the Christian doctrine of creation precludes the existence of pre-existent and uncreated matter. In the *CA* he completes the picture. The world is a divine work (ποιήμα) and as such it was made when God willed it to be. It had not existed for all eternity, but was created out of non-being and obviously had a temporal beginning.[5] Taken together, we see that according to Athanasius, the Christian doctrine of creation should meet the three requirements outlined above.

The same is seen, maybe even more clearly, in the *In hexaemeron* of St. Basil. The creative power of God was not bounded by just one world, but could extend infinitely, he asserts. As it is, however, God, by His will alone, brought this, our world, into being.[6] It seems that God, according to St. Basil, *freely* imposed limits on Himself and in so doing made just one world. St. Basil explicitly denies that the world was created out of uncreated matter. The matter and the form of the world were created together.[7] The world, furthermore, has not existed for eternity; it had a temporal beginning. This is brought forward in the following words:[8]

> You may know the epoch when the formation of this world began, if, ascending into the past, you endeavour to discover the first day. You will thus find what was the first movement of time; then that the creation of the heavens and of the earth were like the foundation and the groundwork [...].

When it is said that "In the beginning God created", it should be taken in the sense of "in this beginning according to time" (ἐν ἀρχῇ ταύτῃ τῇ κατὰ χρόνον).[9] The world is perishable or transitory, because that which has a temporal beginning shall come to an end in time, St. Basil says.[10]

I shall not go into details of the doctrines of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, because they teach essentially the same as St. Basil.[11]

Dionysius does not do justice to all of these requirements. There is no clear notion of the divine will or freedom (the first requirement) in the Dionysian writings; rather the creation of the world seems to follow by some kind of necessity from the nature of God. Whether there is in fact some necessity involved will be discussed below. On the other

---

[4] Cf. R.W. Thomson (ed. and transl.), *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, Oxford 1971, 138.
[5] *CA* 1.29, *PG* 26.72.
[6] *In hex*. 1.2, *PG* 29.8c.
[7] *In hex*. 2.2, *PG* 29.29c–32b.
[8] *In hex*. 1.6, *PG* 29.16b. Translation in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* II.8, Edinburgh 1895.
[9] *In hex.* 1.5, *PG* 29.13c.
[10] *In hex*. 1.3, *PG* 29.106.
[11] For St. Ambrose, cf. the first books of his *Hexameron*. St. Augustine treats the creation of the world in several of his works. Cf. the *Confessions* book 11 and *De civitate Dei* books 11 and 12. It is often held that the distinctive mark of the Christian doctrine of creation in comparison with Neoplatonism is the teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*. This, I believe, is not strictly accurate. The Neoplatonists did not commit themselves to interpret the *Timaeus* of Plato in the sense that the world was created out of some pre-existent stuff. The most important differences between Christian and Neoplatonic doctrines are the first and third requirements listed above. Cf. Sorabji 1983, 193–199.

hand, according to Dionysius, there is no pre-existent material out of which God created (the second requirement).[12] However, this does not seem to mean that the world had a temporal beginning in the sense outlined above (the third requirement).

For the reasons just given, the Dionysian doctrine of creation seems to bear the strong imprint of Neoplatonic cosmology. I will now elaborate on this point.

According to Placid Spearritt, discussions of Dionysius' doctrine of creation have revolved around the question of emanationism *versus* Christian creationism.[13] Here we encounter the problematic of emanationism, which has often been presented as an obscure doctrine. It seems that many scholars in the past have mistaken the metaphor of emanation for a philosophical concept. It should be asked, then, what the philosophical concept of causality behind the emanation metaphor in Neoplatonism really is. We shall turn to this problem below.

A basic idea in the Dionysian thought-world is the idea of union and differentiation (*ἕνωσις καὶ διάκρισις*). There is union and differentiation within the divine being, in the created world, and in the relation between God and the world.[14] We shall keep this idea in mind as we proceed. Another idea, basic to the Dionysian doctrine of creation, is the triadic scheme of causality – of indwelling (abiding), procession and conversion (*μονή*, *πρόοδος*, *ἐπιστροφὴ*) – derived from Neoplatonism.[15] According to Proclus, the effect remains in its cause (*μένει ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ αἰτίᾳ*), proceeds from it (*πρόεισιν ἀπ' αὐτῆς*) and converts to it (*ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς αὐτήν*).[16] The indwelling should be taken in the sense that the quality of the effect is perfectly present in the cause, and that cause and effect therefore have the same quality. The procession accounts for the difference between cause and effect, while the conversion means that the effect is constituted as an entity with the "reception" of the quality remaining in the cause.[17] This doctrine occurs often in the Dionysian *corpus* and is clearly brought forward in the *Divinis nominibus* 4.10 (705d): "To put the matter briefly, all being derives from, exists in, and is converted towards the Beautiful and the Good". According to this scheme, creatures are made to be perfected within the provident arrangement of creation and salvation. Dionysius is, perhaps, the first Christian thinker to employ this triad of causality extensively, but after him a modified version of it was built into the system of St. Maximus the Confessor.[18] Our modern labelling of this causal scheme as "Neoplatonic" would probably have met with the objection from the Fathers that it is a Biblical concept. In support they could have quoted at least two texts from St. Paul (*Rom*. 11:36 and *Col*. 1:16–17): "For from Him (*ἐξ αὐτοῦ*), and by Him (*δι' αὐτοῦ*), and to Him (*εἰς αὐτὸν*), are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen". "For in Him (*ἐν αὐτῷ*) were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers – all things were created by Him (*δι' αὐτοῦ*), and to Him

---

[12] In *DN* 4.28, *PG* 3.729a he seems to deny that God created out of any pre-existent matter: "if it [i.e. matter] has some kind of being, then, since all beings derive from the Good, it too derives from the Good [...]" (*Εἰ δέ πως ὄν, τὰ δὲ ὄντα πάντα ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ, καὶ αὐτὴ ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἂν εἴη*).

[13] Spearritt 1968, 43.

[14] Cf. *DN* ch. 2 where this topic is thematised.

[15] Cf. Procl. *Inst. theol.* 35. Strangely enough, Spearritt does not discuss this scheme of causality.

[16] Procl. *Inst. theol.* 35.

[17] Procl. *Inst. theol.* 30–32.

[18] Cf. *Ambigua* 7, *PG* 91.1081a–c.

(εἰς αὐτὸν). And He is before all things, and in Him (ἐν αὐτῷ) all things consist". These prepositional expressions suggest both that the created world somehow is contained *in* God, and that creatures, as they are created, are "moved" *from* God and that they further are designed to move *towards* God. Such a "metaphysics of prepositions", however, is known from Middle Platonism,[19] and is developed in the Neoplatonic systems of triadic causation. I believe that this Neoplatonic doctrine was acceptable, at least in part, for Christian thinkers because they were acquainted with the rudimentary "metaphysics of prepositions" from the sacred books of their own Tradition. The triadic scheme could therefore be seen as a common sense idea of causality.

The triadic scheme was used by Dionysius to explain the generation of creatures from God. However, I would like to frame a hypothesis, with some probability, that the scheme has an even deeper significance in the Dionysian system. I shall begin this exposition of Dionysius' doctrine of creation, not with the relation between God and His creatures, but with the intra-trinitarian relations.

The generation of the divine persons

In the second chapter of the *De divinis nominibus* we read that "the Father is the originating source of the godhead (ὅτι μέν ἐστι πηγαία θεότης ὁ πατήρ) and that the Son and the Spirit are, so to speak, divine offshoots (θεόφυτοι), the flowering and transcendent lights of the divinity" (645b). The Father is the πηγαία of the trinity of persons. How, one may ask, is it possible for the Father to act as such a source and in what way do the other two persons emerge? Dionysius immediately says, however, that "we can neither say nor understand how this could be so". This remark is quite interesting, as we shall see below, but first we should note that Dionysius actually alludes to a way in which the divine causality might be understood.

Before we try to determine exactly how the divine causality functions, we should note that, according to Dionysius, the motive behind the general dialectic of union and differentiation is the divine Goodness. This is emphasised again and again by the Areopagite. I shall quote two important examples:[20]

> Now I must be clear about what it is that has to be defined: as I have already said, the term "divine differentiations" is given to the benevolent processions of the supreme Godhead. This Godhead is granted as a gift to all things. It flows over in shares of goodness to all. And it becomes differentiated in a unified way.
>
> This essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things. Think of how it is with our sun. It exercises no rational process, no act of choice, and yet by the very act of its existence it gives light to whatever is able to partake of its light, in its own way. So it is with the Good.

We shall return to a problem contained in the second quotation later. What I would like to emphasise now is this principle of goodness: the good is by nature such that it gives

---

[19] Cf. Dillon 1977, 138.
[20] *DN* 2.11, *PG* 3.649b; *DN* 4.1, *PG* 3.693b. Luibheid's translation.

itself to other things, it distributes itself. This idea may be traced to Plato's *Timaeus*, in which the cause of creation is the goodness of the Demiurge.[21] Dionysius speaks about the differentiations that are befitting the goodness of the godhead (*τὰς διακρίσεις δὲ τὰς ἀγαθοπρεπεῖς τῆς θεαρχίας*).[22] The primary instance of union and differentiation is the divinity itself. The *union* of God is preserved in the one essential and good Godhead. Through the Father this Godhead is differentiated into a triad of hypostases. Within this unified triad each of the persons is preserved in an unmixed and unconfused way in its own hypostatic characteristics.[23] The reason behind the manifestation of the triad is probably that it befits the divinity *qua* good to communicate as internally related personal subsistences.

Against this background we may move to the doctrine of divine causality. Dionysius writes that those initiated into the theological tradition say that "the differentiations (*τὰς διακρίσεις*) within the godhead have to do with the benign processions and revelations (*προόδους τε καὶ ἐκφάνσεις*) of God".[24] Although the meaning of this assertion is far from clear, I would suggest that the terms *προόδους* and *ἐκφάνσεις* indicate a two-fold perspective: (i) in this context, the *processions* refer to the ontology of the trinitarian generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, while (ii) the *revelations* concern the possibility for intelligent creatures to know this inner-trinitarian life. In short, the first has to do with the mystery of the divine being itself, while the second concerns what is revealed in the economy.

The Father is the origin of the Trinity, the Son and the Spirit are processions from Him. If this is interpreted according to the triadic causal scheme the following picture emerges: the Father remains (*μένει*) in His essentially good nature. While remaining in a goodness that by nature is distributive of itself, He gives rise to two processions, viz. of the Son and the Spirit. As they proceed they are hypostatically differentiated from the hypostasis of the Father. The causal process is fulfilled, however, at the moment (not in the temporal sense, of course) when the two proceeding hypostases convert (*ἐπιστρέφουσι*) to their source and become filled with it. What happens in the conversion is that they are constituted in the same essentially good content as their source. They are hypostatically differentiated but essentially identical with the Father.

This description of the mystery of the Trinity is, of course, within the dimension of what is revealed. How is that? The answer is that it borrows both its terms and its causal scheme from the created world and applies them to the transcendent being of God. Such an explanation could never be adequate, since the theological mystery is described from the point of view of the economy.

Despite the philosophical scheme of causality involved, the description itself is full of metaphors. The Father is spoken of as a *source*. The hypostases of the Son and the Spirit are conceived in a scheme of *movement* as proceeding and converting in relation to the Father, almost as if these movements took place spatially. Is it possible to explain the process in a more conceptual, philosophical way? I believe so, even if the explanation would be, as I said above, a quite hypothetical construction. However, even if the description from a philosophical point of view could be brought to a more advanced

---

[21] Pl. *Ti.* 29d-30c.
[22] *DN* 2.4, *PG* 3.640d.
[23] Cf. *DN* 2.5, *PG* 3.641d.
[24] *DN* 2.4, *PG* 3.640d.

level, it would still be within what is accessible to human reason and not adequate for the divine mystery in itself.

The triadic causal scheme of Proclus is historically connected with the Plotinian doctrine of double activity.[25] The doctrines of triadic causality and of double activity are the philosophical theories behind what is held to be the Neoplatonist doctrine of emanation. According to Plotinus, everything has its origin in the supreme principle, the One. By just being itself, and without being active as a creator, the One is the source of the next hypostasis, the Intellect. The One has an ἐνέργεια τῆς οὐσίας which inevitably is accompanied by an activity ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας. This activity *ad extra* culminates in the constitution of the Intellect.[26] When it is said that the activity *of* the essence is "accompanied by" an activity *from* the essence, this does not mean that they are two quite different or separate activities. There seems to be one immanent activity with a transitive aspect. The double activity could be compared with *walking*, as an example of immanent activity, and *leaving footprints*, as the transitive result. This is a general Plotinian principle.[27] If we elaborate a little further on this doctrine, we could say that the One remains itself and its "energy of the essence" is its self-contemplation, i.e. its contemplation of itself as good. This contemplation is accompanied by an "activity out of the essence" as a creative activity. This creative activity is established as the next level below, the level of the Intellect, because the "energy out of the essence", as a rational principle (a *logos*), is turned as self-contemplation towards itself as a derivation from the higher level. Thus "the energy out of the essence" of the One is identified as "the energy of the essence" of the Intellect. This "energy of the essence" of the Intellect is not only its self-contemplation, but at the same time its self-constitution as a new hypostasis.[28] The process is repeated in the relation between the Intellect and the Soul.

In this way the Neoplatonic triad of primary hypostases is generated, and it seems quite probable that the doctrine of double activity (Plotinus) or of indwelling-proceeding-converting (Proclus) represents the causal scheme behind Dionysius' allusions to the mystery of the establishment of the Christian Trinity. But, as we have seen, according to Dionysius, we can neither say nor understand how the divine processions actually take place.[29] Even though it might seem conceptually clearer, it would not, however, help much to say that the Son and the Spirit are activities of the Father's essence. I have already pointed out that the divine mystery is inaccessible in itself, and can only be grasped from the point of view of what is revealed economically. From the point of view of the philosophical doctrine employed, there is an obvious problem involved: according to the Neoplatonic doctrine of causes, the effect, even if generated in the way explained above, is established on a metaphysically lower level of reality than its cause. The "movement" from cause to effect is a "downward" movement from the more to the less real, from the more to the less unified, from unity to plurality. This is not difficult to understand, since while the activity of the first hypostasis is itself quite simple, the activity of the second hypostasis is of a more complex kind: the Plotinian Intellect, for instance, contemplates itself both *as deriving from the higher principle* and *as good*, i.e. as a cause for what comes

---

[25] On this doctrine, cf. Emilsson 1999.
[26] Plotinus, *Enneades* 5.4.2.
[27] Cf. Plotinus, *Enneades* 6.1.20.
[28] Cf. Plotinus, *Enneades* 3.8.1-4.
[29] *DN* 2.7, *PG* 3.645b.

next. The problem was clearly seen by Dionysius as evidenced by his pronouncement that we cannot understand the divine generation:[30] "In reality there is no exact likeness between caused and cause, for the caused carry within themselves only such images of their originating sources as are possible for them, whereas the causes themselves are located in a realm transcending the caused, according to the argument regarding their source". What Dionysius seems to find problematic is that the Neoplatonic scheme of causality explains the generation of hypostases on an ever descending scale of perfection. It is not adapted to explain how the first hypostasis may generate two more hypostases on the same level of reality as the first, so as to constitute together a primordial Triad of hypostases. This problem does not necessarily represent a weakness in Dionysius' trinitarian doctrine, but could be a signal that the philosophical theory used to elucidate the doctrine is inadequate for this purpose.

The creation of the cosmos

Why did we make this long detour round the generation of the divine persons before we arrived at the real topic, the creation of the world? The reason is simple: the understanding of the nature of the cause – as far as this is possible for us – helps in understanding the ontological condition of the effect. With this I do not intend to deny the principle that, in the case of God, the cause is known through its effects. The Dionysian approach, however, seems rather to be from what is revealed about God in the Holy Scriptures.[31] In the *Divinis nominibus* he takes his starting point from the revealed names of God and tries to establish philosophically the correct methods for speaking about Him. In doing so he unfolds his Christian interpretation of the cosmos in its relation to the divine cause. He has some presuppositions and axioms which are played out in his work. Among the presuppositions is a Neoplatonic concept of causality and of goodness. His most important axioms are the Christian confession to the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. As we shall see, the "mechanisms" at work in his doctrine of creation are the same as those which operate in his doctrine of divine generation. But when it comes to creation, the principles are to a greater degree adequate for their purpose.

In chapter 9.8–9 of the *De divinis nominibus* Dionysius interprets God's rest and movement. The rest is interpreted as God's *remaining* (τὸ μένειν) in Himself, while the movement is understood as His *procession* (πρόοδος). In 9.9 Dionysius distinguishes between God's straight, spiral and circular movement. The straight movement is the procession of His activities or energies (πρόοδον τῶν ἐνεργειῶν), and the coming-to-be of all things from Him. The spiral movement is also connected with procession, while the circular motion means that God holds all things together and secures the conversion (ἐπιστροφή) of all that has come forth from Him. In all of this we clearly see the triadic scheme of indwelling-procession-conversion as applied to the causal relation between God and the created world.

Before we proceed we should note an ambiguity in Dionysius' use of the terms indwelling and procession. Indwelling means, as we have just seen, God's remaining in

---

[30] *DN* 2.8, *PG* 3.645c. Luibheid's translation.
[31] Cf. *DN* 1.1, *PG* 3.588a.

Himself. On the other hand, it means the indwelling of the effect in its cause. However, these two aspects are somehow identical, as we shall see below. Procession means, on the one hand, that something, an effect, proceeds from its cause. On the other hand, Dionysius often tends to focus more on the *process* of procession than on its result. In this sense the procession itself is brought forward as a divine activity or power in which God manifests His being. We shall first focus on the moment of indwelling.

How God remains in Himself is first taken up by Dionysius in connection with the creative process. This divine condition of rest must be attributed to the Holy Trinity itself. God's transcendent being exists in an immovable sameness, Dionysius says, and God acts (*ἐνεργεῖν*) according to the same and around the same.[32] Now, what are the characteristics of this divine sameness and action within the Trinity, i.e. the sameness and action of the condition of indwelling as relevant to the problematic of creation? Here it will be useful to cast a glance over Dionysius' conception of the different names we use in speaking of God.

In the second chapter of the *De divinis nominibus* Dionysius distinguishes between names expressive of unity and names expressive of distinctions. Names of the second kind are those that are proper to each divine hypostasis, such as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and predicates denoting certain hypostatic characteristics belonging to each of the persons. These names are not held in common and are not interchangeable. The "unified names", on the other hand, are applied to the whole divinity, i.e. they belong to the divine nature and not to any one of the persons specifically. Of these there are two kinds: (i) those that express abstraction (*ἀφαίρεσις*) and involve pre-eminence, and (ii) those that are aetiological (*τὰ αἰτιολογικὰ*). These "aetiological terms" denote God as cause of the properties found in created being. The first kind of term is exemplified by the following: *τὸ ὑπεράγαθον*, *τὸ ὑπέρθεον*, *τὸ ὑπερούσιον*, *τὸ ὑπέρζωον*, *τὸ ὑπέρσοφον*. Examples of aetiological terms are *τὸ ἀγαθόν*, *τὸ καλόν*, *τὸ ὄν*, *τὸ ζωογόνον*, *τὸ σοφὸν*. Some comments should be made in this regard. First, each of these "unified names" denotes the whole simple being of God. Secondly, they are processions befitting the goodness of the godhead (*τὰς ἀγαθοπρεπεῖς τῆς θεαρχίας προόδους*), and as such they are ways in which He differentiates Himself, i.e. "divine differentiations" (*διάκρισιν θείαν*).[33] The predicate *ἀγαθοπρεπής* ("befitting the good") points to the basic characteristic of goodness as *that which by nature distributes itself*, i.e. proceeds. Even though all of the processions are divine differentiations befitting the goodness of God, in the text on which I am commenting (cf. note 33), they are primarily directed to the creation of otherness, and do not characterise the superessential internal life of God.[34] These processions are also termed 'powers' (*δυνάμεις*) and 'activities' (*ενέργειαι*).[35] When it comes to divine names for the processions *ad intra*, Dionysius says that the understanding of their nature is beyond mind and knowledge.[36] I believe that the abstractive terms denote the divine being in its condition of remaining within itself, an indwelling which is characterised by the divine persons being in a certain way "active" or in processions towards each other.

---

[32] *DN* 9.8, *PG* 3.916b.
[33] *DN* 2.11, *PG* 3.649b.
[34] Cf. *DN* 2.5, *PG* 3.641d–644a; *DN* 5.1, *PG* 3.816b.
[35] *DN* 2.7, *PG* 3.645a; *DN* 9.9, *PG* 3.916c–d.
[36] Cf. *DN* 2.7, *PG* 3.645a.

If my interpretation is correct, the processions are considered on two levels of reality: the abstractive terms denote them as belonging to the intra-trinitarian sphere, while the aetiological terms denote them as divine activities *ad extra*.

In the "remaining", understood in terms of their indwelling, the hypostases of the Holy Trinity proceed towards each other in a way that is beyond knowledge. They are transcendentally perfect manifestations of divine goodness, being, life, wisdom, etc. *ad intra*. Considered *ad extra* we should note, however, that in actuality there is no plurality of processions, because, according to Dionysius, goodness is not one thing, being another, life and wisdom yet other, etc. There is one God for all these good processions, and the term goodness denotes God's universal providence, while the other predicates denote certain aspects of this one goodness.[37] In short, all processions *ad extra* are aspects of the one procession of goodness. If this be so, much more should the activities *ad intra* constitute one divine activity. Divine goodness and divine love (*eros*) must be understood as basically the same. In his definition of *eros* Dionysius shows the picture of well-ordered life which, I think, must be a characteristic of the inner life of the Holy Trinity of persons:[38]

> What is signified is a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and Good. It is a capacity which preexists through (*διὰ*) the Beautiful and Good. It is dealt out from the Beautiful and the Good through the Beautiful and the Good (*καὶ ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ διὰ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐκδιδομένης*). It binds the things of the same order in a mutually regarding union.

The indwelling of the Holy Trinity in well-ordered activities (*ενέργειαι*) of goodness and love *ad intra* is the starting point of creation. As I said above, this condition of divine rest is somehow identical with the indwelling of the effect in God. Earlier in this paper I quoted a text from Dionysius in which he says that effects pre-exist more truly in their causes.[39] How, then, do God's creatures pre-exist or dwell in Him and how does the plural "causes" fit into the picture?

What we are confronted with now is a rather complex piece of doctrine, in which the three properties of divine goodness, knowledge and will are intimately connected. There is an important section on divine knowledge in the last part of the *De divinis nominibus* 7.2.[40] In His capacity as the cause of all things, God knows all creatures. This knowledge, however, is not something different from God's knowledge of Himself. "By knowing itself, the divine Wisdom knows all things" (*Ἑαυτὴν οὖν ἡ θεία σοφία γινώσκουσα γνώσεται πάντα*), Dionysius says. What, exactly, is it that God knows when, knowing Himself, He knows all things? God knows Himself as the One from whom all things derive or proceed, i.e. He knows Himself as *good* or in His *goodness*. This knowledge of Himself as good, i.e. as distributive, takes the form of conceiving within Himself all possible effects in their *παραδείγματα*.[41] These paradigms are pre-existing

---

[37] *DN* 5.2, *PG* 3.816c–817a. Cf. *DN* 2.5, *PG* 3.641d–644a.
[38] *DN* 4.12, *PG* 3.709c–d. Luibheid's translation, Greek terms inserted by me.
[39] *DN* 2.8, *PG* 3.645c–d.
[40] *DN* 7.2, *PG* 3.869a–c.
[41] *DN* 7.3, *PG* 3.869d.

logoi which not only exist "in" God, but are identified with what He knows when knowing Himself as good.[42] The *logoi* are the plurality of *causes* mentioned above. Here we see that God's remaining in Himself (as good) and the remaining of the effect in Him (as an Idea of what goodness may accomplish) are identical.

The paradigms or *logoi* are also called "predefining, divine and good acts of will" (*προορισμοὺς καλεῖ καὶ θεῖα καὶ ἀγαθὰ θελήματα*).[43] Earlier in this paper I remarked that there is no clear notion of the divine will or freedom in the Dionysian writings. The identification of the divine Ideas as *θελήματα*, however, indicates that the Areopagite had a notion of divine will, even if this notion is not explicitly developed in the *corpus*. Here we meet the important question of the character of the Dionysian doctrine of creation: emanationism *versus* creationism. We shall return to the Neoplatonic background before we discuss Dionysius' teaching.

Spearritt, commenting on the Plotinian doctrine of double activity in connection with Dionysius' doctrine of creation, emphasises the *necessity* involved in the production of the effect: (i) the *cause* necessarily produces the effect *ad extra*, and (ii) the *effect* is a necessary result of the activity of the cause.[44] I believe that this stress on necessity at least requires some further qualification. Spearritt appeals to two texts from the *Enneads*. The first is from 5.1.6:[45] "All things which exist, as long as they remain in being (*ἕως μένει*), necessarily (*ἀναγκαίαν*) produce from their own substances, in dependence on their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside of them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced [...]". The second text, from 5.4.2, runs as follows: "...and the activity of the essence is the selfsame particular thing, while the other activity is from that one, and must in everything follow it, being necessarily different from the thing itself [...]" (*καὶ ἡ μὲν τῆς οὐσίας αὐτό ἐστιν ἐνέργεια ἕκαστον, ἡ δὲ ἀπ' ἐκείνης, ἣν δεῖ παντὶ ἕπεσθαι ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἑτέραν οὖσαν αὐτοῦ*). The conclusion Spearritt draws from these two texts (viz. that creation is due to necessity) is, in my opinion, somewhat short-sighted. Maybe the whole problem would be easier to understand if we make an analogy.[46] The will to walk and the act of walking could be seen as an example of immanent activity. The leaving of footprints, on the other hand, is an external activity. However, there seems to be but one action. The will to walk and the walking is an intransitive description of two aspects of this action, the leaving of footprints is a transitive description of what the walker does. Here we should listen to what Plotinus says in the *Ennead* 6.1.22: "And one should not call all activities productions or say that they produce something. Producing is incidental. Well then, if someone walking produces footprints, do we not say that he made them? But he did it out of being something else. Or [we may say] he produces incidentally and the activity is incidental, because he did not have this in view". We could say then, that the will to walk and the walking itself is somehow independent of the leaving of footprints, because in most cases one does not walk with this *purpose*. The leaving of footprints is, therefore, usually incidental to the will and the purpose. On the other hand, we should ask whether the footprint-making is

---

[42] *DN* 5.8, *PG* 3.824c, cf. *DN* 7.2, *PG* 3.869a–c.
[43] *DN* 5.8, *PG* 3.824c.
[44] Spearritt 1968, 52–53.
[45] Translation from A.H. Armstrong (transl.), *Plotinus: Ennead V* (Loeb Classical Library 444), Cambridge, Massachusetts 1984. Greek terms inserted by me.
[46] Cf. Emilsson 1999.

a necessary effect of walking as a physical act. I should think the answer would have to be positive.

Let us return to the two texts from the *Enneads* appealed to by Spearritt. The key to understand the first quotation is the ἕως μένει ("as long as they remain in being"). We should ask what is characteristic of the indwelling of the first principle, the One. The One, according to Plotinus, acts according to its *will* (βούλησίς).[47] The remaining of the One in its activity of essence must, then, be connected with its will to be itself.[48] Upon this background, the point is that the One wills to be itself as remaining in its activity, and, because of this will to remain, the One *necessarily* produces an effect *ad extra*, as the citation from *Ennead* 5.1.6 teaches. The conclusion to be drawn from the second quotation is that *if* there is an activity of the essence, which, as we have seen, is willed by the One, *then* an external activity *must* follow it. Further, this external activity is *necessarily* different from the first activity.

There is no external or internal constraint on the One; rather it is free in its internal activity because it has willed to act according to its own nature. From a modern point of view one could, of course, object that this is a strange notion of freedom, because it does not seem that the One has any alternative, i.e. acts from free choice. However, what is expressed here is the idea that to be free is to live according to one's nature. The One wills to be itself, and this means that it wills itself as good. Goodness has the essential feature that it is distributive of itself, but the One does not have this distributive aspect or the external effect in view. From this we may draw the conclusion that the internal activity of the One as an act of will is independent of creatures; as an activity of goodness, however, it is the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of creatures. The existence of creatures is incidental to the internal activity of the One as an act of will, but necessitated by the resulting immanent activity.

I believe these distinctions are important for the evaluation of the difference between an orthodox Christian doctrine of creation as compared with Neoplatonism. Spearritt seems to suffer from a rather common error regarding the evaluation of emanation versus creation: from a Christian point of view, emphasis is often placed on God's free will as a characteristic of Christian thought, while the Neoplatonist position is branded with the necessity of an emanationist position.[49] This, I think, is at least partly wrong. From both a Christian and a Neoplatonist point of view the creation of the world does *not* follow by necessity from the divine nature in itself. God, further, knows Himself as good (i.e. as a principle of distribution) and He wills Himself as such. It is at this point that the difference between Christianity and Neoplatonism occurs. It has to do with two things: (i) the character of the divine knowledge and (ii) the *modus* of the divine will. Even if the One of Plotinus knows itself as good and implicitly knows itself as a principle of something possibly *other* than itself, when it wills to be itself, it does not will itself as an actual principle of such an otherness. Neither, *a fortiori*, does it will itself as a principle of an otherness with a temporal beginning. The question now is to what degree Dionysius follows in the footsteps of Neoplatonism or to what degree he approaches an orthodox Christian approach.

---

[47] Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.8.13.

[48] This is the interpretation of Rist 1967, ch. 6. I believe he is right in this.

[49] In addition, what strikes me as strange in Spearritt's treatment is that he does not at all relate his discussion of Plotinus to the Dionysian doctrine of creation.

In what sense are we to take the Dionysian pronouncement that the Ideas are acts of will? First we should note that the God of Dionysius is the Christian God who contemplates Himself as a principle or cause of something possibly other than Himself. This God, in knowing Himself as distributive of external effects, wills what He knows. But, if this is so, how should this will, or even acts of will, be understood? Does the will include a decision to create an otherness with a temporal beginning? I cannot find any indications that point in this direction. As a matter of fact, I cannot find any texts in the Dionysian writings that provide clear information on the author's concept of divine will in creation at all. Rather, it seems that, according to Dionysius, what God knows from eternity He wills from eternity, and, consequently, the effects of that will are manifested from eternity.[50]

This interpretation may be supported from several texts in which Dionysius speaks about the nature of God's goodness. One text, which is especially telling, is found in the *De divinis nominibus* 4.1:[51]

> Think of how it is with our sun. It exercises no rational process, no deliberate choice (*οὐ λογιζόμενος ἢ προαιρούμενος*)[52], and yet by the very fact of its existence it gives light to whatever is able to partake of its light, in its own way. So it is with the Good. Existing far above the sun, an archetype far superior to its dull image, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity, such as this may be, to receive it.

This, of course, is an image, an analogy, but even so it does not receive any definite Christian qualification in the context. Now, the quotation is quite striking and seems indeed to teach that the creation of the world follows eternally from the natural goodness of God. This is consistent with the Neoplatonic concept of causality employed by Dionysius. According to Plotinus, the emergence of the effect is the eternal result of the eternal activity of the One's being. According to Proclus, the eternally remaining cause has eternally proceeding and converting effects. At this point, the Dionysian doctrine of creation, therefore, seems to be more Neoplatonic than specifically Christian. Even if the world is created *ex nihilo*, even if it is created by God's will to be Himself as good and even if it is created by His will to be the cause of something possibly other than Himself, it does not seem to be created by God's free decision to give it a temporal beginning. The Dionysian notion of the divine will seems to lack something which was important for the great thinkers of the fourth century and which was repeated by Fathers after Dionysius, for instance by St. Maximus the Confessor: the divine will is such that God eternally could want that something other than God, i.e. the world, should have a temporal beginning of its existence.[53]

---

[50] St. Athanasius struggled to avoid this consequence, cf. *CA* 1.29, *PG* 26.72.

[51] *DN* 4.1, *PG* 3.693b.

[52] Luibheid's translation. I would prefer "calculation" to "rational process" (Luibheid). The sun does not execute any calculation, neither does God reason in this way. The divine knowledge should not be confused with calculation or with discursive reasoning. It is more like a contemplative insight or understanding. I have changed Luibheid's "no act of choice" to "no deliberate choice", because *προαίρεσις* is usually understood to be a rational act.

[53] Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 7, *PG* 91.1081a–b. For a discussion of the concept of God's will in creation, cf. Tollefsen 2000, ch. 3.

This interpretation could be met with at least three objections. First, in *De caelesti hierarchia* Dionysius states the freedom of human beings.[54] Is it not reasonable to believe *a fortiori* that God, as the supremely rational being, is eminently free as well? Could it not just be a coincidence that Dionysius does not comment on the topic of divine freedom? I would answer that it is not impossible that Dionysius in fact held an adequate doctrine of divine freedom, even though the texts do not bear witness to it. But whatever his ideas on this, his employment of the causal scheme has not received sufficient Christian modification and seems to point decisively in the direction of a beginningless world.

Secondly, is it true that the texts bear no witness at all to a doctrine of divine freedom? In the *De divinis nominibus* 13.2 Dionysius says: "Without the One there is no multiplicity, but there can still be the One when there is no multiplicity, just as one precedes all multiplied numbers".[55] If it is possible for God to exist without the world, then the existence of the world must depend, not only on a causality stemming from God's eternal will to act in accordance with His nature, but also on the divine will to be the cause of a possible otherness with a temporal beginning. Consequently, God could well have a will to decide that the world should emerge from non-being in such a way that its temporal existence had a starting point. To this objection I would say that in the face of the evidence I have put forward, I would be very sceptical of constructing a whole doctrine of divine will on the above citation. However, whatever the exact meaning of these words, I admit they point to the possibility that a specifically orthodox Christian doctrine of divine freedom, in the sense we speak about it now, should perhaps not be excluded. On the other hand, the weight of evidence leans against the attribution of this doctrine to Dinoysius, and I really doubt that he had any such doctrine.

Thirdly, does not the fact that St. Maximus the Confessor, whose orthodoxy on the issue of creation is beyond doubt, never criticises Dionysius speak against my conclusion? St. Maximus is highly critical towards the Neoplatonic doctrine of creation and explicitly argues against the idea of a beginningless world.[56] This objection is interesting. I believe St. Maximus held the Dionysian writings in such high regard, stemming, as he believed they did, from a disciple of St. Paul, that he would not admit that they could contain any erroneous doctrines. St. Maximus interpreted the writings in the light of Tradition and what seemingly lacked in them he would probably read into them. If Dionysius' teaching is supplemented in regard to the divine will one could argue that his Neoplatonic causal scheme actually could be modified so that we would arrive at an orthodox result, perhaps without any detriment to the Dionysian system. I would not deny this possibility, but is it probable that the Areopagite himself would have accepted such an elaboration of his philosophy?

As it is, then, I will conclude this paper with the dictum that if the Dionysian *corpus* belongs to the last decades of the fifth century, the author does not have an orthodox doctrine of creation.

Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas
University of Oslo

---

[54] *CH* 9.3, *PG* 3.260c–d.
[55] *DN* 13.2, *PG* 3.980a.
[56] Cf. *De charitate* 4.1–13, *PG* 90.1048b–1052a.; *Ambigua* 7, *PG* 91.1081a–b; *Ambigua* 10, *PG* 91.1176d–1177b; *Ambigua* 10, *PG* 91.1181a–1188c.

Bibliography:

Dillon 1977 = J Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, London 1977.
Emilsson 1999 = E.K. Emilsson, 'Remarks on the Relation between the One and Intellect in Plotinus', in J. Ceary (ed.), *Traditions of Platonism*, Kluwer 1999.
PG = J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 vols., Paris 1857–1866.
Rist 1967 = J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, Cambridge 1967.
Sorabji 1983 = R. Sorabji, *Time Creation and the Continuum*, London 1983.
Spearritt 1968 = P. Spearritt, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Dionysian Mysticism*, Fribourg 1968.
Tollefsen 2000 = T. Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor*, Oslo 2000.