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Saints and Heroes

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# Christ in *Corpus Dionysiacum*

Gunnar af Hällström

Scholars have spent much ink on the question of how to define the place of *Corpus Dionysiacum* (in English often “Dionysian corpus”, henceforth *CD*), also called *Corpus Areopagiticum*, in the history of ideas and the history of theology.<sup>1</sup> In Christian Protestantism the main options seem to have been: either Dionysius was a Christian with traces of Neo-Platonism, or a Neo-Platonist with Christian surface treatment.<sup>2</sup> The opinion of Martin Luther in this respect is presented by Fredric Cleve in his article in the present volume. Luther’s very critical view met with fierce resistance. Just to mention one example: in Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* (vol. 3) it is characterised as “*impietas et impudentia intolerabilis*”.<sup>3</sup> Among more recent, famous, and very critical attitudes towards the theology of the *CD* Anders Nygren should be mentioned. In his well-known study on Agape and Eros we are told that “the fundamental Neoplatonism is but scantily covered with an exceedingly thin Christian veneer”.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore he claims that “Now no one could help seeing that the Christianity of Dionysius was entirely different from that of Paul and of the New Testament in general”.<sup>5</sup> About the same time as the original Swedish version of Nygren’s book appeared, a Finnish theologian and later bishop, Eino Sormunen, wrote a monograph on Dionysius. The title of his study is revealing. A translation of the Finnish original goes as follows: *Ps-Dionysius and the Main Lines of his Neo-Platonic Mystagogy*.<sup>6</sup> Sormunen’s study remains to this day the only monograph on Dionysius in Finnish. The nowadays numerous scholars dealing with Christian spirituality, or “mysticism”, may bypass the question of the ideological background of the *CD* to some extent, but the problem is far from being solved.<sup>7</sup> A philosopher’s disciplined presentation of the topic is available in Christian Schäfer’s study.<sup>8</sup> The methodological approaches used in modern scholarship to deal with the question are too numerous to be presented in an article – in fact they would be a useful topic for research themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article the editions *CD* 1 and *CD* 2 by B.R. Suchla, G. Heil and A.M. Ritter have been used. Unless otherwise stated, the translations into English and the references are those of C. Luibheid (transl.), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (The Classics of Western Spirituality 54), New York 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Though Protestant scholars seem to have emphasised the Neo-Platonism of the *CD* more strongly than scholars from other denominations, there are nevertheless numerous examples of strongly Neo-Platonic interpretations of Dionysius among the latter also. Rolt 1940, 202–219 provides examples from the history of theology. One of the Orthodox presentations strongly critical towards Dionysius is that of Pharantos 1993, 408, n. 17 who presents the inter-Orthodox discussion. His own conclusion, *ibid.*, 426, is that Christianity is completely secondary in comparison with Neo-Platonism. Other critical Orthodox voices will be presented below in connection with criticism of Dionysius’ doctrine of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> *PG* 3, *Prolegomena* 24B.

<sup>4</sup> Nygren 1953, 576.

<sup>5</sup> Nygren 1953, 577.

<sup>6</sup> Sormunen 1934. The original title is *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita ja hänen uusplatonilaisen mystagogiansa pääpiirteet*.

<sup>7</sup> Völker 1958; McGinn 1991; Golitzin 1993; and Louth 1981 all deal with the question of Neo-Platonism and Christianity in the *CD*.

<sup>8</sup> Schäfer 2006.



The Church of Dionysius the Areopagite on Skoufa Street in Kolonaki was designed in Neo-Baroque style by Anastasios Orlandos and built between 1925–1930.

In the present article it is my intention to tackle the old question concerning Dionysius' theological and philosophical affiliation by using one more point of departure. First of all we need to admit that there is no generally agreed way of defining when a person or a text is ideologically Christian more than anything else. Among external characteristics of adherence to Christianity, baptism is often frequently mentioned as an important criterion. But the fact that a person is or was baptised provides the scholar with no binding proof that the person in question was also thinking in a Christian way – whatever this means. However, in spite of the difficulties of definition, many a scholar would presumably admit that Jesus Christ should play a central role in an ideology to which we admit the attribute “Christian”. Therefore the question put forward in this article is the following: is the teaching in the *CD* concerning Jesus Christ such that, on that basis, its belonging ideologically to Christianity can be maintained – or perhaps rejected?

The Christology of the Areopagite has received quite a lot of attention, not least because his position between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians is a delicate problem.<sup>9</sup> It has been said, and rightly so, that “all Christological parties claim him (i.e.

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<sup>9</sup> One of the latest stands on this topic is that of Klitenic Wear and Dillon 2007, 4, according to whom the *CD* was “in accordance with the Monophysite position”. A recent contribution is also that of A.M. Ritter in *The Jurist*, according to whom *CD* belongs to a “moderately monophysite milieu”, Ritter 2006, 165. Among older works, Roques 1954, 305–318 gives a detailed presentation of the problem of monophysitism in the *CD*.

the Areopagite), or else see in him their opponents' heresies".<sup>10</sup> The frequently presented view according to which the *CD* was embraced first by the Monophysites and only later by the Chalcedonians, due to the efforts of Maximus the Confessor in particular, probably cannot be upheld.<sup>11</sup> But the Christianity of the *CD*'s overall world-view is hardly deductible from his being a Monophysite or not. It is interesting, though, that it is possible to deny the Christianity of a person who is regarded either/or. The present article will not deal with the Christology of the *CD* in this traditional sense. Rather, we wish to see how much bearing the person of Jesus Christ and his work has in the *CD*'s "system".<sup>12</sup> A system of thought that works beautifully without Christ incarnated, dead and resurrected can hardly be called Christian, but on the other hand, if these matters are of crucial importance for the whole of a person's thought, the conclusion that the person's views can be characterised as Christian is at least close at hand.

The aforementioned article by Cleve shows that, according to Martin Luther, Jesus Christ is absent from the *CD*. And even worse: a Christian reading Dionysius will be deprived of his Saviour by the mere reading.<sup>13</sup> According to Luther, the theology of Dionysius is mainly (Neo-)Platonic. The reformer happened to say similar things about Origen of Alexandria, too. Luther maintained that there is hardly anything about Christ in Origen's works.<sup>14</sup> In this point it is obvious that he was badly mistaken. The incarnated Christ, his life and death were central in Origen's theology, but, and probably this misled the reformer, the "advanced" Christians are supposed to go beyond the historical Jesus and find the eternal Christ as well. Of course, this does not mean that Luther's opinions about Christ in the *CD* were likewise mistaken, but at least we are justified in checking the state of affairs from the Areopagite himself.

A number of later Lutheran scholars have repeated Luther's accusation concerning the lacking presence of Christ in the *CD*. Eino Sormunen's monograph has already been mentioned. According to him "Paul's doctrine of salvation in Christ's blood ... is completely unknown to him" (i.e. to the Areopagite).<sup>15</sup> Bernhard Brons repeats these thoughts by pointing out the Neo-Platonic character of the *CD* in general, and then concluding "wie leicht ...die Verkündigung von Gericht und Gnade in Christus in die geringfügig modifizierende übernahme einer gerade gängigen Weltanschauung umschlagen können".<sup>16</sup> Recently, Paul Rorem has discussed Luther's criticism of the lack of Christocentricity in the *CD* in moderate wordings.<sup>17</sup> His aim was to "dispel the impression that Luther's critique was unique as some sort of Protestant innovation".<sup>18</sup> But not only Lutherans lament the lack of a Christocentric theology in the *CD*. Fierce criticism

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<sup>10</sup> Golitzin 1999, 150.

<sup>11</sup> Rorem and Lamoreaux 1998 challenge this traditional view.

<sup>12</sup> Our question is thus similar to that put forward but not extensively discussed by McGinn 1991, 180: "The issue is not about the orthodoxy of Dionysius's Christology... nor is it about failure to mention Jesus the Christ – he appears often in the corpus. The issue is rather how central Jesus' theandric activity is to the process of return". McGinn remarks that von Ivanka, Roques, and Rorem answer the question differently from Lossky, von Balthasar, and Corbin, the former having more difficulties in finding Christ in the *CD* than the latter.

<sup>13</sup> See this article, 115–116.

<sup>14</sup> References to Luther's comments on Origen can be found in *WA* 63.460 and will not be enumerated here.

<sup>15</sup> Sormunen 1934, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Brons 1976, 329.

<sup>17</sup> Rorem 1997. See also Rorem 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Rorem 1997, 304.

is expressed from the side of Orthodox theology by Kenneth Paul Wesche.<sup>19</sup> Dionysius has “distorted” the real meaning of Christ, Wesche claims, and promoted Neo-Platonist gnosis.<sup>20</sup> Already before Wesche, the influential Orthodox scholar John Meyendorff wrote a strongly critical presentation of the Areopagite’s doctrine of Christ.<sup>21</sup> Alexander Golitzin seems to combine his own critical attitude towards Dionysius’ Christology with that of Georges Florovsky in pronouncing the verdict: “With respect to a very important point, nothing less than the person of Jesus Christ, Dionysius merges as, indeed, more a “platoniser” (or at least a Helleniser) than a Christian. Credit must be given Fr. Georges for honesty here. He has admitted a weak point ...”.<sup>22</sup>

Even scholars who regard the Areopagite first of all a Christian have found certain problems as regards the doctrine of Christ in the *CD*. Thus Endre von Ivanka, having on numerous occasions noticed that the doctrine of the *CD* changes or even contradicts central Neo-Platonic views in order to favour Christianity, states a certain defect in its Christian teaching, too: “Wenn man der dionysischen Gesamtschau etwas vorwerfen kann, so ist es vielleicht der Umstand, dass in seinem Denken die Gestalt Christi, als des *menschgewordenen* Gottes, und die Inkarnationsidee im allgemeinen keine genügend grosse Rolle spielt”.<sup>23</sup>

## Statistics

Of course statistics cannot solve the problem of Dionysius’ ideological affiliation. The bare number of references to Jesus Christ in *Corpus Dionysiacum* provides some food for thought, though. Therefore statistics should not be altogether overlooked. The big issue is what conclusions the existence or non-existence of the name of Christ allows. It should be borne in mind that much of the second-century apologetic literature refrains from referring to Christ.<sup>24</sup> And this holds true also of the prototype of Christian apology, the famous Areopagus speech by St. Paul (Acts 17:22–31), a speech to which the “genuine” Dionysius was listening. Christ is not mentioned there by name, though an insider is able to find a reference to him towards the end of the speech (verse 31). Nevertheless St. Paul preached the resurrection of Christ in Athens (Acts 17:18), a fact resulting in St. Paul’s arrest and in the delivery of the Areopagus speech itself.

The most remarkable thing as regards references to Christ in the *CD* is the fact that there are no such references in *De mystica theologia* (*MT*).<sup>25</sup> The criticism expressed

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<sup>19</sup> Wesche 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Wesche 1989, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Meyendorff devoted one chapter in his monograph, Meyendorff 1969, to Dionysius. According to him “Denys ... mentionne le nom de Jésus-Christ et professe une croyance dans l’Incarnation, mais la structure de son système est parfaitement indépendante de cette profession de foi”. Meyendorff 1969, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Golitzin 1999, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Ivanka 1964, 286.

<sup>24</sup> Is, then, the treatise *De resurrectione* by Athenagoras not Christian since Christ is not mentioned? It is not possible to enter into an extensive discussion concerning the literary genre of the *CD* here, but I do agree with Meyendorff 1969, 123 and others that it should be regarded as a “préoccupation essentiellement apologétique”.

<sup>25</sup> Louth 1981 ominously succeeds in presenting the mysticism of the Areopagite without mentioning the name of Christ.



by Martin Luther against Dionysius seems to have built partly on this fact. *MT* is a short tract, only about six pages in modern print. This could partly explain the non-existence of the name of Christ, but there could be other and more important explanations as well. The topic discussed in the *MT*, the ascent to God and the final *theosis* of man might also contribute towards an explanation. For the moment I leave this problem open. It should be stated, too, that Christ is not mentioned in every single letter belonging to the *Corpus Dionysiacum* either. His name is lacking in the first two letters, but is present in the third, written to the same Gaius as the previous letters, and dealing with the same topic, i.e. the hiddenness of God. The topic is discussed in letter five, too, without reference to Christ but with references to St. Paul's epistles. The sixth letter contains a few lines only. The topic deals with the logic of argumentation and it is understandable that no reference to Christ is made here. The rest of the letters do contain explicit references to Christ.

In the other treatises of *Corpus Dionysiacum* the name of Christ certainly occurs, and occurs rather frequently. In *De divinis nominibus* (*DN*), Dionysius discusses initially what names belong to the entire Godhead and which ones to the distinct persons of the Trinity. Consequently quite a lot is said about the Son and the names that He is given in the Scriptures. But admittedly the names given to the entire Trinity play the main part in the tract, names such as the Good, Love (eros and agape are discussed), Life, the One, etc., names that are central in Neo-Platonic thinking as well as in Christianity. One could conclude, cautiously, that the emphasis in *DN* is on the entire Godhead rather than the persons in the Trinity.

The treatise called *De caelesti hierarchia* (*CH*) deals, as the title suggests, mainly with different categories of angels. Christ is mentioned, but little is said about him. A prayer is said to him at the beginning of the tract: "Let us, then, call upon Jesus, the Light of the Father, the true light enlightening every man coming into the world, through whom we have obtained access" to the Father, the light which is the source of all light".<sup>26</sup>

A similar prayer is repeated later,<sup>27</sup> before the actual presentation of hierarchies and angelic orders. There is a reference to Christ at the beginning of *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* (*EH*), too, more detailed than that at the beginning of *CH*. The central part of it goes as follows:

Jesus enlightens our blessed superiors, Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God, who is the ultimate in divine power. He assimilates them, as much as they are able, to his own light.<sup>28</sup>

Most important in this context is the statement according to which Christ in fact is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy. This suggests that Christ in fact is somehow present everywhere in both the treatises on the hierarchies – but this will be discussed below more in detail. There is after all only a limited number of explicit references to Christ in the rest of *EH*. The presentation of the sacraments contains some references and they will be discussed later. All in all it must be conceded that explicit references to Christ are limited in number in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, a fact that can

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<sup>26</sup> *CH* 1.2.

<sup>27</sup> *CH* 2.5.

<sup>28</sup> *EH* 1.1.



easily be taken to support the idea that Christ has a modest position in the theological construction of Dionysius. What is said about Christ, though, is more important than how often something is said about Christ. It is, therefore, time to move from statistics to doctrines. But before doing so one more thing should be pointed out: when Dionysius refers to Christ, he does so remarkably often by using the name “Jesus” (instead of Christ, that is, or Jesus Christ). Even the rather intimate expression “my Jesus” is once used.<sup>29</sup> The *Corpus Dionysiacum* does not explain this remarkable use of Christ’s names, though it contains a tract about divine names! The traditional way of explaining such intimate language is to postulate a “mystical” relationship between the writer/speaker and Christ. A personal experience of union with Jesus may also be the answer in the case of Dionysius. However, there are no explicit references to such an experience in the *CD*.<sup>30</sup>

## Christ in the Trinity

The Trinity is often mentioned in *Corpus Dionysiacum*. It is the object of adoration and praise in the famous opening hymn of the Mystical Theology.<sup>31</sup> When speaking about Christ, Dionysius often takes his point of departure in the Trinity. In our attempt to arrange the scattered references to Christ in the *CD* in an order both logical and true to the Areopagite it is therefore fair to begin our analysis from his Trinitarian views.

The oneness of the Godhead and the distinction between the three divine persons are both thoroughly treated by Dionysius. Both doctrines are emphasised, but Dionysius begins his discussions from the One, the supreme God and arrives at the Trinity later, not the other way round. The theologically correct term “hypostasis” is applied (*DN* 1.4) to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but in a significant way: the Godhead is said to be “manifested” in a “three-hypostatic” way. Thus the Trinity is presented as an aspect or manifestation of the supreme Deity, but according to the Areopagite there are other aspects as well, such as the Monad and the Cause of beings.<sup>32</sup> To all three persons in the Trinity a number of divine names apply, such as God, Creator, Lord, and Life.<sup>33</sup> Consequently they apply to Christ, the second person, also.

References to the second hypostasis in the Trinity are frequently made by using the name “Word” (λόγος), with various attributes. Thus Christ is “the divine Word”<sup>34</sup>, “the transcendent Word”<sup>35</sup>, and “the most divine Word”.<sup>36</sup> The rich, even innovative language of Dionysius also produced many other names applicable to Christ. The Word

<sup>29</sup> *CH* 2.5.

<sup>30</sup> Dionysius suggests, however, that he was present at the crucifixion of Christ (see below), a fact which may suggest a mystical relationship with the Saviour.

<sup>31</sup> “Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence”. *MT* 1.

<sup>32</sup> *DN* 1.4. But the Trinity is also presented as being beyond all divinity (not something subordinated to the divine unity) making it difficult to define the Areopagite’s final word in the matter. See the discussion in Louth 1989, 91; and in Klitenic Wear and Dillon 2007, 16–17, 33–48.

<sup>33</sup> *DN* 2.3.

<sup>34</sup> *DN* 2.1.

<sup>35</sup> *DN* 2.6.

<sup>36</sup> *EH* 3.3.12.

is very appropriate, though, since Christ is said to have spoken about the Deity, including Himself.<sup>37</sup> In such a context the term “Word” seems to be applied to God revealing himself verbally to people. But “the Word” is also transcendent and pre-existent,<sup>38</sup> thus “the Word” is not simply a name emphasising oral transmission. It is also an aspect within the Triune God, but what precisely it means in this context is not systematically explicated.

Terminologically, the Christology of the *CD* represents no consistent logos-Christology, however. In addition to “the Word” a number of other names are given to Christ within the Trinity. Using some scholarly intuition one may see a common factor behind these names. Christ is the light of the Father (πατερικὸν φῶς) according to *CH* 1.2. The Father himself is the original light (ἀρχίφωτος Πατήρ) according to the same passage. Light as a metaphor comes close to the concept of revelation, also present in the appellation “the Word”. The light from Jesus helps people to understand the meaning of the sacred rites, for example.<sup>39</sup> This is so also in the case of the “synaxis”, that is, the Eucharist.<sup>40</sup> And again the Father is the ultimate source (of light) and the Son the immediate successor in the activity of dispensing light to angels and men. The lights (plural!) of Jesus are also called θεουργικά,<sup>41</sup> which means much more than just “divine”: the light of Christ is a transforming power. Some of the parables Dionysius makes use of belong to another type of Trinitarian doctrine, however. The image of three lamps shining with just one light does not presuppose the primacy or initiative of the Father but suggests three divine persons exercising one and the same function.<sup>42</sup>

Transcendence is a frequently mentioned attribute of Christ. It is, naturally, an attribute applicable to the Trinity as a whole, too. But applied to Christ it receives a special meaning. The transcendence of Christ is over and over again mentioned as the point of departure when Dionysius intends to present the incarnation of Christ. Being in himself transcendent, transcendent for ever, Christ chose at a certain point of time to dwell among men. This brings us to the next aspect of Dionysius’ teaching of Christ: the incarnation.

## Christ in the world

The incarnation of Christ is mentioned and discussed several times in the *CD*. Its unexpected and/or paradoxical character is emphasised in two ways: by using the language of negative theology, and by constantly contrasting the incarnation with Christ’s original transcendence. An example of the latter instance is contained in a passage in the fourth letter, where Dionysius in fact uses double negation: “He (Christ) was not man, not as non-man, but as from men and beyond men; beyond man he truly became man”.<sup>43</sup>

God’s motive for undertaking such a surprise move is also repeatedly stated. The third letter provides an example of how divine love causes the transcendent Word to

<sup>37</sup> *DN* 2.1.

<sup>38</sup> *DN* 2.6.

<sup>39</sup> *EH* 7.3.1.

<sup>40</sup> Ἰησοῦ φωταγωγοῦντος ὁψόμεθα θεωρίαν. *EH* 3.3.2.

<sup>41</sup> *CH* 7.2.

<sup>42</sup> *DN* 2.4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ep.* 4. The translation is from Mortley 1986, 231, who also discusses the philosophical background of this passage.

become immanent: “As for the love of Christ for humanity, the Word of God, I believe, uses this term (“sudden”) to hint that the transcendent has put aside its own hiddenness and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being. But he is hidden even after this revelation”.

By emphasising the word “suddenly” (ἐξαίφνης), a term used by Plato in his *Symposium* to characterise the moment when a mystic, after lots of preparation, gets sight of the splendid world of ideas,<sup>44</sup> Dionysius brings out the element of surprise in the fact of incarnation. The word strongly suggests the punctual, perhaps even historically unique, character of the event.<sup>45</sup> What is definitely new in comparison with Plato’s use of the term is the fact that in the *DC* it refers to a physical event, the incarnation. If the use of the Platonic term is intentional, which it probably is, we witness a dramatic Christianisation of its content, as it refers to the incarnation. Love is mentioned as the motive for the incarnation, in this passage as often elsewhere. Dionysius even speaks of the “endless love of Jesus for us”.<sup>46</sup> The term used for love in the context of incarnation is usually *φιλανθρωπία*. The incarnation is characterised as an act of mercy: “The hierarch, who «desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth» ... proclaims the good news (τὰ εὐαγγέλια – plural!) to all that God out of his own natural goodness is merciful (ἰλεω) to the inhabitants of earth, that because of his love for humanity he has deigned to come down to us”.<sup>47</sup>

Even more important than the terminology used is the meaning: in passages dealing with the incarnation, love is unambiguously a “downward” movement, an affection of God towards men. This we state confronted with the criticism presented by Anders Nygren. But Eros is also described as a descending, philanthropic force by Proclus, the Neo-Platonist.<sup>48</sup> This may or may not be an influence from Christianity.<sup>49</sup> But in teaching a descending love which reveals itself in the incarnation of Christ, the Areopagite has clearly chosen a doctrinal position which is impossible to Proclus.

Numerous times Dionysius states the fact that the loving subject, the person who loves, is Jesus himself: “Out of love he has come down to be at our level of nature and has become a being. He, the transcendent God, has taken on the name of man”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Pl. *Symp.* 210e. See also Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.3.17, where the One is “suddenly” present and thereby the mystic has finally reached his goal. But the Areopagite would not be true to himself had he not combined two traditions here, too: “suddenly” is also important in the *NT*, e.g. in the description of Christ’s appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus. I owe this piece of information to Golitzyn 1999, 153, who presents a useful survey of the meanings of the word “suddenly”.

<sup>45</sup> Mortley 1986, 236–237, referring to Brons 1976, suggests that ἐξαίφνης expresses what is “unhoped for”, or “against hope”, and thinks that such a meaning “runs counter to the usual understanding of the incarnation”. Does it really?

<sup>46</sup> *EH* 5.3.5. In *EH* 3.3.11 the one loving is called “the Deity”, but the context reveals his identity. The text goes as follows: “Yet the goodness of the Deity has endless love for humanity and never ceased from benignly pouring out on us its providential gifts. It took upon itself in a most authentic way all the characteristics of our nature, except sin”.

<sup>47</sup> *EH* 2.2.1. Rist 1985, 238, n. 11 reads Dionysius in much the same way as we do: “The word *Philanthropia* is used frequently elsewhere in Dionysius. On practically every occasion it is used in connection with the Goodness (agathotes) of God as manifested by the Incarnation”.

<sup>48</sup> See Rist 1985, 235–236.

<sup>49</sup> It should be borne in mind that the detailed, polemical treatises against Christianity in the times of the Early Church were written by Middle- and Neo-Platonist philosophers first of all. The knowledge of Christian doctrine displayed by Platonists such as Julian the Apostate and Porphyry is quite amazing.

<sup>50</sup> *DN* 2.10.

From “So God loved the world” (John 3:16, meaning the Father) has become “so Jesus loved mankind” in the *CD*. And certainly this is so not only in the epistles contained in the *CD* but in the treatises also. An example from *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* may suffice to illustrate this: “For because of his goodness and his love for humanity the simple, hidden oneness of Jesus, the most divine Word, has taken the route of incarnation for us and, without undergoing any change, has become a reality that is composite and visible”.<sup>51</sup>

There is one exception, though, to the rule that the incarnation is a consequence of Christ’s love in particular. In the beginning of *DN* there is a passage where the Trinity as a whole is the loving subject: “But they especially call it (the Trinity) loving toward humanity, because in one of its persons (ὑπόστασις) it accepted a true share of what it is we are, and thereby issued a call to man’s lowly state to rise up to it”.<sup>52</sup>

A Christocentric emphasis is present in this passage also, since in the Trinity “one of its persons” is both included in the loving process and the illustration of the love in action. The Christianity of Dionysius is not a message about God’s love in general, similar to the Neo-Platonic doctrine of the goodness of the One, but a message about Christ’s love in particular, revealed in the incarnation.

The scope of this love realised in the incarnation is the salvation of the world.<sup>53</sup> Salvation may be understood in different ways, but it should not be claimed, in the way Bernhard Brons does, that the *CD* lacks a soteriological interest.

A feature typical of Dionysius is the constant reminder of the fact that Jesus, even in the incarnation, kept his divine nature intact. It suffered no change whatever.<sup>54</sup> This is obviously very important to Dionysius. He believes that through communion with Jesus we can become completely changed, that is, divinised.<sup>55</sup> The Areopagite seems to argue that if Christ’s divinity was reduced, ours would be reduced, too.

It should be remembered that in the same way as the unchanged divinity is emphasised, the unabbreviated humanity of Jesus is again and again pointed out, too. “It (the Deity) took upon itself in a most authentic way all the characteristics of our nature, except sin. It became one with us in our lowliness”.<sup>56</sup> Christ has “united our humility with his own supreme divinity”.<sup>57</sup> A witty way of referring to both “natures”, a word which the *CD* avoids, is found in the expression “the divine (θεουργίαι) works of Jesus the man (ἀνδρικοί)”.<sup>58</sup> According to another passage God “gave us a most perfect share of his nature by completely taking on our own, and that in this way he made it possible for us to enter into communion with himself”.<sup>59</sup> The Areopagite has the commonly shared Early Christian conviction in mind, according to which Christ must be like us and we like him if salvation is to be reached. Dionysius makes no attempts to divinise the human nature of Christ. He is, on the contrary, keen to stress that the incarnate Christ was really human.

<sup>51</sup> *EH* 3.3.12.

<sup>52</sup> *DN* 1.4.

<sup>53</sup> *EH* 2.2.1, quoted above on page 9. Note also the expression σωστική ἀγαθοουργία in *CH* 4.4

<sup>54</sup> “It (the Deity) became one with us in our lowliness, losing nothing of its own real condition, suffering no change or loss”. *EH* 3.3.11.

<sup>55</sup> *EH* 3.3.11.

<sup>56</sup> *EH* 3.3.11.

<sup>57</sup> *EH* 3.3.12.

<sup>58</sup> *EH* 3.3.4. A more precise translation would read: “the human divine works of Jesus”.

<sup>59</sup> *EH* 3.3.7.

He speaks, for example, of Christ's *καθ' ἡμᾶς παντελής καὶ ἀναλλοίωτος ὑπαρξίς*.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, referring to the Trinity, he says that "in one of its persons it accepted a perfect (*ὀλικῶς*) share of what it is we are, and thereby issued a call to man's lowly state to rise up to it".<sup>61</sup> To him Christ is a *σύνθετος*, but his actions not divisible among the "natures".<sup>62</sup>

Worth noting is the consequence which Dionysius draws from his Christology for Christian spirituality: Christian life means that *ἡμεῖς ὡς μέλη σώματι συναρμολογηθῶμεν αὐτῷ*.<sup>63</sup> Christians are supposed to cling to Christ as feet and legs cling to the body. Their goal is to become like Christ, *χριστοειδής*.<sup>64</sup>

In spite of the fact that Christ's divine nature did not change, his status within the hierarchies did. As a true human being he belongs not only to the heavenly realm but also to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Within this structure of humans and sacraments he is of course the highest. This is not particularly surprising. But being the highest in the ecclesiastical hierarchy he is, all the same, below the lowest ones in the heavenly hierarchy. As such he receives the services of the angels, not the other way round. This is mentioned by Dionysius as an example of Christ's humble obedience, but it also serves to illustrate that the fact of incarnation is also taken seriously by him within his central doctrine of hierarchies.<sup>65</sup>

## Christ on the Cross

There is no extensive treatment of the crucifixion of Christ in the *CD*. The passion and death of Christ are, nevertheless, mentioned repeatedly as main points in Christian belief. Dealing with the differentiations in the divine nature, the Areopagite states that the incarnation and suffering belong to the person of Jesus Christ, not to the Father or the Spirit.<sup>66</sup> This is a statement very much at issue during the Justinian era, when the formula "One in the Trinity suffered" was a favoured topic among theologians. The theology of the *CD* seems to favour such a formula.<sup>67</sup> *DN* 2.6 also brings out clearly that the incarnation and passion are seen as a unity, though Christ's "actions" are mentioned in the same context as forming a third element within Christ's personal contribution to salvation. Unspecified "works of Jesus the man" is the content of the Gospels, according

<sup>60</sup> *DN* 2.3, taking *καθ' ἡμᾶς* to mean "in our likeness". In this passage Dionysius also states that Christ became *οὐσιώδης* like us, thus giving emphasis to Christ's true humanity.

<sup>61</sup> *DN* 1.4. Translation partly differing from that in note 1 above.

<sup>62</sup> "Furthermore, it was not by virtue of being God that he did divine things, not by virtue of being a man that he did what was human, but rather, by the fact of being God-made-man he accomplished something new in our midst – the activity of the God-man". *Ep.* 4.

<sup>63</sup> *EH* 3/3 12. Völker 1958, 57 deals with the *imitatio Christi* –concept in *CD*.

<sup>64</sup> *EH* 5.1.

<sup>65</sup> *CH* 4.4. See also Roques 1957b, 1104: "Man muss folglich sagen, dass die Inkarnation das Wort auf sehr reale Weise in unsere Hierarchie eingliedert". But Brons 1976, 237 is of another opinion: according to him a Docetic Christology fits best within the Dionysian system.

<sup>66</sup> *DN* 2.6.

<sup>67</sup> "In one of its persons it accepted a true share of what it is we are", *DN* 1.4. The suffering itself is not explicitly mentioned here, however. Riedinger 1964, 151 pays attention to the fact that in a Coptic autobiography Dionysius makes explicit use of the mentioned "theopaschite" formula.



to Dionysius.<sup>68</sup> The main reason for the incarnation is, in the *CD* as in many other Early Christian texts, the passion on the cross.

In addition to the aforementioned non-specified “acts” of Christ only little is said about the works of Jesus from Nazareth in the *CD*. The virgin birth and the walking on the waters are mentioned, and so is Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. The crucifixion is also mentioned, as will be shown below.<sup>69</sup> The *CD* is, then, similar to many early Christian creeds, where little more is said about Christ than that he was born of a virgin, became man, suffered, and died.

The Areopagite quotes once the famous saying of Ignatius of Antioch (Rom. 7:12): “He for whom I yearn has been crucified”.<sup>70</sup> The context in the *CD* is to clarify the term “yearning” and thus we are not entitled to discover any “theology of the cross” in the passage mentioned. But we do realise, again, that the passion of Christ is no *Fremdkörper* in the theology of the Areopagite.<sup>71</sup> The quotation from Ignatius does not prove the existence of an Ignatian type of a mysticism of passion, either. A Christian loves Christ, that much can be concluded from the quotation of Ignatius, and from the fact that the Areopagite quotes John 14:23: “He who loves me will keep my word”.<sup>72</sup> Identification with Jesus suffering on the cross is not a topic discussed.

The probably most famous and commented upon passage in the *CD* dealing with the crucifixion is that dealing with the solar eclipse in Heliopolis.<sup>73</sup> The Areopagite seems to claim that he himself actually experienced the darkness that occurred when Christ died on the cross. This is probably the text which comes closest to teaching a “mysticism of passion” in the *CD*. Interesting though this piece of information is from a historical point of view, and as a feature of the spirituality of the *CD*, it provides little new from a dogmatic point of view. We may conclude that the crucifixion was a topic very much present to the mind of the Areopagite. But he recalls the event not in order to expand on the theology of the cross but to provide examples of miracles, trying to convince a certain unbelieving Apollophanes.

The most extensive text on the significance of the death of Christ is a famous passage in *Letter* 8. There the dream of a certain Carpus in Crete is presented. The dreamer wishes disaster over the ungodly, but Jesus, in the dream, addresses him: “So your hand is raised up and I now am the one you must hit. Here I am, ready once again to suffer for the salvation of man and I would very gladly endure it if in this way I could keep men from sin”.

There are many traditional elements in this story. The story itself has a parallel in earlier monastic literature.<sup>74</sup> Carpus is obviously imported from St. Paul’s second

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<sup>68</sup> *EH* 3/3.4

<sup>69</sup> The virgin birth and the walking on the waters are mentioned in *DN* 2.9 and in *Epistula* 4. Roques 1957b, 1105 is, all the same, entitled to say that “dabei vernachlässigte Dionysius vielleicht ein wenig den historischen Charakter u. die eigentlich menschlichen Umstände der erlösenden Inkarnation”.

<sup>70</sup> *DN* 4.12.

<sup>71</sup> Sormunen 1934, 46 claimed that the incarnation was “endlessly more important” to Dionysius than the passion, a claim which I regard as misleading.

<sup>72</sup> *EH* 2.1.

<sup>73</sup> Ep. 7.2 The passage is extensively discussed by Riedinger 1964, but he focuses on chronological, not Christological, issues.

<sup>74</sup> Louth 1989, 21–22 has drawn my attention to this fact. Louth also points out a number of Platonic elements in this story as told by Dionysius, features not present in the earlier version!

letter to Timothy (4:13). Later Christian tradition made him one of the seventy disciples commissioned by Jesus, and the bishop in Thrace. The tradition says that he met St. Paul's disciple Dionysius the Areopagite on a missionary excursion to Crete. The contrast between the merciful Christ on one side, prepared to die a second time, and the mercilessness of a Christian on the other side is well-known already from the "quo vadis?" episode in the apocryphal Acts of Peter. Christ, in Carpus' dream, was "moved by compassion" (ἐλεήσαντα) towards the sinners. The use of this story within the *CD* indicates that Dionysius lived in a spiritual milieu where the suffering and death of Christ were present even outside their liturgical context. In the same *Letter* 8, Dionysius also reminds his readers that "Jesus asked the Father to pardon those who treated him impiously, even in his suffering", <sup>75</sup> thereby illustrating that this event in connection with the crucifixion was important for his understanding of Christianity. An obligation to follow the example of Christ, in other words, to follow the principle of *imitatio Christi* is thus deduced from Christ's words on the cross. Love towards one's enemies is the main topic of *Letter* 9.

## Christ in the Sacraments

In *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* a number of holy rites are discussed. They are not called "sacraments", which in Greek is usually expressed by the word *μυστήρια*, but occasionally they are called *τελεταί*. The most important of them, according to the *CD* itself, are baptism, the Eucharist, and holy Chrism, but funeral rites are also presented. An examination of their relevance to Christology will be our next task to undertake.

### A. Baptism

A daily dying with Christ to sin, for example by practicing penitence, is not mentioned in the *CD*. But baptism certainly means dying with Christ, and dying to sin. Dionysius writes: "By dying to sin in baptism one could say mystically that he shares in the death of Christ himself". <sup>76</sup> "By his triple immersion and emersion he (the one who is baptised) imitates, as far as the imitation of God is possible to men, the divine death of one who was three days and nights in the tomb, the lifegiving Jesus". <sup>77</sup>

In this passage the imitation of Christ is explicitly mentioned twice, though Christ is called "God" in the latter instance. The ideal life of a Christian can thus be called both "Christ-like", as was noted above (p. 119), but also "imitation of God", *θεομιμησία*. <sup>78</sup> The limitation expressed by the words "as far as possible" brings a certain realism to the presentation, but its exact meaning is hard to determine. Maybe it is a way of expressing that Christians are to some extent sinners also after baptism.

The cross of Christ, Christ's death, Christian baptism and the benefits of baptism are briefly mentioned later on in *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* when the holy Chrism is the issue:

<sup>75</sup> *Ep.* 8.4

<sup>76</sup> *EH* 2.3.6.

<sup>77</sup> *EH* 2.3.7. Völker 1958, 32 makes the general statement that the Areopagite presents baptism "eng in Zusammenhang" with the death of Christ, a statement with which we can agree.

<sup>78</sup> Alexandropoulos discusses the concept of *θεομιμησία* in the *CD* in his article, 2008, 49–50. He defines it, in my view correctly, as the imitation of the (sinless) life of Jesus. There is, according to Alexandropoulos, no way to imitate the (hidden) nature of God.



Similarly, in my view, one may explain that rite at the purifying baptistery when the hierarch pours the ointment in drops to form a cross. He thereby shows to those able to contemplate that Jesus in a most glorious and divine descent willingly died on the cross for the sake of our divine birth, that he generously snatches from the old swallowing pit of ruinous death anyone who ... has been baptised “into his death”, and renews them in an inspired and eternal existence.<sup>79</sup>

The effects of Christ’s death, offered to the believer through baptism, are thus the traditional ones: the coming to an end of the former life, new birth to a new life, and renewal.<sup>80</sup> The “swallowing pit of ruinous death” is the same figure of speech as in the dream of Carpus, dealt with above. The expression used (“renewal...in an eternal existence”) seems to mean more or less the same as rebirth. But of course the logic of the passage requires that those who received new life in baptism go on practising that life. In the passage dealing with baptism and the holy Chrism connected thereto, Dionysius portrays Christ as a kind of all-in-all in the life of the new Christian. He writes:

(The priests) summon the initiate to the sacred contests which, with Christ as his trainer, he must undertake. For it is Christ who, as God, arranges the match, as sage lays down the rules, as beauty is the worthy prize for the victors, and more divinely, as goodness is present with the athletes.<sup>81</sup>

The dying to sin in baptism is mentioned at the end of this passage, indicating that there is a logical connection between everyday Christian life as ἀσλητήης and baptism, but the latter is not explicitly used as an argument for the former. The Christocentric character of Christian life is beyond doubt. Translating the text of Dionysius into more modern language Christ can be called the organiser of the games, the coach of the sportsman, the jury and the trophy to be won. His being “present” with the athletes may or may not be a reminiscence of Matth. 28:20. There are, of course, numerous other biblical passages stating the presence of the Lord with his people.

### B. The Eucharist

The Eucharist is usually called σύναξις by Dionysius. The term puts emphasis on the coming together, συνάγειν, but since Dionysius does not explicate the reason for having chosen this terminology, it is hardly advisable to read much Eucharistic theology into it.<sup>82</sup> This is so also since our Areopagite is not the first one to apply this term to the Eucharist.

In the *CD* the logical place for a discussion on the Eucharist is the tract on *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*. The most extensive presentation is indeed there, but a short reference can also be found in *De caelesti hierarchia*. Material things are quite necessary

<sup>79</sup> *EH* 4.3.10.

<sup>80</sup> Roques 1957a, 276 writes with a certain ambiguity in *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité*: “Cette présentation du baptême constitue certainement le morceau le plus purement chrétien de toute l’oeuvre”. With “oeuvre” the *EH* is meant.

<sup>81</sup> *EH* 2.3.6

<sup>82</sup> Meyendorff 1969, 140 claims that this Eucharistic terminology, stressing the coming together of the congregation, does not correspond at all to the Eucharistic theology of Dionysius.

for humans, Dionysius claims, in order to reach the heavenly hierarchy.<sup>83</sup> He mentions beautiful things (for the eyes), wonderful odours (for the nose), and visible light as examples. Then he goes on to say: “The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus”.<sup>84</sup> The translation seems unnecessarily “spiritualising” here. Dionysius describes participation in the Eucharist by using the words τῆς Ἰησοῦ μετουσίᾳς (participation) but strictly speaking he is not claiming that the participation is only symbolic. All heavenly things are given to us *through* symbols (συμβολικῶς δέδοται). The gift contained in the sacrament is a real one, but it is not given without a visible symbol. The gift, in the case of the Eucharist, is said to be Ἰησοῦς.

In *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, Dionysius discusses the Eucharistic liturgy at length. When dealing with the commemoration of the dead he says that the names of the dead are mentioned while the Eucharistic elements are placed on the altar.<sup>85</sup> The reason for this procedure is “to make clear in this way that they (the deceased believers) are unshakably bound to him (Christ) in a sacred and transcendent union (ἔνωσις)”. Perhaps it is not too daring to draw from this the conclusion that the goal of the believers’ lives is union with Christ. If this is so, we can hardly maintain that Christ plays a minor role in this interpretation of Christianity. Dionysius has a few words to say about the Eucharistic elements also in this context. They are symbols (σύμβολα) of Christ.<sup>86</sup> The Areopagite switches terminologically from “Jesus” to “Christ” here, but this probably lacks theological significance. In other Eucharistic passages he speaks in line with his general terminology of “Jesus”. More important is the term “symbol”. If it is read, not in the light of the Eucharistic quarrels in Reformation times but in accordance with the Dionysian theory of symbols, it becomes crucially important. There is no other way of participating in the divine than by means of symbols. Dionysius interprets himself when he states concerning these symbols that through them Christ is meant (σημαίνεται) and is really partaken of (μετέχεται). In a theology such as that of the Areopagite, participation is what Christianity is all about – and it takes place in the Eucharist also.<sup>87</sup>

In connection with the description of the Eucharistic liturgy, Dionysius indicates that the history of the Last Supper and passion of Christ was read/sung. This is, however, indicated using most obscure language, intelligible only to those knowing the order of the liturgy by heart.<sup>88</sup> More clearly, the same thing is indicated later in the discussion concerning the Eucharist. Dionysius writes:

This imitation of God, how else are we to achieve it if not by endlessly (Gr. *αεί*, my note) reminding ourselves of God’s sacred works and doing so by way of the sacred

<sup>83</sup> CH 1.3.

<sup>84</sup> CH 1.3.

<sup>85</sup> EH 3.3.9.

<sup>86</sup> EH 3.3.9.

<sup>87</sup> There is a major clash between Wesche 1989 and Perl 1994, who rejects Wesche’s “Neo-Platonising” interpretation of Dionysius. The main issue seems to be whether a “symbol” in the CD is something that unites with the thing/God symbolised or if it is an indication of the separation between the thing symbolised and the symbol. Golitzin for his part argues in a note: “I for one would argue that Christ’s presence on the altar is quite real for Dionysius, though it be ‘symbolical’. That is, it is different in degree, if not in kind, from His presence in the other symbols of scripture and liturgy”. Golitzin 1999, 148–149, n. 58.

<sup>88</sup> The expression used is τὰς ιερὰς θειουργίας υμνήσας, EH 3.3.10 This happens immediately before the elevation of the Eucharistic elements.

hymns and the sacred acts established by the hierarchy? We do this, as the scriptures say, in remembrance of him.<sup>89</sup>

In these passages Christ is, again, called God. The terminology used here is quite remarkable. By “this imitation” (τὸ θεομίμητον) Dionysius refers to his own treatment of the *theosis* of our nature in the previous paragraph. In this context the imitation of Christ does not primarily mean the repetition of Christ’s works and deeds, but the gradual transformation of our nature into Christ’s. The remembering of Jesus’ “providence for the salvation of the human race”<sup>90</sup> takes place through (singing, listening to?) the “sacred hymns” and attending to the acts of the hierarchy in connection with the celebration of the Eucharist. By saying this, Dionysius indicates that he is a person regularly (*αἰ*) attending the Liturgy, paying special attention to everything in the Eucharistic liturgy that refers to the work of Christ on our behalf.

One of the best known passages in the *CD*, often presented iconographically, is that where the apostles together with Dionysius himself, and his teacher Hierotheus, are gathered around the *θεοδόχον σῶμα*.<sup>91</sup> It has been argued that this text in fact deals with the celebration of the Eucharist,<sup>92</sup> though the iconographical presentation takes the *σῶμα* to mean the Virgin. If the Eucharist is meant, we obtain important additional information about the central place the Lord’s Supper has in the Christianity of Dionysius. This interpretation being hypothetical we dare not trust much to this argument.

### C. The Chrism

In the *CD* the Chrism is called τὸ μύρον, quite as tradition demands. It is not only an addition to the ritual of baptism. The focus is on the Chrism itself, on the consecration of it, and on the many occasions where holy Chrism could be used. It was, Dionysius says, used in connection with all ecclesial rituals: “A consecrating prayer is offered over the ointment and this is then used in the holy sacraments of sanctification for almost all of the hierarchy’s rites of consecration”.<sup>93</sup> And, using slightly different words, he says: “And, what is even more divine, the divine ointment is used for the consecration of every sacred thing”.<sup>94</sup> Thus it is mentioned also in connection with baptism, the funeral, and the Eucharistic altar. It must be regarded as something particularly holy, since holiness was bestowed to others by means of it in the act of consecration. But the one consecrating everything is Jesus, and thus the Chrism is in fact a symbol of Christ himself.<sup>95</sup>

In him, as scripture says, we have access to consecration and are mystically offered as a holocaust. So let us behold with transcending eye that divine altar where

<sup>89</sup> *EH* 3.3.12.

<sup>90</sup> *EH* 3.3.12.

<sup>91</sup> *DN* 3.2.

<sup>92</sup> Walsh 2001, 846.

<sup>93</sup> *EH* 4.2.

<sup>94</sup> *EH* 4.3.10.

<sup>95</sup> Lampe 1961, s.v. *μύρον* quotes Dionysius using the Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* (3.497a) saying τὸ τίμιον μύρον σύμβολον τοῦ δεσπότου Χριστοῦ, but alas, this sentence is not to be found in the Göttingen edition. Nevertheless the logic of Dionysius’ presentation requires this same conclusion.

sanctifying consecrations are performed, itself being consecrated by the most divine ointment. For it is the most holy Jesus who consecrates himself for us.<sup>96</sup>

As the Chrism is present in all actions and in the most central place of the church, i.e. the altar, the presence of Christ is thereby indicated to those understanding the meaning of the anointment. Through the Chrism every baptised Christian has access to Christ, not only the highest hierarchs.<sup>97</sup> “We” have access, Dionysius tells his reader.

The picture becomes more complicated by the fact that Dionysius sometimes combines the Holy Spirit with the Chrism. But even so the general picture remains Christocentric. After baptism Christ got the Spirit, and after baptism a Christian gets the Chrism, and thereby the Spirit.<sup>98</sup> In connection with baptism the bishop pours ointment (into the baptismal water, consecrating it) in the form of a cross.<sup>99</sup> The connection between Christ and the Chrism is thereby indicated again.

The Areopagite also combines the Seraphim with the Chrism. The concrete reason for this seems to be the twelve-fold (two times six wings of the Seraphim) cover used on the vessel containing the Chrism in order to protect it.<sup>100</sup> And, in the middle of his exposition on the holy Chrism, Dionysius says:

This is why the twelve folds signify the order of seraphim... They stand in assembly around Jesus and they rightly embark upon the most blessed sight of him, and in the infinitely pure receptacle of their souls they receive the fullness of his spiritual gifts and, if one may use the language of sense perception, they sing, with voices that never grow silent, the glorious hymn of the divine praises.<sup>101</sup>

This gathering around Christ in the heavens has its counterpart in the liturgy when the assistants gather around the “hierarch”, the bishop.<sup>102</sup> In front of this description the attribute “Christocentric” to Christian worship seems appropriate indeed.

#### *D. The funeral*

Dionysius deals with the Christian burial rite, too, though this ceremony is not included among the three sacraments belonging to the hierarchical order. The ceremony aims at strengthening the belief in the resurrection of the body and in eternal life. Christ is said to be the proof and the example of the eternal union between soul and body. An entirely spiritual and a completely materialistic eternity are both rejected: No sacred men will ever fall into such error, for they know that their whole being will be granted the peace which will make them Christlike.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> EH 4.3.12.

<sup>97</sup> O’Daily suggests, in my opinion incorrectly, that there is a fundamental difference between the relationship between the higher hierarchs to Christ and that of an ordinary Christian. He writes: “Es schliesst die Vorstellung aus, dass jeder Christ direkte Verbindung mit Christus als Menschen habe; diese Verbindung steht vielmehr nur der höchsten menschlich-hierarchischen Stufe kraft ihrer Berufung und Weihe offen”. O’Daily 1981, 775. But it is certainly true that the “uninitiated”, i.e. the unbaptised, are excluded from both the Eucharist and the Chrism according to the CD.

<sup>98</sup> EH 3.3.10.

<sup>99</sup> EH 3.3.10.

<sup>100</sup> EH 4.3.5.

<sup>101</sup> EH 4.3.5.

<sup>102</sup> EH 4.3.6.

This eternal being in the likeness of Christ is, it seems, a logical consequence of the fact that “in this life they have somehow become «members of Christ»”.<sup>104</sup> From a logical point of view Dionysius could hardly have tied the Christian and Christ more strongly together than he does in the context of the funeral rite. But statistically, and judging from the topics discussed in this context, this Christocentric emphasis is not particularly clear, since Dionysius here and often elsewhere, too, does not deal explicitly with Christ all the time.

## Christ in the Hierarchies

The centrality of the hierarchies in the theology of the Areopagite is obvious. The word “hierarchy” is possibly a creation of Dionysius himself. Two of his four extant treatises are devoted to the hierarchies, forming more than half of the entire text of the *CD*. Thus the role played by Christ in this context must be regarded as rather crucial to the question of Christ in the whole of the Dionysian theology.

A hierarchy is a sacred order, the Areopagite says.<sup>105</sup> Knowledge, in the *CD* often called “light”, and a certain kind of providential activity belongs to each member of the hierarchy. These properties make it possible for the members of a hierarchy to serve those lower down the hierarchical scale. Speaking about the goal of a hierarchy the Areopagite says:

A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that when its members have received this full and divine splendour they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God’s will to beings further down the scale.<sup>106</sup>

The importance of passing on, downwards, is strongly emphasised in other passages as well. In the seventh chapter of *De caelesti hierarchia* Dionysius says:

Now I think I have already said enough about the fact that the aim of every hierarchy is always to imitate God so as to take on his form, that the task of every hierarchy is to receive and to pass on undiluted purification, the divine light, and the understanding which brings perfection.<sup>107</sup>

In other words, by reflecting the light of God properly, anyone belonging to a hierarchy will be helpful towards his or her less advanced fellows. Thus the hierarchy in its totality forms a kind of distribution network, where “light” is passed from God “down” to more remote beings.

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<sup>103</sup> *EH* 7.2.

<sup>104</sup> *EH* 7.1.

<sup>105</sup> *CH* 3.1.

<sup>106</sup> *CH* 3.2.

<sup>107</sup> *CH* 7.2. In *CH* 10.2 the gift passed on is, interestingly enough, called *θεολογικαὶ γνώσεις*: “the holiest of the seraphim «cry out to one another», and, it seems to me, this shows that the first ranks pass on to the second what they know of God”.

Jesus Christ is related to this hierarchical structure in a number of different ways. First of all, he is the creator and keeper of the whole construction. The Areopagite brings this out in most solemn language: “Jesus who is transcendent mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source (*ἀρχή*) and the being (*οὐσία*) underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, all the workings of God ...”<sup>108</sup>

Remembering that the hierarchy as a whole consists of different angelic creatures and human beings in the church it is easy to see how Dionysius’ view follows early Christian tradition. According to traditional Christianity, expressed e.g. in the Nicene Creed, God created through the Son both things invisible and visible. Dionysius is stating the same fact. But he arranged the whole creation as a distribution network and here he is rather original. To him the network including the flow of light is an arrangement by Jesus Christ. In the ideal case, when functioning as it is supposed, the hierarchy is not a rival but an instrument of Christ.

There is more to the relationship between Christ and the hierarchy than just the genetic aspect. The light, over and over again mentioned as the primary element in the totality of hierarchies, has a name. When speaking about light, the Areopagite speaks of God, who is light, but transmitted to us only through “the light of the Father”, that is through the Son. It has already been stated that the incarnation is often praised in the *CD*, but in the present context the eternal Son is meant. It is an eternal “arrangement” that the light of God only comes through the Son, but the incarnation is seen as a kind of culmination point in this perpetual system. But to say that the light comes “through” the Son is not all that the Areopagite wishes to say. The Son is himself the light. There can, then, be no true light apart from Him. The Seraphim, being on the highest top of the hierarchies, are allowed to enter into fellowship, *κοινωνία*, with Jesus and participation (*μετουσία*) in His light.<sup>109</sup> The spiritual gift transmitted through the hierarchies is certainly called “light” over and over again, but this light is understood as being Christ himself.

The hierarchies are thought to function in such a way that the human receiver of light from above himself turns his mind upwards to the origin of the light. In the words of the Areopagite himself: “We come to look up to the blessed and ultimately divine ray of Jesus himself”.<sup>110</sup>

As the sun turns the plant towards itself, so God turns the soul towards Him by giving light. The goal of the hierarchical system is, then, God himself. Often the Areopagite is more specific than that. Certainly God is the goal, but by God Christ is meant. Christ is the goal. Being like Christ is explicitly mentioned as an eschatological goal in *DN* 1.4.<sup>111</sup> Enthroned above the whole hierarchical structure he is rightly called the “King of Glory” and “Lord of the heavenly powers”,<sup>112</sup> constantly transforming his people, though. He assimilates all beings to his own light.<sup>113</sup> The consequence for humans is thus that “formed of light ... we shall be perfected and bring about perfection”.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>108</sup> *EH* 1.1. Wesche 1989, 64–66 interprets Dionysius in the following way: “In His descent from and return to heaven Jesus has brought the ecclesiastical hierarchy into being, making Himself present at every level of the hierarchy, embracing it in the entirety of its structure and movement”.

<sup>109</sup> *CH* 7.2.

<sup>110</sup> *EH* 1.1.

<sup>111</sup> “But in time to come, when we are incorruptible and immortal, when we have come at last to the blessed inheritance of being like Christ, then, as scripture says, «we shall always be with the Lord»”.

<sup>112</sup> *CH* 7.3.

<sup>113</sup> *Πρὸς τὸ οἰκεῖον αὐτὰς ἀφομοίῳι ... φῶς*, *EH* 1.1.



An interesting variation of expression is given in the second book of *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*.<sup>115</sup> In a context dealing with the incarnation, Christ is said to bring fire to the rational beings (in the hierarchy): “Like a fire, he has made one with himself all those capable of being divinised”. Having stated this Dionysius quotes John 1:12. Accepting the fire-like Christ, then, brings about *ἐνωσις* and *θέωσις*, both mentioned explicitly here. A light ontologically separated from Christ is not present in the hierarchies, but the light and fire who is Christ himself.

In the *CD* Christ is the origin of the hierarchies, the gift given by the hierarchies and the ultimate goal of the hierarchic system. Thus it is hardly surprising to notice that the *CD* refers to Christ with the Pauline words about God who “works all things in all” (1 Cor. 12:6).<sup>116</sup> This Christocentric view is partly hidden in the extensive presentation of the hierarchies, since the Areopagite does not call the Son all the time by name, but operates with a more general terminology about God, light etc., a terminology deliberately reminiscent of the Neo-Platonic language.

## Conclusions

The most famous passages dealing with Jesus Christ in the *CD* are found in the *Epistulae*. The dream of Carpus on Crete and the solar eclipse in Heliopolis during the crucifixion present a suffering Saviour in a dramatic way, not found elsewhere in the *CD*. But a Saviour-type of Christology does exist also in the main treatises, though it cannot be said to be central. The suffering Saviour-type of Christology is most evident in the baptismal theology, where dying with Christ is a frequently mentioned theme.

The prevalent type of Christology in the *CD* is the Trinitarian one. The Son has a prominent role in the Trinity. Being the eternal Light of the Father Christ plays a crucial role in all communication between God and his creation. He is also the source of all hierarchies, that is, the creator/author of the saving and deifying structure of the spiritual universe. His love for mankind makes him become man, without losing his eternal identity: he is forever “unchanged”. For the fifth/sixth-century debate concerning Christ’s natures the Areopagite has little interest. He manages to express himself in a way acceptable for both Dyophysites and Monophysites.

It is no doubt quite unfair to speak of a “thin Christian polish” only in Dionysius’ world view. The central elements of traditional Christology are all present, and certain parts of it display a Christocentric emphasis. Such emphases are the consistent use of the name “Jesus” for Christ, the importance of Christ’s (not only God’s) love for mankind and Christ’s being in the centre of the whole Christian life.

Certain features in the *CD* make the criticism against Dionysius’ Christology intelligible, though not acceptable. The first is the lack of a chapter on Christology. The references to Christ and his work must be found amid a multitude of other topics, in passages dealing with something other than Christology proper. Then there is also an obvious lack of references to the “historical Jesus”, in particular to the miracles performed by him. Also the quotations from Jesus’ teaching are few. The Christology of *CD* has

<sup>114</sup> *EH* 1.1.

<sup>115</sup> *EH* 2.2.1

<sup>116</sup> *DN* 11.5.



its starting point above, in heaven, and in the eternity, rather than in the Jesus of the Synoptic type. This is, however, a typical Byzantine procedure, not a characteristic of the *CD* only. Finally it can be noted that forgiveness and justification, central particularly for the *CD*'s Protestant critics, are not that central for Dionysius. He concentrates his theology on sanctification and *theosis*, on striving towards God and becoming like God. His baptismal theology illustrates, however, that forgiveness and rebirth are necessary parts of his understanding of Christendom, but the emphasis on deification may create another impression among his readers.

*De mystica theologia* illustrates how such an erroneous impression is easily borne. If *MT* is read separately from the rest of the *CD* it may appear to have a "thin layer of Christianity" only. Certainly *MT* can be read that way, and Völker has shown that in the Middle Ages *MT* circulated and was commented on – isolated from the rest of the corpus.<sup>117</sup> But if it is read in the light of the abundant liturgical material in the *CD* about Baptism, Eucharist, and the Chrism, it will be evident that according to Dionysius there can be no mysticism without the liturgy, the clerics, and the sacraments. And these, in turn, are all related to the incarnated Christ according to the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, a fact which does not change through the Neo-Platonic language used or philosophical patterns of thought.

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<sup>117</sup> Völker 1958, 218.

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