

2 Literature Survey

2.1 Introduction

Although there are many facets to Dionysian Studies, there seem to be two main issues towards which many concerns converge. The optimistic assumptions of scholars in previous ages led many to attempt to identify - often with misplaced confidence - the person behind the pseudonym; Hathaway lists twenty-two of the principal conjectures alone¹. But Rosemary Arthur² has shown that the questions concerning provenance and purpose still fascinate, as well as that of trying to 'lift the mask' of Denys.

Connected to the author's identity is the issue of the unusual synthesis of ideas present in the works, which has drawn others to expound primarily on the system or systems present in Denys' *univers hiérarchique* and on how they relate to the historical dialogue between academy and Church.

This brief survey therefore begins with a digest of literature concerning the mysterious provenance of the corpus and the evidence which suggests a late date of composition. The controversial origin and remarkable passage into circulation is then touched on, followed by a treatment of pagan objections to Christianity. Writers of the modern era, however, have also offered much critical comment on *CD*, sometimes denying the integrity of the author as either a philosopher or a Christian; these arguments are reviewed. However, in the light of the highly complex interaction between Neoplatonist themes and the late antique Church we shall suggest that the harsher of such judgements are questionable and - subject to the discernment of helpful criteria - open to greater scrutiny. The chapter therefore ends by focussing on the central issues of the Christian faith that seem to have scandalised educated pagans and that may have consequently motivated Denys, together with a suggestion of the criteria for further exploration of this relationship.

¹ Hathaway, R F, *Hierarchy*, pp31-5.

² Arthur, R A, *A new interpretation of the context and purpose of the Ps-Dionysian corpus*, London, 1998.

2.2 Provenance

The first surviving documentary evidence of a *Corpus Dionysiacum* is in the acts of a Council that took place in 532/3 between Chalcedonian Bishops under Hypatius of Ephesus³ and a group of Monophysites⁴ looking to the leadership of the moderate Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch, Severus⁵. His party produced texts from various Fathers to support their Christology, amongst whom was the Apostolic Father, Dionysius. Hypatius rejected the whole lot as misinterpretations but reserves a well-deserved comment for those purporting to come from the Areopagite:

Finally, we say what should have been said at the outset. Those quotations you claim to have come from the Blessed Dionysius the Areopagite - how can you prove that they are authentic, as you maintain? For if they do come from him, they could not have been unknown to Blessed Cyril⁶.

Despite the truth of Hypatius' observation - that neither Cyril nor any other Father cites Dionysius, the implication of which very few would differ with since the late 19th century - *CD* passed into the canon of orthodox patristic writings⁷. The influence of the work spread to philosophers and spiritual teachers like John Scotus Eriugena, Duns Scotus, Peter Lombard, the Victorines, Aquinas and many others, only to be challenged

³ *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, ed by A Di Bernardino, (trans by A Walford, Cambridge, 1992, p401) has Hypatius as Metropolitan of Ephesus from 531, dying post 537/8; apart from chairing the *Collatio cum Severianis* he was sent as imperial legate to Pope John II and obtained his adherence to the theopaschite formula in 533/4, also speaking against Anthimus at the Synod of Constantinople in 534 that deposed him for monophysitism.

⁴ Monophysitism is the term commonly used by western Christians to describe the movement that emphasised the divine nature of Christ in the fifth century Christological controversies. 'Miaphysite' is really a more accurate term as otherwise the Greek implies 'sole-nature' rather than 'one-nature', which was not the stance of the movement. The cause of the controversy lies before the Council of Chalcedon in that Alexandrine and Antiochene schools used *φύσις* in different ways to describe the relation between the divine and human in Jesus. For Cyril and the Alexandrines, *φύσις* referred to a concrete and complete entity, rather as we would use 'person'. Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Antiochenes tended to use *φύσις* qualitatively to describe a property or character of a person. The latter party would therefore quite naturally describe two 'qualities' of Christ, the divine and human, using *φύσις*. For the Alexandrines, however, discussion of this kind was confusing as it implied that there were two Christs, two distinct and separate persons. With this in mind, it is clear how the Chalcedonian definition of 'One Person in Two Natures' could have been unacceptable to those who followed Cyril's dictum, 'one Incarnate Nature of the Word'. Variant forms of Monophysitism existed, but that reprinted by Severus was very close to orthodoxy, diverging only in terminology.

⁵ Torrance, I R (*Christology after Chalcedon: Severus of Antioch & Sergius the Monophysite*, Norwich, 1988, pp5-6) notes that Monophysites and Chalcedonians was summoned to a council in Constantinople by Justinian in 532, but that Severus himself declined the invitation, staying away until summoned again in the winter of 534/5. His initial refusal to attend the royal city is given in *The Syriac Chronicle*, 9.16 (known as that of Zachariah of Mitylene, trans F J Hamilton & E W Brooks, London, 1899).

⁶ *Innocentii Maronitae epistula de collatione cum Severianis habita*, reprinted in *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, 4-II:173 (cited by J Pelikan, intro in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 1987, p13).

⁷ The whole corpus was first translated by Sergius of Reshaina (ob 536) into Syriac, almost certainly before 532 according to Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, p112.

eventually by the humanist Lorenzo Valla in the mid 15th century. Valla appears to have been the first to suggest pseudonymity since Hypatius, but his views were not widely circulated until many years after his death.

Knowing the *terminus ad quem* for *CD* is some help, but finding an *ante quem* is a more complex issue. Valla challenged the traditional Apostolic dating on several grounds, including that of linguistic style. In the modern era this criticism was developed in the late 19th century by Koch and Stiglmayr⁸, who secured a connection between *CD* and the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (*ob* 485)⁹. Noting a link was not a novelty if Lossky is right in asserting that St Maximus counted the apostolic Dionysius a Christian source for the pagan Proclus¹⁰. Yet the concepts employed by Denys suggest composition *after* the developments of Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus. Indeed, a recent thesis presents a case based on style, metaphysical concepts and vocabulary for an even closer connection with Damascius, the head of the Neoplatonist School in Athens when it was finally closed in 529¹¹, only three years before *CD* appeared with Hypatius and Severus.

Comparison with Christian sources also suggests a fifth century date of composition, there being affinities between the Cappadocian Fathers and Denys, especially regarding mystical *θεωρία* with St Gregory of Nyssa, the salvific purpose of *θέωσις* with Gregory of Nazianzus¹², and perhaps even the under-girding concern for ecclesiastical order that Denys shares with St Basil.

Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Moses*, written in the early 390s, has been noted as a possible source for some of Denys' characteristic themes. *MTh*, for instance, follows the biblical account of Moses' ascent on Mount Sinai, as does - naturally enough - *The Life of Moses*. But, as Rorem¹³ observes, there is a further common reference to

⁸ Koch, H, 'Der pseudo-epigraphische Character der dionysischen Schriften', *Theologische quartalschrift* 77 (1895); Stiglmayr, J, 'Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagiten in der Lehre vom Übel', *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895).

⁹ A substantial section of *DN* shows a close dependence on Proclus' *De Malorum Subsistentia*. This relationship will be explored more fully in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ Lossky, *The Vision of God*, p122.

¹¹ Griffith, R, 'Neoplatonism and Christianity: Pseudo-Dionysius and Damascius': *Studia Patristica* 29 (1997), 238-43.

¹² This issue will be explored more fully in Chapter 4.

¹³ Rorem, P, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans by C Luibheid, New York, 1987, p137, n10.

religious ritual as the basis for mystical ascent, the events of Sinai pointing through specialised terminology to the experience of the liturgical hierarch with Moses as the prototype. A little of this can be seen in the parallels given below:

Mystical Theology 1.3

It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He see the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents.

The Life of Moses 2.155-8

For this reason the garments are washed at divine command before he ascends the mountain ... When this has been accomplished and the herd of irrational animals had been driven as far from the mountain as possible, Moses then approached the ascent to lofty perceptions ... If one were a Moses, he would ascend higher and hear the sound of trumpets which, as the text of the history says, becomes louder as one advances.

A common typological subject and method need not imply a relationship between the two writers beyond theological coincidence, but other connections between Denys and Gregory of Nyssa arise from comparing the structure of *The Life of Moses* with that of *EH*. The former has a sequence of brief prologue, historical account (*ἱστορία*) and longer contemplation (*θεωρία*), which is the pattern used by Denys in describing the rites in *EH*: prologue, *μυστήριον* and *θεωρία*¹⁴.

Gregory also develops the use of the metaphor of darkness, *γνόφος*, present ambiguously in Philo and Clement¹⁵, as a positive term for divine presence transcending notions of light mysticism. Liddell and Scott's¹⁶ treatment of *γνόφος* and *δνόφος* suggest that this was an idea foreign to the Greek mind, but for Philo would have been rooted in the Exodus account of the pillar of cloud (14.20), the ascent of Moses (20.21) and Psalms

¹⁴ The issue of *θεωρία* will be explored more fully in Chapter 4.

¹⁵ Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York, 1985, pp31-43, traces the source of darkness (*γνόφος*) as a metaphor for the knowledge of God to Philo, where it is both a positive symbol for the ineffability of God and a negative one for the formless and blind search of human beings. This tradition continued with Clement, where it is mostly negative. *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed by G W H Lampe, Oxford, 1961, indicates quite clearly the development of *γνόφος* as a positive term in Gregory of Nyssa, the divine darkness where God dwells (*homiliae 1 in Cant*) and hence a symbol for transcendence (*The Life of Moses*, passim) and the contemplation of mysteries (*Inscriptions of the Psalms A7; The Life of Moses*), all of which are paralleled in Denys. It seems that only Denys, however, uses *σκότος* in a positive sense pertaining to theophany (cf Gregory of Nyssa *apologia in hexaëmeron* 21 where it connotes primeval darkness and *Mystical Theology* 1.1 where it describes inaccessible light).

¹⁶ *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ed by H G Liddell & R Scott, 8th edn, Oxford, 1897.

17.10 and 96.2 (*LXX*)¹⁷. From his eight uses of *γνόφος* in *DN* (1), *MTh* (6) and *Epistle* 5 (1), Denys clearly reserves this term for the positive sense of the divine unapproachable light, echoing strongly the Mosaic ascent. *Σκότος*, however, retains the more traditional Greek meaning of ambivalence for Denys: ten occurrences fall negatively in *DN* (4) and *EH* (1), positively in *MTh* (3) and ambiguously in *Epistle* 1 (2).

Rather than actual dependence, we might infer that these common elements suggest a similar climate in Christian scholarship and spirituality, pointing to a time *after* the settling of Neoplatonist categories of thought within the Christian tradition, and after the spread of influence of Gregory's manual of mystical ascent, *The Life of Moses*. But the text of *EH* gives a specific hint at a date after about 478, the time at which - if we take Theodore the Lector's story as truth - Peter the Fuller¹⁸, Patriarch of Antioch, first ordered the Creed to become part of the Eucharistic liturgy¹⁹. Denys writes of the significance of the *ὑμνολογία καθολικῆ* in *EH* 3.3.7 and this 'catholic hymn' has generally been taken to be the Creed.

Even if we question the veracity of Theodore's story, Jungmann²⁰ concludes that the Creed was in widespread use in the East in the sixth century, certainly being current in Syria before about 515. Given that reference to a very recent liturgical innovation would seriously undermine Denys' pseudonym, we might lean towards placing the date of composition a generation or so later, very close to the time of the works' appearance under Severus, which also allows for the influence of Damascius.

¹⁷ 'καὶ ἔκλινεν οὐρανὸν καὶ κατέβη, καὶ γνόφος ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ. νεφέλη καὶ γνόφος κύκλω αὐτοῦ, δικαιοσύνη καὶ κρίμα κατόρθωσις τοῦ θρόνου αὐτοῦ.'

¹⁸ *ODCC*, ed by F L Cross & E A Livingstone, Oxford, 1997, notes that according to an uncertain tradition, Peter the Fuller may have been a monk in Constantinople where he practised the trade of a fuller. Expelled for Monophysite leanings, he came under the protection of Zeno the Isaurian, whom he accompanied to Antioch in c470. Here he violently opposed the Chalcedonian bishop Martyrius and, during his absence, had himself made bishop in 470. Gennadius, Patriarch of Constantinople, quickly had him imprisoned but Peter regained his see from 475 to 477 when he was again deposed. Giving his assent to Zeno's *Henoticon* in 482, he again regained his patriarchate until his death in 488.

¹⁹ Theodoros Lector, *Historica Ecclesiastica*, fragment 2.48, Migne 86.209, Paris, 1857-66.

²⁰ Jungmann, J, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Missarum Sollemnia* I, trans by F A Brunner, New York, 1951, pp471, 486.

2.3 *Controversial Origin*

Although hardly favouring their position more than that of their opponents, the association of *CD* with the Monophysite controversy is underlined by the colloquy of 532. The Chalcedonian party, by contrast with Severus, was not familiar with the texts cited nor apparently were they able to search for passages in *CD* sympathetic to their own Christology. It is probable then that only the Monophysites had access to the corpus at that stage; or at least only Monophysites were ready to wield it as an authoritative source.

The ambiguity of Denys on Christological matters is shown in the primary texts in *CD* associated with Monophysite spirituality, each displaying an imbalance in their treatment of the divine and human nature of Christ. In *EH* 3.3.13 (the meaning of the unveiling of the eucharistic elements) while the Chalcedonian Christological term *ἀσύγχυτος* is used, Denys' language clearly emphasises divinity: 'Christ emerged from the hiddenness of his divinity to take on human shape, to be utterly incarnate among us while yet remaining unmixed'. Similarly *DN* 2.9-10 begins by echoing the vagueness of the *Henoticon*²¹, 'the sacred incarnation of Jesus ... is something which cannot be enclosed in words nor grasped by any mind'. But Denys then continues by asserting the divine nature of Christ in words assigned to the holy Hierotheus: 'The divinity of Jesus is the fulfilling cause of all ... He, the transcendent God, has taken on the name of man ... and he has come to join us in what we are without himself undergoing change or confusion'.

However, what Pelikan²² calls the 'most notorious statement' of Denys' Christology is in *Epistle* 4 and concerns the 'Monergist' formula that he adopts to describe the nature of Christ:

καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν οὐ κατὰ θεὸν τὰ θεῖα δρᾶσας, οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, ἀλλ' ἀνδρωθέντος θεοῦ, καινὴν τινα τὴν θεανδρικήν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῖν	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
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²¹ In a sense Denys' apophaticism can be seen as a theological flourishing of this ethos of reverent silence.

²² Pelikan, J, intro in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, p19.

Pelikan notes that some versions of the text read ‘... μίαν θεανδρικήν ἐνέργειαν ...’ (‘a single activity of the God-man’) leaving even less doubt as to how many ‘energies’ were operating in the incarnate Christ, which even in the critical text is in the singular. Somehow Denys’ pseudonym allowed him to survive the implications of this kind of language, even though some who echoed it were less fortunate²⁴.

Monophysite association, however, is not the only problem in the content of *CD*, since within Denys’ definition of holiness in the Church lie expressions echoing Donatist concerns. Parts of *Epistle* 8.2 convey a similar tone and language to that associated with Petilianus, the Donatist Bishop of Circa, cited by St Augustine²⁵. Words from St Matthew²⁶ - ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ - comprise the description used by Petilianus to describe the catholic clergy, and by Denys to describe priests convicted of impiety who return to the Church’s ministry.

Despite these historical associations with heterodoxy - and perhaps largely through the work of ‘neo-Chalcedonian’ scholars like John of Scythopolis, Leontius of Jerusalem and St Maximus the Confessor - *CD* become established as an important part of the Byzantine synthesis of Patristic Theology. Brought to the West by a papal legate who was to become St Gregory the Great, the works survived as a part of the Patristic corpus in the Latin church as well, no doubt largely because of the success of the pseudonym.

2.4 *Background of Christian and Pagan Antagonism*

From the very outset of the Dionysian odyssey, conflict between Christianity and pagan philosophy is implicit. St Luke’s narrative episode of St Paul’s visit to Athens²⁷ includes Christian indignation at the many idols in the city and controversy between St Paul and Jews in the synagogue and with passers-by in the market place every day. Those philosophers pictured meeting him - Epicureans and Stoics - disparage him with

²³ *CD* 2, 161.7-10, trans by Luibheid.

²⁴ *CD* was a possible Monergist influence on Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople and Pope Honorius, together hereticised for Monothelism in 681 at the Third Council of Constantinople.

²⁵ Augustine, *Answer to the Letters of Petilianus*, Bishop of Circa, 2.16.36, in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, Série 4, Traités anti-Donatistes, trans by Finaert, G, introduction and notes by Y M-J Congar et al, Paris, 1963-68.

²⁶ Matthew 7.15-16.

²⁷ Acts 17.15-34.

the term *σπερμολόγος*, suggest that he is ‘preaching foreign divinities’, and take him to the Areopagus²⁸.

The background of debate between the Hellenistic philosophers and Christians is, however, complex and multivalent. Dodds²⁹ notes that the extant evidence does not evenly represent a debate engaging all levels of society, being fought out in village market places as well as in the learned arguments of scholars. But from remaining works three phases can be identified in the dynamics of the debate.

Firstly, the period prior to 203, when neither Christian nor pagan thought formed a ‘closed or unified system’³⁰, provides the climate for first dialogue. A range of pagan attitudes is evident: Pliny the Younger viewed Christians as an administrative nuisance; to Galen, writing some time before 192, they were - like the Jews - a philosophically flawed curiosity, ‘for they order [their pupils] to accept everything on faith’³¹; only to Celsus did the Church represent an insidious threat to the stability of the Empire.

If everyone were to do the same as you, there would be nothing to prevent [the Emperor] from being abandoned alone and deserted, while earthly things would come into power of the most lawless and savage barbarians, and nothing more would be heard among men of your worship or of true wisdom.³²

But unlike the Apostolic Fathers, who had written for fellow-Christians, significant change accompanied this period with the emergence of the Apologists in the world of educated pagans. Here their purpose was not so much to convert but to persuade the Establishment to cease the sporadic persecutions of Christians that characterise this time.

A second phase, from circa 203 to 248, coincides both with the active teaching and writing life of Origen and with a time of increasing insecurity and misery in the Empire. Opportunity for the growth of the Church was allowed by freedom from persecution

²⁸ Acts 17.19a: *ἐπιλαμβάνομαι* need not suggest ‘arrest’ as in *RSV*; ‘take an interest in’ might be more consistent with vv19b-21 although this may be another of St Luke’s attempts at harmonisation.

²⁹ Dodds, E R, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge, 1965, pp102-3.

³⁰ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p103.

³¹ Galen, *Εἰς τὸ πρῶτον κινουῦν ἀκίνητον*, fragment cited in R Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, Oxford, 1949, p15.

³² Celsus, *apud* Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.68, trans by H Chadwick, Cambridge, 1953, p504.

which also helped quicken intellectual advances in Christian scholarship. No longer could Christianity be described as a religion for the uneducated as the Church's scholars absorbed Classical philosophy, mathematics and science. 'For whereas to Celsus ... the majority of Christians seemed to be stupid and uneducated fools ... with Origen, Christians and pagans met intellectually on equal terms'³³. And to Dodds, the air of intellectual superiority in Origen's *Contra Celsum* is largely justified³⁴.

Nor during this second period was Christian accommodation of Hellenistic culture without some reciprocal effort to absorb Christ into the Establishment. Origen was invited to Court by Julia Mamaea³⁵, and her son, Emperor Alexander Severus, is reported to have kept statues of Abraham and Christ in his private chapel along with Orpheus and Apollonius of Tyana, four mighty *προφήται*³⁶. Thus the Christian faith had by this stage secured appeal not just to those with little culture or education, but even to the imperial household.

The third period of dialogue, from 249 through to the Great Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius, began terribly with Decius' attempt to exterminate the Church 'from the top down' through the removal of clergy, which was cut short only by his death in battle. However, even more appalling social and economic conditions followed between 250 and 284 which helped to give further room for the expansion of the Church's numbers and influence.

Plotinus, the most significant philosopher of this age by far, never explicitly mentions Christians, but shows possible anti-Christian sentiments in several passages of the *Enneads* criticising gnosticism³⁷. In common with Celsus and most educated pagans, he shows distaste for the notion of bodily resurrection, asserting instead that 'the true awakening of the soul is a true resurrection not *with* the body but *from* the body'³⁸.

³³ Chadwick, intro to *Contra Celsum*, pxiii.

³⁴ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p106.

³⁵ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.21.3.

³⁶ Lampridius, *Alexander*, 29, cited in Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p107.

³⁷ He would not be the first to confuse these religious traditions since Celsus is accused by Origen of confounding the two (*Contra Celsum*, 5.61f, 6.24f). Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p104, also notes that this confusion of Christianity and gnosticism was probably shared by many Christian contemporaries of Celsus.

³⁸ *Enneads*, 3.6.6.

Likewise his awareness of the Christian doctrine of grace may well be an inspiration for the following passage addressing the Gnostic trait of self-exaltation.

Yet imbeciles are found to accept such teaching at the mere sound of words ‘You yourself are to be nobler than all else, nobler than men, nobler than even gods.’ Human audacity is very great: a man once modest, restrained, and simple hears, ‘You, yourself, are the child of God; those men whom you used to venerate, those beings whose worship they inherit from antiquity, none of these are His children; you without lifting hand are nobler than the very heavens’.³⁹

As Anthony Meredith⁴⁰ remarks, the reception of this gift *ἀνευ πόνων* on the part of the elect sits incongruously with the pure, Plotinian form of Neoplatonism which is represented very much as a philosophy of self-sufficiency rather than as a religion.

Sometime between 271 and the beginning of the fourth century⁴¹ Porphyry published *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν* which comprises the most intense expression of pagan insecurity and alarm at the success of the Church, as well as a powerful critique of Christian faith. What had with Galen been a question of the admirable Christian virtues of courage, self-control and justice being undermined by the lack of *φρόνησις* is, for Celsus, turned into an attack against the Church as the enemy of science⁴², and then echoed in Porphyry - despite Origen’s rationalism - as ‘an irrational and unexamined πίστις’⁴³.

Porphyry however, unlike Plotinus and to a greater extent than Celsus, brought great scholarship to bear directly on the Church. With his facility in Hebrew, he was deemed the greatest threat by Christian scholars. ‘Whereas Celsus before him had attacked Christianity from the standpoint of classical culture and philosophy, Porphyry elected to attack it with the help of the very weapons the Christians themselves employed - the bible’⁴⁴. He quotes copious passages to support his assertions, noting the Evangelists’

³⁹ *Enneads*, 2.9.9, trans by S MacKenna, London, 1991, p120.

⁴⁰ Meredith, A, ‘Porphyry and Julian Against the Christians’, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2, ed by H Temporini & W Haase, Berlin, 1980, 1119-1149.

⁴¹ Meredith, ‘Porphyry and Julian’, p1126, has a helpful discussion of the theories of composition date.

⁴² *Contra Celsum*, 3.75.

⁴³ Porphyry, *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν*, fr 1.17, cited in Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p121.

⁴⁴ Meredith, ‘Porphyry and Julian’, p1125.

false references to the Old Testament, their own contradictions, and the inconsistencies of St Paul⁴⁵.

From what survives of his attacks on Scripture, Meredith judges much of Porphyry's argument highly pedantic. But two lines of attack stand out for their perception, indicating that, regardless of Porphyry's tendency to be preoccupied with the trivial, he grasped well the apologetic basis of the Early Church. Firstly 'he firmly rejects the claims of Christians that they are representatives of a historical revelation appearing at a particular point of time for all men'⁴⁶, correctly seeing it as a threat to the ancient wisdom that he so admired. Similarly he mocked the demonstration of the validity of this faith through the means of the miraculous and the prophetic: 'these were the two main props upon which early apologetic rested'⁴⁷. Despite its often pedantic character, some measure of the power of the arguments of *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν* can be gauged from its fragmented survival and the fact that it was being burned as late as 448.

We can see in Porphyry a continuation of the same resentment of developing Christian influence that motivated Celsus, but the two display contrasting tempers in their attacks on the Church: Celsus writes with fervour from the perspective of pagan philosophy whereas Porphyry is the consummate rationalist, calmly dissecting the scriptural foundation of Christian faith. But the sour tone and passion of Celsus was to return at a later time, a generation after the settlement of Constantine.

Written in stages between June 362 and March 363, the main thrust of Julian's *Κατὰ Γαλιλαίων* is summarised by Meredith as a plea for the integrity of Hellenistic culture and a consequent attack on the viability of marrying Christianity with Platonism, as exemplified by Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Eusebius of Caesarea. Indeed, part of Julian's attack on Christianity - using an argument of Porphyry - would have won support from many Christian *simpliciores* who had so exercised Clement and would do so again the Cappadocians. 'If they were consistent they would not only eschew pagan sacrifices, they would also avoid the far more dangerous and lethal poison of pagan

⁴⁵ Porphyry, *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν*, frs 9 & 10 (false references); 12, 15, 16 (contradictions); 30-3 (Pauline inconsistencies), cited in Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p126.

⁴⁶ Meredith, 'Porphyry and Julian', p1136.

⁴⁷ A lengthy fragment derived from Jerome's commentary on Daniel preserves something of Porphyry's objective in showing that what purported to be a historical and prophetic work was actually pseudepigraphical and retrospective, cited in Meredith, 'Porphyry and Julian', p1136.

philosophy⁴⁸. Julian thus displays a desire to reinforce the caricature of Christian ἀπαίδευσις and fideism, as well as wanting to re-establish the pagan character of the establishment and intelligentsia.

His more focussed attacks deal with specific and particular revelation, repugnant to the classical notion of divine immutability but, by his day, an argument with a questionable basis in reality. Divine utterances had long been supplementing the rational basis of Neoplatonism with irrational authority. Julian also echoes Marcion in attacking the primitive and ignoble character of the God of the Old Testament, even though his respect for the antiquity of the Jewish religion rendered it preferable to Christianity: ‘bad though the Jews were, they were infinitely preferable to the Christians, who linked their inadequate conception of God to a total disregard for the tradition they had inherited’⁴⁹.

The return to bitterness exemplified by Julian is surely connected to his apostate status but, as Meredith notes, may also have been motivated by the development of irrationalism in post-Iamblichean Neoplatonism: ‘Christians did not have a monopoly of the unreasonableness against which Julian, himself a supporter of theurgy, protested so strongly. It may well have been the feeling that the Christians were so close to them that made the Neoplatonists protest so bitterly against them’⁵⁰.

2.5 *Modern Criticism*

For the modern reader, however, Monophysitism, Monergism and Donatism are relatively peripheral among the problems arising from *CD*. The most profound questions are raised by the Neoplatonist resonances, doctrines and verbatim phrases that are so common in Denys’ works, the characteristic around which criticisms tend to gather. Indeed, many have written on the Dionysian synthesis of Christianity and Neoplatonism, none more elegantly than Westcott⁵¹, who with great general admiration notes one consequence of the marriage in particular.

⁴⁸ Meredith, ‘Porphyry and Julian’, p1139.

⁴⁹ Meredith, ‘Porphyry and Julian’, p1142.

⁵⁰ Meredith, ‘Porphyry and Julian’, p1141.

⁵¹ Westcott, B F, *Essays in the History of Religious Thought in the West*, London, 1891, pp189-90; quoted in A Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, London, 1989, p130.

This harmonisation of Christianity and Platonism was not effected without a sacrifice. It is impossible to feel in Dionysius, in spite of his generous and apostolic aspirations, the lack of something which is required for the completeness of his own views. He fails indeed by neglecting to take in the whole breadth of the Gospel. The central source of his dogmatic error lies where at first it might be least looked for. The whole view of life which he offers is essentially individual and personal and subjective; the one man is the supreme object in whose progress his interest is engaged. Though he gives a magnificent view of the mutual coherence of all the parts of the moral and physical worlds, yet he turns with the deepest satisfaction to the solitary monk, isolated and self-absorbed, as the highest type of Christian energy.

Perhaps surprisingly, this same critique of individualism is made independently by the modern Orthodox theologians Meyendorff⁵² and Schmemmann⁵³, yet *without* Westcott's underlying theme of admiration for the pseudo-Areopagite. However, another Orthodox writer, Louth, defends Denys and seeks to articulate the source of the charge of individualism as a misunderstanding of the 'spectacular' quality of Denys' vision of the Church⁵⁴. He also takes issue with the pejorative interpretation of hierarchy as an ordering *imposed* on the Church, seeing it with Denys as that which *consists of* the Church. Louth further notes the great importance assigned to Denys by the Orthodox theologian, Lossky.

By contrast, scholars approaching Denys from the route of classical and late antique philosophy, like Wallis, are naturally sensitive to the Athenian flavour of the Neoplatonism in *CD*, finding a place for Denys as a Neoplatonist when his Christian credentials are deemed weak. His supposed failure as a Christian writer can be traced to the fact that his 'angelology seemed too reminiscent of the Athenian School's order of gods. Hence his God tended to become merely the supreme term in the metaphysical hierarchy'⁵⁵. Likewise, Wallis judges Denys insufficient in his attention to the Incarnation, and that his writings display considerable equivocation on the doctrine of Creation. He contends that, rather than as an act of gratuitous grace, Denys naturally describes creation in more emanationist terms, as a characteristic of divine nature. This, he argues, leads to a de-emphasis of the supernatural in his sacramental theology to such a degree that it becomes hard to distinguish it from pagan theurgy.

⁵² Meyendorff, J, *Le Christ dans la pensée byzantine*, Paris, 1969, p147; cited in Louth, *Denys*, p131.

⁵³ Schmemmann, A, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, London/Portland, ME, 1966, p106f; cited in Louth, *Denys*, p131.

⁵⁴ Louth, *Denys*, pp131-34.

⁵⁵ Wallis, R T, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd edn, London, 1995, p161.

Others, like Hathaway⁵⁶ and Vanneste, can state more categorically that there is nothing fundamentally Christian about Denys in either motives or works, ‘on n’y trouve pas trace d’une expérience chrétienne concrète, mais seulement l’écho d’une technique néoplatonicienne bien rodée’⁵⁷. Although hardly well concealed in the eyes of most, we must agree that even at his most Christian, Denys cannot hide the echo of Neoplatonism. Hathaway also imagines Denys writing with the works of Proclus before him within easier reach than the Septuagint, since the former are generally quoted with better accuracy.

Despite emphasising these basic weaknesses in Denys’ Christian credentials, Hathaway finds that his Neoplatonism does not confront Christian theology in a crude way. Rather it is as though he seeks to deny a ground for conflict between pagan and Christian belief systems. His objectives are thus summarised as firstly a highly audacious (and remarkably successful) claim to the mantle of the Areopagite, secondly the denial of a ground for conflict, and thirdly the diffusion of Pauline Christian monotheism into Neoplatonist metaphysics. ‘The crux’ passage illustrating this ‘blurring’ is at *DN* 11.3 where, Hathaway claims, Denys both avoids Christian dogma and quietly emends Neoplatonist metaphysics⁵⁸. Denying a ground for conflict supposedly enables Denys to smoothly transform St Paul’s ‘*agape* religion into *Eros* theology’⁵⁹, a change with profound repercussions.

This argument is an important element of Anders Nygren’s thesis⁶⁰ concerning the suffusion of the ‘*Eros*-tradition’ into the Christian notion of love, rooted in the New Testament basis of *ἀγάπη*. There is no point in denying it: Denys uses *ἀγάπη* on only seven occasions while *ἔρως* appears forty-eight times, mainly in *DN*⁶¹ in some remarkably dense patches. But far from hiding his motives, Denys explains his reasons

⁵⁶ Hathaway, R F, *Hierarchy*, p xv.

⁵⁷ Vanneste, J, *Le mystère de Dieu: Essai sur le structure rationnelle de la doctrine mystique du pseudo-Denys l’Areopagite*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1959; quoted in Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, p xv.

⁵⁸ Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, p xvii. Sadly, he does not explain the basis of the claim further.

⁵⁹ Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, p xviii.

⁶⁰ Nygren, A, *Agape and Eros*, trans by P S Watson, Philadelphia, 1953.

⁶¹ By Heil and Ritter’s index: *ἀγάπη* *DN* 150.16; 157.10,15; 158.11; 160.1,6; *Ep* 8 185.9; *ἔρως* *DN* 111.1; 152.4; 155.17,18; 156.1; 157.10,11,13,15,16,18; 158.1,2,3,5,11,19; 159.4,10,12,16,19; 160.1,12,18; 161.1,6,7,9,10,12,15,16; 205.4; 215.7; *CH* 14.12; 21.7; 58.2; *EH* 64.5; 74.16; 77.5; 83.18; 87.18; 100.2; 116.3; 130.10; *Ep* 10 209.1.

for preferring ἔρως over ἀγάπη in DN 4.11 onwards, describing - he claims - the same biblically-based Christian love daringly with a Hellenistic term.

The connection between yearning, mystical ascent and deification is also made clear by Nygren, as is his repulsion for the whole enterprise. ‘All true Mysticism belongs decidedly to the *Erōs*-tradition. Its main preoccupation is with man’s way to God. It is essentially self-salvation by means of an ascent to the Divine’⁶². But Denys, unlike others attracted by the Eros-tradition, is judged lacking both in originality and awareness; for, unlike Augustine’s conception of *caritas* based on both *erōs* and *agapē*, Denys simply confuses the two: ‘the eros motif has inundated Christianity, and Christianity is literally absorbed in Neoplatonic Eros theory’⁶³.

The source of this syncretism between Hellenistic Eros piety and Christianity is traced by Nygren to Origen’s misinterpretation of an intriguing passage in Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Romans*: ‘ζῶν γὰρ γράφω ὑμῖν, ἐρῶν τοῦ ἀποθανεῖν. ὁ ἐμὸς ἔρως ἐσταύρωται, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἐμοὶ πῦρ φιλόυλον’⁶⁴. Both Origen and Denys use this same phrase to support their argument that ἔρως is a permissible synonym for ἀγάπη⁶⁵, ‘my *Eros* has been crucified’ whereas Nygren insists on ‘my *worldly desire* has been crucified’⁶⁶.

Dean Inge⁶⁷ notes the same dependence but sides with Origen (against Lightfoot) on the translation of this phrase. However, although showing important differences, his argument anticipates that of Nygren - who does not cite this work - in condemning Dionysian and all Christian Mysticism. For example, Nygren, whom we noted above proscribing all mysticism as essentially self-salvation, concludes his case against the pseudo-Areopagite by asserting that Denys ‘in all essentials is a disciple of Plotinus and

⁶² Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p220.

⁶³ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p563.

⁶⁴ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* 7.2, *The Apostolic Fathers* 1 (Loeb Classical Library), London, 1985.

⁶⁵ Origen gives this in the prologue to *Commentarius in Cant*: ‘quæcumque de caritate scripta sunt, quasi de amore dicta suscipe nihil de nominibus curans; eadem namque in utroque virtus ostenditur ... Non ergo interest, utrum amari dicatur Deus aut diligi, nec puto quod culpari posit, si quis Deum, sicut Johannes ‘caritatem’, ita ipse amorem nominet. Denique memini aliquem sanctorum dixisse, Ignatium nomine, de Christo: ‘meus autem amor crucifixus est’ nec reprehendi eum pro hoc dignum iudico’. Denys gives the same in DN 4.12 (CD 157.9-11): ‘Καὶ τοὶ ἔδοξε τισὶ τῶν καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἱερολόγων καὶ θεϊότερον εἶναι τὸ τοῦ ἔρωτος ὄνομα τοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης. Γράφει δὲ καὶ ὁ θεῖος Ἰγνάτιος: <‘ Ὁ ἐμὸς ἔρως ἐσταύρωται >’.

⁶⁶ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, pp390-91.

⁶⁷ Inge, W R, *Christian Mysticism*, London, 1921, pp109-10.

Proclus' and that 'the fundamental Neoplatonism is but scantily covered with an exceedingly thin Christian veneer'⁶⁸. A contrasting objective is assumed, however, by Inge, who argues that Denys' 'main object is to present Christianity in the guise of a Platonic mysteriosophy'⁶⁹, even though the mystical tradition is still soundly damned:

Thus we see that the whole of those developments of Mysticism which despise symbols, and hope to see God by shutting the eye of sense hang together. They all follow from the false notion of God as the abstract Unity transcending, or rather excluding, all distinctions. Of course, it is not intended to *exclude* distinctions, but to rise above them; but the process of abstraction, or subtraction, as it really is, can never lead us to 'the One'. The only possible unification with such an Infinite is the ἀτέμνων νήγρετος ὕπνος of Nirvana.⁷⁰

Obviously these two intertwined matters - the nature of Christian love and the validity of mystical theology - impinge critically on the viability of Denys' sacramental system. They will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6. Nevertheless, it is perhaps heartening to note the presence of voices of a different register here.

Gene Outka⁷¹, for instance, argues against the extreme and naïve notion of Christian love exemplified by Nygren, suggesting that acquisitive self-love is unavoidably present in *all* love relations. Personal satisfaction is surely accrued from rescuing a drowning man. Yet no one would suggest that such an act is a form of psychological egoism since acquisitive love is not solely determinative.

Similarly, there may be some unintended irony in the arguments from representatives of Western traditions of the Christian faith who find in the Greek patristic writers themes that do not harmonise well with subsequent hermeneutics of philosophical or sociological reductionism. It is amusing that the fruit of such reactions to mystical theology can appear to have 'reformed' the categories of Christian thought backwards towards the fundamental concerns of classical *pagan* philosophy: morality and the good. For 'Christianity is in the first place an Oriental religion, and it is a mystical

⁶⁸ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p576.

⁶⁹ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, p105.

⁷⁰ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, pp111-12.

⁷¹ Outka, G H, *Agape: an ethical analysis*, London, 1976, pp286-87.

religion. These assertions sound strange today, in an age when it is generally assumed that to be a Christian means to lead a good life⁷².

This is surely not the only difficulty rooted in the difference between traditions of different ages and cultures concerning Christianity. Elements in the above review of the relations between the pagan Establishment and Early Church may, therefore, help considerably in clarifying the location of the most problematic of modern sensitivities and their relevance to Dionysian studies.

2.6 *Locating the Stumbling Blocks*

A theme already noted runs through much of the controversy between academy and Church and concerns the status of reason with respect to the Christian virtue of faith. But although Judaeo-Christian belief in propositions for which no proof was offered remained a problematic matter for pagan philosophers, the faith-reason controversy had largely faded in later Neoplatonism. This was due to the development of religious philosophies in Iamblichus and the Athenian School, on the one hand, and the appropriation of apologetics and reasoning structures for articulating the faith of the Church, on the other: the nibbling at pagan learning, which effectively brought Christian and pagan closer together⁷³. This dynamic created the circumstances in which Julian could both change allegiance, and find a motivating source of his energetic insecurity.

Origen, perhaps the greatest protagonist in this rapprochement, had in his time echoed Celsus' earlier contempt for mere *πίστις*. He thus admits its place with a qualification worthy of Plotinus or Porphyry, 'we accept it, as useful for the multitude since, partly owing to the necessities of life and partly owing to human weakness, very few people are enthusiastic about rational thought'⁷⁴. This shared disdain for purely irrational belief is the background for Origen's repudiation of Celsus' comparison of Christians with devotees of sorcery and mystery cults:

⁷² Barreau, J-C, preface in O Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, trans by T Berkeley, London, 1995.

⁷³ Denys does not use cognates of *πίστις* frequently: the substantive appears only three times and *πιστεύω* a further six times: this could not have been an area of sensitivity for his readers.

⁷⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.9.

[Celsus] compares inconsiderate believers to Metragyrtae, and soothsayers, and Mithrae, and Sabbadians, and to anything else that one may fall in with, and to phantoms of Hecate, or any other demon or demons. For as amongst such persons are frequently found wicked men, who, taking advantage of the ignorance of those who are easily deceived, lead them away whither they will, so also, he says, is the case amongst Christians.⁷⁵

And yet while Origen's successors followed him in supplementing authority with reason, those who followed Plotinus broke faith with their master, turning away from reason towards the authority of Orphic poetry, Hermetic theosophy and barely intelligible mystical texts like the *Chaldean Oracles*. As Dodds writes, 'after Plotinus Neoplatonism became less a philosophy than a religion, whose followers were occupied like their Christian counterparts in expounding and reconciling sacred texts'⁷⁶. Even Porphyry's early work *On the Philosophy of Oracles* shows a respect for sources previously disparaged by Christians and Platonists alike:

... to some who asked Hecate whether Christ were a god, she replied, 'You know the condition of the disembodied immortal soul, and that if it has been severed from wisdom it always errs ... The soul you refer to is that of a man foremost in piety: they worship it because they mistake the truth' ... You are not, then, to speak evil of [Christ], but to pity the folly of men.⁷⁷

Lurking nearby, however, is a more major Neoplatonist objection: that concerning the nature and status of matter⁷⁸. The deep ambivalence to matter present in Neoplatonism, especially before Iamblichus and Proclus, frequently erupted in objections to the Incarnation. The concept of divine union with human flesh could be particularly distasteful, as Celsus shows here.

If God had wished to send down his Spirit from himself, what need was there to breathe it into the womb of a woman? For as one who knew already how to form men, he could also have fashioned a body for this person, without casting his own Spirit into so much pollution, and in this way he would not have been received with incredulity, if he had derived his existence immediately from above.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.9.

⁷⁶ Dodds, *Pagan and Christian*, p122.

⁷⁷ Porphyry, *On the Philosophy of Oracles*, apud Augustine, *Civitate Dei* 19.23, *NPNF* (first series) 2, ed by P Schaff, Edinburgh, 1886.

⁷⁸ This is explored more fully in Chapter 3.

⁷⁹ Celsus apud Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.73

In locating the context of the *Chaldean Oracles* in Middle Platonism, Ruth Majercik⁸⁰ reminds us of the congruence with Gnosticism and Hermeticism sometimes evident in this milieu, that ‘murky quality’ described by Dillon as the ‘underworld of Platonism’⁸¹. Here are to be found ‘an extreme derogation of material existence’ ... and ‘a dualistic understanding of human nature that envisions the soul or mind as a ‘spark’ of the Divine trapped in matter’.

More reasoned objections were made to the notion of a unique, once-and-for-all, incarnation of divinity, for this sat uncomfortably with the pagan assumption of divine glory manifest in the multiplicity of divine powers subordinate to the One⁸². Further, the issue of historical particularity raised the moral problem of God’s attitude towards the pre-Christian generations⁸³. Thus the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation seemed to Platonists and Neoplatonists hedged all around by philosophical incoherence. But it remains the negative appraisal of human flesh and the denigration of bodily activity that draws what to us can seem the most extreme views from pagan philosophers, an attitude carried over at times into Christian Neoplatonism.

Writing on St Augustine’s attitude to sexuality, Brown remarks that he ‘created a darkened humanism that linked the pre-Christian past to the Christian present in a common distrust of sexual pleasure’⁸⁴. That this - blurred and generalised - is what abides of the patristic heritage among some spiritual writers amounts to something of a parody. Kathy Galloway, a member of the Iona Community, which is influential among the young adults of several Christian traditions, thus attacks patristic ascetic theology:

There can be few doctrines that have been so damaging to so many, can have so defaced the image of God as one which splits the human person into parts and declares the physical intrinsically bad ... It has divided people against themselves, against each other, and against God.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Majercik, R D, *Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, Commentary*, Santa Barbara, 1982, pp4-5.

⁸¹ Dillon, J, ‘The Concept of Two Intellects: A Footnote to the History of Platonism’, *Phronesis* 18 (1973), 384.

⁸² Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.9.26-42, Porphyry, *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν* frs 75-8 = Macarius, *Apocriticus* 4.20-3, cited in Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p104.

⁸³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 4.7, 6.78, Porphyry, *Κατὰ Χριστιανῶν* frs 81-2 = Augustine, *Ep* 102.8, Jerome, *Ep* 133.9; cited in Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p104.

⁸⁴ Brown, P, *The Body and Society*, London, 1989, p426.

⁸⁵ Galloway, K (ed), *Dreaming of Eden*, Glasgow, 1997, p113, cited in T J Gorringer, *The Education of Desire*, London, 2001, p96.

Such a contempt for bodily nature is surely not the character of the patristic contribution to Christian theology; it is anathematised by Lossky⁸⁶ as ‘manichean’ and alien to orthodox asceticism. He adduces St Gregory Palamas arguing that ‘we do not apply the word *man* to body and soul separately, but to both together, for the whole man was created in the image of God’⁸⁷.

But despite the clarity of the patristic synthesis on this issue, the dichotomy of the realities of rational-spiritual and the physical-sensual clearly remains one of the areas of profound confusion and anxiety in contemporary culture. Such a confusion seems to lend itself to exploration in the language of ritual and religious symbolism precisely because misplaced worship describes well the character of what has been termed *homo consumens*. The cultural anthropologist Robert Murphy, crippled with a spinal tumour, gives an insight into this confusion that for many seems to have bred a debilitating idolatry of the body.

The morality of the good body is manifest in the message pounded out daily in television commercials that ‘self improvement’ means attaining physical fitness ... Obesity is regarded as punishment for sloth and weak will ... Fasting and self-inflicted physical punishment are the modern day equivalents of medieval flagellantism. They are religious rituals, part of the immortality project of a secularized middle class that no longer believes in redemption of the soul and has turned instead to redemption of the body⁸⁸.

This perception of the strange morass of dualistic religious phenomena is very much a domain to which Denys can speak, for despite many flaws, he seems to present the reader with a place for matter and the body within an integrated vision cognisant both of true human nature and the ultimate destiny not of the soul alone, but of the whole human person.

⁸⁶ Lossky, V, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, New York, 1976, p224.

⁸⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Dialogue*, Migne 150 1361C: Lossky notes that this is of disputed authenticity but argues that it belongs to the same spiritual family (now assigned to Michael Coinartes, ob 1232).

⁸⁸ Murphy, R, *The Body Silent*, New York, 1990, p114.