

6 Conclusions

6.1 Summary

This concluding chapter sets out briefly the findings of previous chapters, using them as a basis for an outline discussion of Dionysian mysticism and sacramental efficacy. Comments on the purpose of such a sacramental theology naturally arise from this treatment, which leads to the final section addressing the possible relevance of this strange body of writings to the contemporary Church.

In introducing the thesis and corpus the scant ancient references to Dionysius the Areopagite were reviewed, together with the issue of pseudonymity and some theories of possible authorial objective. Although - in the strictest of terms - Denys does not take a pseudonym, never actually referring to himself as the Areopagite, it is manifestly clear that his is the persona that Denys has adopted for his writings. It was further noted that pseudonymity in classical Greek literature can be a mechanism used to identify an admired and inspiring mentor. It can also operate as a 'noble falsehood', justifying the appropriation of an authoritative name in order to support religious truth. The adoption of a name from a more distant historical era also offers participation in the *überlegene Vergangenheit*, a means that could sway both Christians and pagans.

Brox notes that from the fourth century onwards the importance assigned to a work by the quotient of title and content begins to move more in favour of the title, so that the tide of influence flows more favourably for cleverly written pseudonymous works. By choosing the guise of St Paul's most notable Athenian convert Denys seems to tap into all three of these mechanisms outlined above. There is reason, therefore, in assuming that the choice of pseudonym and the content of *CD* are very much a part of the same enterprise.

In surveying the literature on *CD* we noted the controversial background of the works in the Monophysite controversy, but also that if considered as such, Denys can only be described as a poor specimen. For the works contain at least as much that can be used against the Monophysite position. Lossky notes that, through John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor, the Orthodox soon tore the corpus from the hands of the

Monophysites¹. Despite this acceptance some modern critics categorise *CD* as a forgery in terms of a pretence at Christian experience and interpretation. The bases of such analyses range from suspicion over the fundamental compatibility of Christianity and mysticism, to the use of pagan philosophical structures and terminology. This highlights the importance in *CD* of the manner in which the antagonisms between paganism and the Church are addressed, notably the polemical issues lying between Christianity and some Platonists over materiality and the body.

Such concerns were investigated in Chapter 3, where an analysis of Iamblichus' notion of theurgy showed ample reason to reject the older consensus that views his theurgical system as objective 'god-work': a thinly veiled attempt to popularise sorcery and the making of gods. This is among the reasons for arguing that the contrasts between Plotinus and Iamblichus have been overplayed, being more semantic than substantive. For Iamblichus' treatment of theurgy and mystical ascent insists on the subjective meaning of 'god's work', and his purpose is that of rolling back an overblown, elitist rationalism that held the intellect as a divine attribute intrinsic to the human person. The more recent publication of Clarke's *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis: a manifesto of the miraculous* in 2001 agrees with this interpretation.

In the light of this work, Proclus' notion of theurgy in his extant works appears both more variegated and more traditional. Beneath the austerity of his taxonomy of being and the humble place of the human in the cosmos, he still emphasises the importance of cosmic chains of affinity, correct hieratic technique, and the manipulation of cosmic structure. Iamblichus' notion of theurgical grace therefore appears to have been largely mechanised into something more akin to alchemy or magic.

Proclus' treatment of matter in his *De Malorum Subsistentia* is, however, both more helpful and more relevant. No other Platonist produced such a monograph teasing out the issues surrounding the ambiguity of matter (and no contemporary writer seems to have researched it). In it he both repudiates the sense of power attributed to matter and the body by gnostic views - which held them as being fundamentally evil - and affirms the necessity of matter in a cosmic circulation of goodness and redemption. For, he

¹ Lossky, V, *The Vision of God*, p121.

suggests, without the radically different existence of the material realm, the cosmos could not contain a nature capable of desiring participation in the divine.

This work of Proclus is particularly pertinent to Dionysian studies since Denys seems to have almost copied a sizable portion of it in *DN*, on the nature of evil, notably three arguments against Plotinian material ambivalence. Denys also seems to have followed the late Athenian scheme of material necessity but extends its compass by making the Incarnation the ‘most evident’ part of theology, forcing a re-evaluation of the Neoplatonist categories that he readily employs.

Chapter 4 set three of the key concepts of *CD* in their context, showing that Denys, although not quite the first Christian writer to use theurgical language, makes it a central feature of his sacramental theology. As such his use generally follows that of Iamblichus’ notion of theurgical grace. Denys, however, reworks the concept further through applying it mainly to the salvific works of Christ, especially as celebrated in the Eucharist. *Theôsis*, a neologism for Gregory of Nazianzus, and *theôria* are considered in the same way, showing that they are used by Denys in similar ways to other Christian writers, particularly the Cappadocians, albeit with greater enthusiasm. A relationship connecting the three terms is also apparent: *theôria* is the human (or angelic) means of apprehending the divine light that brings the possibility of *theôsis*, whereas theurgy is the actual source of that salvation, the works of Christ, especially in the Incarnation. In this regard Gregory of Nyssa stands out from other possible sources for Denys in that he has darkness as a motif for a higher divine encounter than light: both wrote works dealing with the ascent of Moses as a pattern for the mystical life².

Chapter 5 returned to the three main rites of *EH* with this model, in order both to compare Denys’ symbolic understanding of liturgy in context, and to examine more closely the operation of the terms from within each rite. While the Dionysian rite of Chrism is the first extant example of such a public liturgy, the rites of Baptism and Eucharist offer many parallels with the great catechetical works. Denys’ deviations from this already diverse pattern are not wild and sometimes may simply be based on practical common sense, such as the re-clothing of the neophyte *before* the final

² Gregory of Nazianzus has the darkness of the cloud signifying the ignorance of the multitude in *Orations* 28.15: light is superior to darkness.

anointing with Chrism. Nevertheless, the overarching theological concern is more focussed, and is often betrayed in his use of specialist language, particularly in his interpretation of the Eucharist.

It remains a general feature of *EH* that salvation and *theôsis* are virtually synonymous, *theôria* is presented as the means of obtaining it, and theurgy the source of what unites Christians with each other and with God in communion. The material symbols used in the rites are described as ‘the gifts of the theurgies’ and the presence of unity and fellowship in the community as ‘the fruit of *theôria*’. The common element, and surely an attraction for Denys’, is the *θε-* root with its divine and visual overtones upon which his symbolic and mystical exploration of the rites seems to be based. Other important examples of such terms are *θέαμα*, *θεανδρικός*, *θεαρχία*, *θεαρχικός*, *θεῖον*, *θεμιτός*, *θεογενεσία*, *θεοειδής*, *θεολογία*, *θεολογικός*, *θεολόγος*, *θεομίμητος*, *θεοπαράδοτος*, *θεοπρεπής* and, of course, *θεός*.

6.2 *Dionysian Mysticism*

Fundamental to the corpus is the assumption that mystical union between the human and the divine can, through God’s beneficence, be achieved. Indeed, like Gregory of Nyssa, Denys advertises his doctrinal views with the language of darkness, silence and unknowing. He also places the bounty of mystical union beyond unknowing and light, ‘where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence’³. He is noted as the first to use the phrase ‘mystical theology’⁴.

But this kind of mysticism is not to be confused with the modern usage of the term for ‘mystical experience’ or the quest for ‘mystical’ elements common to different religions. In this regard *ODCC* notes helpfully that language connected with *μυστήριον*, such as that in *CD*, was used in a fairly routine way in the Early Church to denote the conviction that ‘Christian doctrine and liturgy involve matters known only by revelation, which are incomprehensible to, or which need to be shielded from profanation by, outsiders and those insufficiently purified by faith and moral conversation’.

³ *MTh* 1, in *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works*, p135.

⁴ *ODCC*, p1127-28.

Chapter 2 reviewed the argument of Nygren⁵, whose main intention is to show that *erôs*-based mysticism in the Early Church is a tradition seriously divergent from the agapistic motivations of the New Testament. He therefore, quite logically, finds mysticism - and the Dionysian writings in particular - inadmissible to the Christian tradition. But this denial of the possibility of Christian mysticism is disturbing for several reasons. Not least its logic would extend to striking at the mystical basis of several other writers, including those who shaped Trinitarian theology. Denys would then surely not be the only cuckoo expelled from the nest, so that the face of patristic theology would be radically changed.

Nygren's conclusions can, however, be questioned. A weakness in his thesis can be found in an unduly rigid and artificial analysis of the New Testament notion of ἀγάπη -love. Difficulties of a doctrinal nature, as well as the lack of psychological realism, flow from this position.

Nygren contends that the only legitimate attitude of love for Christians is that of a strict, agapistic neighbour-love: selflessly meeting the needs of those around us. Outka⁶ is among those who point out that it would be a strangely omnipotent being who needed this kind of human devotion. Yet without the quality of yearning supported by an element of ἔρως, no other appropriate form of Christian love for God is possible. And even if we were to put such a pure form of neighbour-love into place as the sole basis for moral action, is it possible to envisage a form of selfless, sacrificial act for the good of another completely untainted by a sense of personal achievement? Surely moral action is impossible to isolate from a general desire to do good and to delight in it. To envisage removing this source of desire and delight is to attack something vivifying and humanising - itself mysterious - in a search for the kind of arid scrupulosity which is roundly criticised in the teachings of Christ.

This is not to argue that all forms of mysticism are viable for Christians. Inge, for example, writes of the incompatibility of some mystical traditions which strive to slough off all symbols and doctrines in order to form a unity with absolute simplicity, the One, a divine name used a number of times by Denys. The 'process of abstraction,

⁵ Nygren, A, *Agape and Eros*.

⁶ Outka, G H, *Agape: an ethical analysis*.

or subtraction, as it really is, can never lead us to “the One”. The only possible unification with such an Infinite is the ἀτέρμων νήγρετος ὕπνος of Nirvana⁷.

Vladimir Lossky also shows a critical sensitivity to the issue, noting that Orthodoxy asserts a strong connection between mysticism and doctrine: the former exposes and expresses the latter⁸. Indeed, there has never been a fine distinction between the two in Orthodox theology. He therefore proposes a set of criteria with which to trace the development of Byzantine mysticism in the patristic era and to distinguish its trends from the religious philosophies of other traditions, such as the gnostic forms which were among the sources for many Christian mystical writings.

Perhaps the most essential of these criteria relates to the Trinitarian expression of mystical experience: that for a mysticism to be authentically Christian it cannot posit speculative movement beyond the Trinity into some more archetypal mystical experience, of which the Trinity is only a facet. For in reality there is no ‘beyond’ of that kind. Applied to the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Lossky⁹ finds this criterion beginning to be satisfied.

Clement, for whom God is revealed by the Word and Grace (the second and third persons of the Trinity) explains in *Stromateis* 5.11-12 how we must make the leap of faith beyond the summit of intelligible things and ‘fling ourselves upon the majesty of Christ’, and so be liberated. From the majesty of Christ the Christian is carried through a state of holiness towards the transcendence of the παντοκράτωρ. This characterisation of the Father is not described with the language of darkness but rather with a term which Lossky asserts is borrowed from the Valentinian gnostics. Clement describes the transcendence of the Father as the βάθος or abyss, a motif that serves the same apophatic purpose as darkness, and which distinguishes the ineffable essence of the Father from that of the Logos who reveals him. The Trinity is therefore an integral part of this expression of (eventually) mystical ascent, albeit in a manner that will be developed considerably.

⁷ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, pp111-12.

⁸ Lossky, V, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, pp49-50.

⁹ Lossky, V, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, pp33-35.

Denys, who shows a preference for the term Thearchy over Trinity, forms his more developed mysticism around the whole Trinitarian Godhead, as when he begins *MTh* with a hymn to the Trinity: ‘O Trinity, higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness ...’. Lossky also notes the important passage at *DN* 2.5 where Denys, in discussing the difference between the Father and the Son, sets out the basis of Trinitarian theology: ‘Each of the divine persons continues to possess his own praiseworthy characteristics, so that one has here examples of unions and of differentiations in the inexpressible unity and subsistence of God’¹⁰.

But where does this kind of mystical life of *anagôgia* towards the Trinity lead? Does Denys give signs of the purpose of it, apart from the relatively abstract themes like *theôsis* and *koinônia*? We noted in Chapter 5 the juxtaposition of the possessed with the ideal communicant in *EH* 3.3.7: this passage provides helpful indications of his thinking in terms of discipline and asceticism, spiritual life and divine likeness, and a bold and active ministry among those held captive by fear. The ideal communicant, in the face of worldly and carnal temptations, will ‘not be active in the things of the flesh beside the most natural necessities’. Instead such a person will ‘be a temple and at the same time also an attendant in the highest *theôsis* of the Spirit of the Thearchy, building the likeness by likeness’. Furthermore the ideal communicant will not be troubled by fantasies or fears but will actively and cheerfully drive them away, also acting as a physician for those who are so vexed.

6.3 *Sacramental Theology*

Another of the criteria used by Lossky¹¹ in discerning the emergence of authentic Byzantine Orthodoxy from the shadow of gnosticism is that of anthropology, specifically the potential for a positive appraisal of the human body. He counts Denys as an important source for this theme in his mysticism, for the ‘thought of Dionysius, adopted by Maximus, will serve as the doctrinal basis for mysticism in which the whole man, in the totality of his being, will be involved in communion with God’¹². We have also demonstrated that Denys satisfies this test in his general treatment of matter, and more specifically in his liturgical symbols. Indeed his treatment of the rites with their

¹⁰ *DN* 2.5, trans by C Luibheid.

¹¹ Lossky, V, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, New York, 1976, p127.

¹² Lossky, V, *The Vision of God*, p142.

obligatory use of material symbols suggests that the positive use of matter is essential. However, Lossky also notes that there is a difference between the Greek fathers over the composition of human nature, some assigning two (*ψυχή, σῶμα*) and others three faculties (*νοῦς, ψυχή, σῶμα*).

The dichotomists regard the *νοῦς* as a superior faculty of the reasonable soul, the faculty by which man enters into communion with God ... the image of God ... a divine seal, imprinted on the nature and putting it into a personal relationship with God¹³.

Denys seems to hold this position, being concerned with the two-fold salvation of the Christian through sensible symbols that minister to the body, but also through the life of *theōria* that is made possible by those symbols, which ministers to the soul¹⁴. In the sacraments - at least - he refrains from treating the *nous* as a human faculty, effectively using it as a spiritual domain rather than an anthropological element. This seems to reflect Iamblichus' notion of complete descent of the rational soul more than Plotinus' tendency to divinise the human intellectual faculty. Thus in the most final ritual activity for the Christian, the Funeral Rite, Denys states that the sacraments minister salvation to the whole person, body and soul: no mention is made of *νοῦς*.

The similarities between this understanding and that of Iamblichus extend beyond complete descent of the soul, as the efficacy of ritually consecrated matter provides a similar channel for salvation as Iamblichus' doctrine of immortal ratios present within the created order. More specifically, both insist on the divine origin of their ritual symbols¹⁵. An apparent divergence, however, is that Iamblichus alludes to a freedom from material theurgy for those thoroughly proficient, and so exalts immaterial symbols above all else¹⁶.

¹³ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p127.

¹⁴ Denys is not entirely consistent in his dealings with the means of salvation and sacramental efficacy: *EH* is far from being a systematic work. His descriptions of the Eucharist regularly suggest that *theōria* is the essential means of apprehending *theōsis*, and yet in a more Thomistic sense he argues that the material symbol is also essential, for example in the Funeral Rite. This problem may be answered partially by considering the emphasis at each context to give a certain amount of freedom, or - more fully - by retaining the notion of the human dichotomy of body and soul: the salvation of both is essential through their respective domains of reality.

¹⁵ The term *θεοπαράδοτος* occurs seventeen times in *EH*, and only once elsewhere in the corpus.

¹⁶ Denys' insistence on material symbols is more thorough, but a possible echo of immaterial *theōria* lies at the end of the description of the rite of Baptism (*EH* 2.2.8) where he describes the hierarch's return, having completed the baptism, from secondary things to primary contemplation. A similar, if slightly more muted, passage exists at the end of the *Synaxis*.

There is no avoiding the fact that in Christian terms Denys presents a highly symbolic account of sacramental efficacy. Some commentators, including René Roques¹⁷ and John Meyendorff¹⁸, have suggested that this extends to a denial of the real presence. In demonstrating this, Roques points to part of *CH* 1.3, a passage sometimes translated with subtle divergences from the critical text, so as to attribute the form of participation with Jesus through the Eucharist as more fundamentally symbolic. While it is very clear that some kind of necessary symbolism is indeed the emphasis of the passage, the context is also very important, suggesting a reason for this strict code of symbolism.

Denys has just insisted that uplifting to contemplation and imitation of heavenly things cannot take place for humans in an immaterial way without the material means that our nature requires. Only then does the Eucharist appear in his list of such means of uplifting, and then slightly differently from, for example, Luibheid's translation. His translation is quite interpretative and makes the passage independent of the context, so that it seems to concern primarily the status of the Eucharist, rather than the different modes of uplifting for celestial and ecclesial beings:

<p>... καὶ τῆς Ἰησοῦ μετουσίας τὴν τῆς θειοτάτης εὐχαριστίας μετάληψιν, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα ταῖς οὐρανίαις μὲν οὐσίαις ὑπερκοσμίως, ἡμῖν δὲ συμβολικῶς παραδέδοται¹⁹.</p>	<p>The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus. And so it goes for all the gifts transcendently received by the beings of heaven, gifts which are granted to us in symbolic mode²⁰</p>
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There really seems to be no incoherence in holding this passage as consistent with Denys' location of our hierarchy and its sacraments as a hybrid of the Legal and Celestial hierarchies. We participate in the things of heaven through the spiritual faculty of *theôria* but of necessity through the means of material symbols. This is not a denial of the real presence since Denys makes it clear in his discussion of the Eucharist that the symbol is the means of communion rather than the object. Nor must we neglect the

¹⁷ Roques, R, *L'Univers Dionysien, structure hiérarchique du monde selon pseudo-Denys*, Paris, 1954, pp267-69.

¹⁸ Meyendorff, J, *Byzantine Theology: historical trends and doctrinal themes*, 2nd edn, New York, 1983, pp202-03.

¹⁹ *CD* 2, 9.5-7.

²⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans by C Luibheid, p146.

strange language of theurgy that is used both regularly and centrally in describing the rite.

We have argued that Denys consistently asserts that the object of communion, the source of salvation and *theôsis*, are the theurgies of Jesus, praised in the Great Thanksgiving of the Eucharistic Prayer. Bearing in mind the insistence on material symbolism, how might we take on the likeness of God, Denys asks, if not by the constant memory of the most holy theurgies in sacred words and holy actions (hierergies) of the Eucharist? Even though he deals only allusively with this, the most sacred part of the rite, we can have some confidence that by ‘symbolic hierergy’²¹ he means the repetition of the Last Supper in the taking and breaking of bread, the dominical words, and distribution.

The omission of the first part of the dominical words, ‘Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you’ and its counterpart, is mirrored by the absence of an *Epicleôsis* which would also contain a similar clause. We argue that the reason for this is not that of attacking the notion of real presence in the sacrament. The elements are clearly not merely symbols, rather they have the classic outer form of material symbol and an inner spiritual-noetic reality which uplifts the communicant to the life of heaven. Both aspects are instrumental in the salvation of the whole person, body and soul.

Meyendorff’s criticism is similar to Roques’ and uses his material from *L’Univers*. But it is more rooted in the pastoral and historical currents of the post-Constantinian Church. For example, he draws a contrast between the ‘realistic and existential’ theology of the Eucharist evident in Basil²², and the more rarefied approach of Denys. He sees a theological reaction to a changing eucharistic community from the *laos* to a crowd from whom the Eucharist needed protection. This rationalisation involved a gradual movement from sacramental participation to intellectual vision, an attitude ‘perfectly suited to the Origenistic and Evagrian understanding of religion as an ascent of the *mind* to God’. But rather than seeing these characteristics as part of the tense

²¹ *CD* 2, 92.10.

²² Basil, *The Letters* 93 (4 vols), trans by R J Deferrari, London, 1988, p145: ‘And also to take communion every day, that is to say, to partake of the holy body and blood of Christ, is good and beneficial, since He himself clearly says: “He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, hath everlasting life.”’

milieu in which *CD* was probably written, Meyendorff finds in Denys the most influential source for this Origenist trend, ‘reducing the Eucharistic synaxis to a moral appeal ... the Eucharist is only the visible “effect” of an invisible “model”’²³.

One particular passage from *EH* 3.3.13 cited by Meyendorff concerns the interpretation of the elevation, fraction and distribution, a part of the rite in which divinisation language does not occur. This is as close as Denys comes to affirming explicitly the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, but is concerned just as much with the way in which the meaning of the ritual action reflects the Incarnation:

Διαγράφει γὰρ ἐν τούτοις αἰσθητῶς ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων Ἰησοῦν τον Χριστὸν τὴν νοητὴν ἡμῶν ὡς ἐν εἰκόσι ζῶν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ τὸ θεῖον κρυφίου τῆ παντελεῖ καὶ ἀσυγχύτῳ καθ’ ἡμᾶς ἐνανθρωπήσει φιλανθρώπως ἐξ ἡμῶν εἰδοποιούμενον ...	For he depicts in these things [the elevation, fraction and distribution of communion] in a perceptible manner, bringing before our eyes Jesus Christ, as in images, our noetic life from the divine secret by the complete and unmixed incarnation among us, benevolently being endued with form from us ...
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Roques and Meyendorff understand this as stating that ‘the loftiest sense of the Eucharistic rites and of sacramental communion itself is in symbolizing the union of our minds with God and with Christ’²⁴. However, the loftiest sense of the Eucharist is surely found beyond the enigmatic symbols in the reality itself, as testified by Denys in his brief hymn in *EH* 3.3.2. There he prays that the symbolic surroundings of the rite may, like the veiled eucharistic elements, open to reveal something of a different order of reality: ‘but, O most divine and holy *teletê*, uncover the garments of the enigmas that symbolically surround you, show yourself to us distinctly, and fill our noetic visions with unifying and uncovered light’.

Interestingly this passage is more suggestive of light mysticism, with the shrouding garments of symbols giving way to light. But as is generally the case, Denys writes here concerning the operation of the noetic domain rather than some kind of meeting of minds. The noetic visions of unifying light represent the reception of the transcendent reality of heaven, apprehended in *theôria*, by which the soul of the communicant is

²³ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p202.

²⁴ Roques, *L’Univers*, p267, cited in Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p203.

uplifted (*EH* 7.3.9). This is the call to divine perception intrinsic to the Eucharist. It is the spiritual counterpart to the reception of the material symbol, as well as its precursor; the less obvious aspect of the reality is emphasised more.

Maurice Wiles sees this emphasis of the less obvious as a general characteristic of Alexandrian-influenced liturgies, one that can at times operate to an eccentric extent. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem's de-emphasis of the continuing existence of bread and wine in the sacrament almost amounts, he suggests, to a practical denial. 'The thing that was important religiously was the thing that was not obvious to the senses. It is that side of the reality, therefore, on which overwhelming emphasis is laid'²⁵. This may be a tendentious interpretation of Cyril's teaching, as suggested by *Mystagogical Catechesis* 4.3, 'For in the form (*τύπος*) of bread you are given his body, and in the form of wine you are given his blood'²⁶. Nevertheless, it is possible that Denys' treatment of the Eucharist operates in this emphatic way, de-emphasising the words that identify the sacred species as the body and blood of Christ to their complete absence, in order to emphasise the necessity of the material symbol. Despite this, the loaded term 'theurgy' seems to secure the same theological foundation in terms of Christ's saving works.

Even if this interpretation is slightly fragile, we have to admit that Denys is not the only early commentator to leave something apparently vital out of his treatment of the Eucharist. Cyril omits the whole of the Institution Narrative, a feature that Denys may be copying; certainly both speak of the presence of the elements with considerable awe, to which silence may be a sign of reverence.

Another intriguing facet of the picture concerns the marked contrast between *EH* and the rest of the corpus in terms of apophysis and the negative theological method: could this be connected with Denys' silence on the sacred species? We noted that the notion of *disciplina arcani* could be contributory to this above²⁷: that knowledge of the most sacred and intimate details of the faith were strictly kept from outsiders. *ODCC* notes that the term is a relatively modern way of describing a quite general cultic practice of the early Christian era, which seems to have disappeared by the sixth century. As an

²⁵ Wiles, M, *The Christian Fathers*, London, 1966, p128.

²⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogic Catecheses* 4.3, trans by E Yarnold.

²⁷ p129 above.

element of Denys' ruse, this could have lent an air of authenticity to the works. But is it possible to justify the complete absence of negative treatments of liturgical symbols - as opposed to biblical - by replacing apophaticism with the catechumenate and the discipline of secrecy?

It may be better to consider all three issues - the language of sacramental realism, the absence of the negative method, disciplined secrecy - as connected. One way in which this could be envisaged is to view the stark realism of the dominical words, the words that are glaringly absent, as in some way acting to prevent an apophatic critique of not only the bread and wine, but also all the other sensible symbols of the rite. In that case it is as though Denys treats the whole rite as being divinely given, and that negative treatment of the various sensible images is simply impossible, beyond that of noting their theurgical archetypes with regularity. *EH* 3 could then be seen as a chapter on a different level of subtlety from the rest of the corpus: that of holding mysticism in orbit around a sacramental realism itself centred on words of Jesus that are never given in the text, perhaps because of awe-struck silence. This would be a quite different kind of apophaticism, one that by absence leads to presence: an efficacious silence. It might also suggest why Denys uses the mystical language of light for this kind of sacramental union.

If we return to the treatment of matter in *CD*, it is possible to pursue the issue of material necessity and reflect on the causative efficacy of the sacraments. These material symbols used in the liturgy are, we have shown, the unique images of the archetypes of our salvation and atonement, the works of Christ. But the symbols not only provide a means for ascent but - as is striking in the description of the *myron* as *θεουργικώτατος* - they actually do something themselves: they perfect and divinise. The thesis of the Eucharistic elements as efficacious images of the salvific works of Jesus therefore suggests a cluster of issues not inhospitable to the themes of sacramental causality.

Roerem's account²⁸ of sacramental efficacy, as noted by Louth²⁹, contrasts the unintelligible essence of Iamblichus' theurgic efficacy with the intelligibility of

²⁸ Roerem, P, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols Within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies: Studies and Texts 71), Toronto, 1984, pp99-116.

Dionysian rites. This contrast certainly exists to the extent that there is little chance of Denys' vision of efficacy being mistaken for an early form of sacramental nominalism³⁰. But to suggest that Dionysian *anagôgia* and *koinônia* is effected only through knowledge and understanding surely only caricatures the situation. The material symbol is clearly efficacious itself, or in quasi-Thomistic language, is an element in the cause of grace present in the sacramental rite. Louth notes the implicit suggestion of this in the case of those incapable of understanding divine things, unable to be uplifted through *theôria*.

For Denys, Baptism and 'the most sacred symbols of thearchic communion'³¹ are by no means solely symbols of God's grace. Infants are baptised and, as is still the practise of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, granted a share in Communion immediately. Those too young to understand divine things are therefore nevertheless nourished by them, being subsequently brought up in a holy life under the supervision of a sponsor. This is a kind of sacramentalism that has a dynamic relationship with the human person: it relates to the faculties available in a realistic manner but nevertheless embraces the whole person with grace. Above all they 'really give what they promise, and are what they signify'³².

6.4 Purpose

It is probably no more possible to confidently identify a purpose for the corpus than it is to identify the author. But despite this certain ideas have developed over the period of research; some have receded while others remain, and this is particularly the case with regard to *EH*. If we take the apparent main concerns of *EH* as reflecting their intention (and this connects with the simplest theory of pseudonymity, which we have found to make best sense) then a possible purpose presents itself.

Denys' main themes parallel one of the broader concerns evident in both Iamblichus and Proclus: their account of the cosmic necessity of matter. The works of both these Neoplatonists give an essential role for the sensible domain within the cosmic drama, thus refuting the gnostic myth of matter as a cosmic accident through a cosmology of

²⁹ Louth, A, 'Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite', *JTS* 37 (1986), 436.

³⁰ Neither would that be a natural development for Iamblichus, who is at pains to emphasise the need for mature piety and careful preparation in, for example, *dM* 3.31.

³¹ *EH* 7.3.11.

³² Hooker, R, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.60.1, in *Works*, ed by J Keble, Oxford, 1845.

divine yearning. Denys, by contrast, writes after this shadow of gnosticism has passed. Nevertheless, something still prompts him to emphasise repeatedly the essential material and sensible symbols of the Church - the rites and ministerial orders - as though against some kind of attack from those who would separate the means of divine communion from all matters ecclesial. He also seems to attempt to heal this division by a daringly simple means which accords with his purported Christian experience. This is to emphasise the efficacy of 'our hierarchy' through the language of mystical ascent - the language of the monastic cell - at a time when the influences of Origen and Evagrius Pontus were still a cause of controversy.

EH thus injects into the Christian tradition a body of work that, although emphasising mystical ascent, *theôria* and its essential part in divine union and salvation, does so in tandem with the similarly vital structure of the Church's orders and rites. It is the reality of, and participation in, our hierarchy that mediates and enables the mystical experience of the Christian. This is the sole available basis for *theôsis*. The parties for whom such a message was intended can perhaps also be inferred.

Firstly, Denys surely uses the guise of the Areopagite - a pagan convert - in part to indicate the potential for a sympathetic and profitable relationship between antagonistic parties. Among these conflicts we might note Porphyrian Neoplatonism and Christianity and, in Christian circles, the more extreme Monophysites or Origenists and their orthodox opponents. The over-arching issue for both antagonisms is that of extra-biblical categories of thought. *CD* dives into the heart of this issue with one of the most striking features of its sacramental theology: the use of the language of theurgy. This seems to be derived from Iamblichus who, unlike many of his Neoplatonist contemporaries, refrains from attacking the Church³³.

We have concluded that Iamblichus' own work, *de Mysteriis*, long taken as a manifesto of the irrational, might be better understood as a manifesto of the miraculous. As such it answers Porphyry not just in terms of his distaste for the claims of the pagan cult, but also forms a critical response to the most effective of his lines of argument in *Κατὰ*

³³ Iamblichus, we have noted, was probably taught by the Christian Anatolius, later Bishop of Laodicea.

Χριστιανῶν, namely in making groundless the claims of the Early Church's main props in supporting faith: the prophetic and the miraculous.

The props that concern Denys in his work of rapprochement and synthesis are different but no less miraculous. They are evident in much of his language concerning mystical experience: *anagôgia*, *theôria*, *koinônia*, and a form of union with the divine that brings *theôsis*. In connection with this, Rosemary Arthur³⁴ notes that *CD* appears during the age of the rise of the Holy Man, not least in Syria where moderate asceticism of the kind upheld by Philoxenus of Mabbug³⁵ was the normative precursor to mystical contemplation and the imitation of angelic life. Denys' emphasis on the language of mystical ascent would make much sense in such a context. But what of a threat to Church order?

The threat perhaps lay in the tradition itself. Moderates like Philoxenus faithfully followed Church discipline and tradition and remained earthed. In the hands of an individualist, rigorist monk, however, this trend of contemplating and imitating angelic existence could be severed from the ordered life of the Church, quickly undermining its ministry:

The combination in one person of anchorite, ascetic and visionary gave to the monk in question a charisma which endowed him with a certain authority over simple folk which many of the ordained clergy did not have. Not only did he have access to divine secrets, but he could be seen to be a holy man³⁶.

The additional problem of Origenist heterodoxy in a charismatic figure like Stephen Bar Sudhaili led at times to specific attacks on the sacraments. E A Clark³⁷ notes the tendency of Origenists to spiritualise the Eucharistic elements and to deny their reality as the Body and Blood of Christ, a trend reflected well in *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, thought to have been written by Bar Sudhaili:

³⁴ Arthur, R A, *A new interpretation of the context and purpose of the Ps-Dionysian corpus*, London, 1998, pp137-46.

³⁵ Harvey, S A, 'Philoxenus of Mabbug' in *EEC*, ed by E Ferguson. Philoxenus was a co-leader of the Monophysites with Severus of Antioch, and 'represented the finest synthesis of Greek and Syriac intellectual tradition'.

³⁶ Arthur, *A new interpretation*, p139.

³⁷ Clark, E A, *The Origenist Controversy*, New Jersey, 1992, p65.

Know, O my son, that this material and bodily bread which is set upon the material altar is a kind of perceptible sign - and, to tell the truth, a small and unworthy shadow - of that glorious Bread which is above the heavens; and the cup of mixture also that is in our world - it too, is (only) a material sign of that glorious and holy drink of which the Mind is accounted worthy in the place that is above³⁸.

In Kenneth Kirk's *The Vision of God* a more extreme form is noted:

Canon Hannay has collected instances in which the early hermits are represented not merely as lacking, but even as avoiding, the reception of Holy Communion. 'I do not need the communion,' said one of them, 'for I have seen Christ Himself to-day.' To another the devil appeared in the form of a venerable abbot, with the words: 'We profit nothing sitting in our cells, because we receive not the body and blood of Christ. Let us go to a church where there is a priest, and there receive the sacrament.' The hermit resisted the temptation for a time, but then yielded; his going was the first step in a downward course which ended in fornication³⁹.

Such a wild account may be taken *cum grano salis* and yet, perhaps tellingly, Benedicta Ward's *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* contains in its thematic index no references to Baptism, Eucharist or the sacraments at all⁴⁰.

The fact that Denys offers a strongly, but not solely, symbolic account of the eucharistic elements in *EH*, and that he insists on their efficacy as necessary for knowledge of the theurgies and therefore for salvation, suggests a purpose related to the Origenist symbolic account. The omission of the language of realism concerning the eucharistic species might support the notion that an Origenist party needed to be persuaded by the content. Nevertheless the coining of the language of theurgy imbues the material symbols of the liturgy with an instrumental quality linked to the salvific work of Christ. To a figure influenced by someone like Bar Sudhaili, the combination of a strongly mystical slant and the avoidance of too much traditional language for sacraments could help diffuse sensibilities over the perceptible, material nature of liturgical symbols.

³⁸ *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos* 3.7, trans by F S Marsh, Oxford, 1927, p80.

³⁹ Kirk, K E, *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the Summum Bonum*, 2nd edn, London, 1932, p191. The anecdote is taken from *Vit Patr* 5.6.24 (Migne PL 73.898-900).

⁴⁰ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*, trans by B Ward, London, 1975.

6.5 *Contemporary Relevance*

Paradoxically, part of the appeal of the Dionysian writings lies in their difficult language and style. At a time when communication theory tends to place the burden of responsibility on the transmitter rather than the receiver, any voice or text that veils its message with complicated concepts and uses strained - at times all but incomprehensible - language, is likely to be dismissed. The prospect of a substantial period of research in such an area can cause bemusement even within theological circles, particularly when the fruit of such effort is of dubious relevance.

The statement is already a cliché, but the sound bite reigns in the contemporary media. Public opinion is easily swayed by the slogan and brief, impressionistic bursts of reality. Adjectives for the substance with which we are encouraged to nourish our bodies furnish us with workable metaphors for the kind of approach to reality this conveys: fast, convenient, ready-cooked, hermetically-sealed, easily-digested. The product accruing from any enterprise must therefore be both quickly evident and calculable, preferably in terms of utilisable development, if not blatant material gain, if it is to appear coherent. Reacting against such mores of materialism and superficiality appears alien and threatening and is likely to be deemed eccentric. And yet many problems within modern culture suggest that reality remains manifestly complex, mysterious, indiscrete and inconvenient: it is profoundly indigestible for those whose world-view leaves them easily articulate⁴¹.

Beyond this relief from the banal superficiality offered by pondering the works of Denys, the way in which much of the corpus is an exercise in the apophatic method also begins to challenge the fragmenting anti-structure of post-modernity. The works beckon the reader along a path of faith, illuminated by rich symbolic language enacted in a highly structured communal context, through maturity of understanding to the unifying darkness of divine presence and communion. This is where the richest and most potent of symbols is transcended and silenced, due not only to the fact that language is finite - as Denys seems to say with his tortuous mode of expression - but because the whole enterprise is under-girded by deep experience of the ineffable, indwelling presence of

⁴¹ Duncan Dormor refers to the 'shrill, adolescent voices' of media personalities (unpublished sermon, St Paul's Cathedral, 1 November, 2002). Instead, Denys provides us with the issue of pseudonymity and anonymity.

the Creator who loves his creation, and desires its good. Subtle threads of this kind of realism make the works particularly relevant.

In his penetrating analysis of modern western culture, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Rowan Williams offers the debased meaning of ‘charity’ as one tool for exploring some of the areas where society seems to be undermined by culture. Charity, in its old sense, concerns a given state of affection for one’s fellow human beings grounded, ultimately, on the notion of dependence upon a loving and gracious God. Such a form of charity is not decided upon by an individual or measured as a product but is simply there, recognised in relationship and supporting human friendship.

The paucity of opportunities for social interaction based on this form of charitableness represents a serious social and individual deprivation of what Williams calls ‘the opportunity for suspending relationships characterised by competition, rivalry’⁴². The fact that economic rivalry is increasingly intense in the world of work - often violently so - puts such pressure on the remaining social rituals that they become skewed. Sport is an example of such a phenomenon: it has been industrialised and professionalised to such an extent that it ceases to be a safe forum in which self-understanding can be explored; it becomes instead a matter of marketing, profitableness and entertainment.

A vicious circle exists, suggests Williams, since institutions and rituals grounded on charity or the sense of being - structures which recognise and affirm the individual without having to win a place - have largely evaporated, and our life has thereby become fragmented and often corrupt. There are fewer controls on rivalry in many domains and qualifications for public life are less stringent. An increasing number of people have no stake in the social environment, no system of charitable symbols. Unless it is a slightly xenophobic nationalism, there is no sense of belonging beyond the family, the coherence of which is often sorely stressed, so that the political establishment is related to as an alien ‘them’, rather than with a social ‘our’. The Church falls between the two in a no-man’s-land, apparently unable to speak with any

⁴² Williams, R, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Edinburgh, 2000, p56.

resonance within ‘a recent history of public corruption and barbarity compounded by apathy and narcissism in our imaginative world’⁴³.

Denys’ works do not offer remedies so much as showing some subversive alternatives to such a culture. His is a society held by a firm belief in the efficacy of hierarchy - he originates it as a Christian term - through which the divine gifts are passed proportionately to all. The transmission of these divine gifts is the main function of the Church hierarchy which, although of course involving discipline, is mainly concerned with the source of holiness and grace. It is provocative to reflect on the extent to which Church hierarchy in the present context operates in this manner, and yet that is not the main point.

Andrew Louth notes⁴⁴ that hierarchy is too often conceived as something imposed on us, rather than being that which consists of us. The laity generally talk of the clergy as ‘the hierarchy’; clergy refer to archdeacons and bishops as ‘the hierarchy’. This, too, relates to the forces of alienation and fragmentation outlined by Williams, in that a social - and ecclesial - practice excessively concerned with the achievement of external objectives easily traps us in relations of contest and bargaining, diminishing mutual involvement and trust. Unavoidably society, the Church, and certainly clergy, do not then seem to exist for us, but appear to have different interests from our own, which are worked towards at our expense.

Recognising the reality of our part in the hierarchy is one small element in the solution to this problem, as is overcoming the anxiety caused by managerial approaches to ministry that tend to ignore more basic interaction. But the Liturgy, as a social and religious phenomenon, is a peculiarly good tool for addressing this cluster of issues.

For most Christian traditions the central experience of Christian life is to be found - in formal terms - in the area of sacramental theology, that which articulates our affirmation of the immanence of Christ among us: the tangible seal of salvation in the worshipping life of the Church. The publication of *One Bread One Body* by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, Ireland, and Scotland in 1998 has

⁴³ Williams, R, *Lost Icons*, p9.

⁴⁴ Louth, A, *Denys the Areopagite*, p132.

renewed the dialogue between the Roman Catholic and other communities, not least the author's own communion, the Church of England, and those communities in full communion with it (some of which remain in partial communion with the Pope). The response to this document from the House of Bishops of the Church of England, *The Eucharist: sacrament of unity*, London, 2001, provides contemporary evidence from the Anglican Communion of the interest in sacramental theology and a critical awareness of its importance.

Some areas of this discussion relate closely to our exploration of the Dionysian rites. For example *The Eucharist: sacrament of unity*, p11, section 25, is headed: 'The understanding of a sacrament as an "instrumental sign", in the context of faith, of divine grace.' This text asserts the inevitable presence of the language of sign and symbol in discussion of the sacraments, but also that it 'is vital to affirm that the sacraments effect what they signify and are means of grace, provided that the grace that is offered is not rejected'. We could readily describe the Dionysian sacraments as being well flavoured with the notion of the 'instrumental sign' or symbol.

But Denys explores the symbolism of the whole eucharistic liturgy in significant depth and with considerable originality. It is not just that he employs the categories of Neoplatonist metaphysics more thoroughly than his predecessors, but he uses these - together with countless biblical images - to build connections between diverse aspects of life in the Spirit in moral-ascetic terms. Liturgical ceremonial of a practical origin is brought within this symbolic framework and given a new significance worthy of spiritual contemplation. He makes his rites charged with the symbolism of the heavenly life and of the foundational mysteries of the Christian faith, especially the one most problematic to pagan Neoplatonism, the incarnation. Perhaps more than other patristic texts, *CD* draws together the different areas of theological and spiritual literacy so that there is much here to capture the imagination.

The contemporary situation with respect to the Church's mission apparently offers few opportunities for sacramental theology: it rarely registers in the spectrum of missiological approaches in the West, perhaps because it is not deemed to be of great enough relevance. By contrast the East has for many centuries recognised the potency

of its liturgy in capturing the imagination. It is interesting, therefore, that Cardinal Godfried Danneels⁴⁵ has suggested the main problem in contemporary Western mission relates to this core of Christianity, in its incarnational character, particularly as it affects sacramental theology.

He offers no particular answers but sketches important outlines to the problems that connect with our discussion of contemporary culture. He suggests that cultural-historical trends have created a blindness to the invisible which renders the sacraments problematic. It is not that our contemporaries are unable to participate in ritual, but perhaps that the 'stark, impoverished and repetitive character of liturgical ritual does not appeal to them'. The liturgy is by its nature repetitive, but it need not be stark or impoverished, as Denys amply demonstrates. This contemporary problem with the liturgy will surely be helped, as Bishop Kallistos Ware asserts, not by 'a change in the symbols but a change in us, a cleansing of the doors of our perception'⁴⁶ so that we can admit more readily the primal symbols that speak to us of the human condition. We should not try to articulate exhaustively this symbolic repertoire, for that would then reduce a particular symbol to mere verbal formulae and so undermine the liturgical ritual and mystery.

Concerning the status of sacramental reality, Danneels notes that the categories of comprehension seem to have been reduced to the physical and the psychological. Psychological edification of the individual (often under the guise of spirituality) and the advancement of social cohesion are appreciated aspects of the Eucharist, but a metaphysics for sacramental encounter is a different matter, so too is the efficacy of the entire liturgy. We must take care, however, as there is a danger of presenting social cohesion of the eucharistic community as a secular concern rather than something based inherently on theological and religious assumptions, as Williams contends, so leading to unnecessary aridity. His argument might probe what kind of society was being imagined in a given act of social cohesion. For example, is a given community concerned to support the suspension of negotiation and competition - to practise charity

⁴⁵ Danneels, G, *Current Challenges for Sacramental Theology*, address to LEST Conference, Faculty of Theology, Leuven, 3 November, 1999 (internet publication: <http://www.liturgysociety.org/JOURNAL/volume%205-number%202/volume%205-2-danneels.htm>).

⁴⁶ Ware, K, *The Inner Kingdom: Volume 1 of the Collected Works*, New York, 2000, p64.

- as a vital element in its being, or is some semblance of cohesion a useful attribute in a more managerial enterprise, a means to another end?

A recurring theme in this study has been the pairing of divergent approaches or reflections on life and reality that, on the face of it, seem incompatible: grace and morality, the rational and irrational strains of Hellenistic philosophy, activity and passivity in divinisation, body and soul in the salvation of the person, the spirituality of ancient Syrian monks and the sacraments of the Church. To this we could add the contemporary Church situation in which significant interest in spirituality quite often resides in people who find the sacraments of limited significance. The opposite is probably true as well, for there is a sense in which those keenly aware of the efficacious grace offered in the sacraments find other domains of the spiritual life unnecessary. Such a tension between the spiritual and the sacramental may therefore run very deep.

The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy is a serious attempt to bridge the gap between these haunting emphases in the Christian way from a time when the tension threatened the Church's sacramental life and order. For in *CD* we find that not just the spiritual faculty of the soul, but the whole psychosomatic person is affirmed as the physical body 'experiences through the sacraments a true inauguration of the bodily glory of the Age to come'⁴⁷. This is undertaken by the anonymous writer with great imagination and rigour, yet also with a lightness which measures well against his apophatic convictions. For not only is the world of symbolic meaning built up only to be melted away in the mystical experience of the divine, but his concluding comments yearn with humility for the response of more inspired, more divine and more beautiful insights from his readers.

⁴⁷ Ware, K, *The Inner Kingdom*, p40.