

**THE CORPUS AREOPAGITICUM AS A CRYPTO-PAGAN PROJECT\***

Tuomo Lankila, Universities of Helsinki and Jyväskylä

(tuomo.lankila@helsinki.fi)

**Abstract:** Summing up current discussion this article presents a detailed critique of Carlo Maria Mazzucchi's suggestion that Damascius, the last head of the pagan Neoplatonist school of Athens, was the author of the enigmatic Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. Mazzucchi's approach grasps better the probable context of the emergence of the Dionysian Corpus than mainstream interpretation, which accepts the author's overt claim of Christianity, resorts too easily to rather twisted theories of pseudonymic writing and overrates the autonomy of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* in relation to Proclus. Contrary to the opinions that dismiss speculation about the identity of the writer as meaningless in the absence of new data this article considers such attempts necessary and useful. The article agrees with Carlo Maria Mazzucchi's general thesis that the *Corpus* was a creation of pagan philosophers in the Neoplatonic academy of Athens after Proclus. However, it argues that Mazzucchi misjudged the perspective regarding the future that prevailed in the Athenian school and in particular Damascius' willingness to accept a compromise with Christianity at the cost of polytheism as articulated in Proclus' theology of the classes of the gods. As a result a more credible version of the crypto-pagan hypothesis could be developed, namely to see the *Corpus Dionysiacum* as a purely instrumental stratagem aiming to protect Proclus' works in order to resurrect more easily the polytheistic religion in better times, which according to the Neoplatonists' cyclic view of history were destined to return one day.

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss how far and in what ways the "crypto-pagan hypothesis" of the origin of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* could be defended. By the term "crypto-pagan" I do not mean that the Christian content of the *Corpus* is damaged due to Dionysian thinking being so saturated with pagan Neoplatonism (nobody could seriously nowadays deny in scholarly debate that the *Corpus* is thoroughly permeated with Neoplatonic ideas). No one is in possession of the measure with which to state what "genuine" Christianity is and then judge how

---

\* I would like to thank all who have commented on earlier versions of this article, especially Edward Butler, Mika Perälä, Timothy Riggs and Ben Schomakers.

Dionysius is possibly falling short of this standard. I use the phrase “crypto-pagan hypothesis” in a stronger sense, meaning a claim that it would be fruitful to view the *Corpus* not as a theoretical attempt at synthesising Christian and Neoplatonic ideas but as a purely instrumental historical document, evidencing a stratagem forged for the service of the self-defence of the Athenian School of Later Neoplatonism.

Approving, without critical reflection, of an overt claim regarding the intention of the pseudonymous discourse contradicts the fundamental requirement of caution in historical analysis. There are some tendencies in Dionysian studies to overestimate the space for free philosophical discussion during the fifth and sixth centuries and to underestimate the role of persecution.<sup>2</sup> Other contributing factors to these tendencies are the view that it is meaningless to investigate the classic question of authorship (on the grounds that it is unsolvable) and the emphasis on the independence, originality, and profundity of the Dionysian project in its relation to pagan Neoplatonism, and especially to Proclus.

### A Crypto-Pagan Tale

To convey the issues involved, I will begin with a tale. At the beginning of the sixth century there was an extremely clever, well-educated, and, as is inevitable in a tale, exceptionally beautiful woman, who was originally of non-Christian birth and a very staunch supporter of traditional piety. Maybe she was Theodora, to whom Damascius dedicated his “Philosophical History”, and thus she was a descendant of the divine Iamblichus and priestly-king Sampsigeramos.<sup>3</sup> – Or maybe she was of some other ancestry, descended perhaps from Aglaophemus or even Ammikartos—who knows.

---

<sup>2</sup> I think that Anthony Kaldellis’ view of the period is basically true: “.. there was no freedom of expression in sixth-century Constantinople, for imperial ideology was backed by the punitive powers of the state. There may have been actual freedom of thought, more so, perhaps, than in our own age, but that is another matter. The main point is that if one disagreed with the basic principles of imperial rule, or with a specific policy, one had to tread very carefully in expressing dissent. Certain things simply had to be said and other things could never be said openly, no matter what one believed.” A. Kaldellis, “Republican theory and political dissidence in Ioannes Lydos”, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 29 (2005), pp. 1-16 at 10.

<sup>3</sup> All that we know about Theodora comes from Damascius through the patriarch Photius, who says in his *Bibliotheca* (cod. 181 p. 125b 32 Bekker (= Henry II p. 189): “Read Damascius the Damascene’s ‘On the Life of Isidore the Philosopher’. The book is long, comprising some sixty chapters. Having decided to write the Life of Isidore, he dedicated the composition to a certain Theodora, Hellene too by religious persuasion (“Ἑλληνα μὲν καὶ ἀπὸ τῆ θρησκευτικῆς τιμῶσιν), not unacquainted with the disciplines of philosophy, poetics and grammar, but also well versed in geometry and higher arithmetic, Damascius himself and Isidore having taught her and her younger sisters at different times. She was the daughter of Kyrina and Diogenes, the son of Eusebius son of Flavian, a descendant of Sampsigeramus and Monimos who were Iamblichus’ ancestors too, all of them first prize winners in idolatrous impiety. Damascius dedicates Isidore’s biography to her; it was her exhortation, together with that of certain others who joined in her request, that was responsible for the author’s efforts, as he himself testifies”, tr. Polymnia Athanassiadi.

She was well versed in mathematics, philosophy, and theurgy, and a hierophant of all the modes of divinity. But these were fateful times. Agapius, the youngest of Proclus' pupils, who was teaching in Byzantium, was alarmed. He sent desperate warnings to the Platonic academy in Athens about the situation developing in the capital.<sup>4</sup> There was an imminent danger that the old emperor might be forced to give in to militant Monophysites; or, even worse, after him, as a reaction to his religious policy, some Latin-speaking adherents of the synod of Chalcedon might take power; both groups were united only in their hatred of the cult of the gods.<sup>5</sup> Wise Damascius tried to be prepared for all twists of fate. Aware of the abilities of his assistant, he convinced her of the importance of carrying out a very special task. Taking the example of divine Iamblichus in his manifesto for the defence of theurgy (a work known today by the title *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*), two centuries before, she had to operate under a pseudonym, not this time adopting the identity of a venerable Egyptian prophet as Iamblichus had done, but of one of the ancient leaders of the adversaries. And so she did and produced, in an impressively short time, a collection of four books and ten letters. These writings alluded to other more sacred ones. By accomplishing these feats, she built a fortification around the hidden doctrine in order that the happier future generations need not reinvent all the truth concerning the classes of gods but could enjoy the Platonic vision of the great Proclus.

If this tale sounds provocative and “non-academic”, let us remember that similar stories are repeated many times in Dionysian studies by impeccable scholars.<sup>6</sup> Like

---

<sup>4</sup> Lydus, *De Mag.* 3.26, John the Lydian says that Agapius was his teacher in Constantinople, not in Philadelphia, when at the age of 21 he moved to the imperial city. Damascius also mentions Agapius and his school in Constantinople, *Philosophical History*, fr. 107.

<sup>5</sup> The Monophysite leaders Severus and Philoxenus had a strong influence on the emperor Anastasius (491-518), especially in the years between 508 and 512. With Justin's accession in 518 the Chalcedonian victory followed.

<sup>6</sup> See, e. g., S. Klitenic Wear and J. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist tradition*, (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 131-32, who seem to be developing Saffrey's original profiling story, which follows (translation mine). H. D. Saffrey, “Le lien le plus objectif entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus,” in *Roma magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae medievalis* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1998), pp. 791-810 = H. D. Saffrey, *Le Néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Paris, 2000), p. 236: “Before Hellenism is sentenced to death by the orders of Emperor Justinian, forbidding pagans to teach, there is a young Christian who becomes, by some chance, a reader of Proclus. We must believe that he is captivated and allowed to be imbued by the fervour of Proclean theology. This young Christian enters into a monastery, where he also finds an environment of prayer and study. He reads the Fathers of the Church, especially Origen and the Cappadocians. In his own century the great theological lights had become rare. But, like these doctors, he also wants to express his faith in the context of his time. Our young monk becomes a mature man and is recognized as a personality in his time; he becomes a hegumen of his monastery, and he will be soon chosen to be a bishop. Naturally he thinks about the problems in terms of philosophy, which has seduced him, and these are Proclean terms. This approach should absolutely not be surprising, if we remember that the Greek pantheon, i.e., the traditional enemies of Christianity, have a very inferior rank in this system, and therefore there is room for a Christian interpretation on the part of the Proclean divine hierarchy... When he writes his treatise he is also aware that this is something new, and he wonders how his thoughts will be received. But he has a precedent in the Neoplatonist school: Iamblichus who answered Porphyry under the pseudonym Abammon, an Egyptian priest. His master

those stories, this tale too refers to possible settings, portrayable people and a definite historical period that all together form a plausible context for the birth of the *Corpus*. This story has no unheard of quality in itself. It only differs from the old tales in two respects. First, it does not assume that the *Corpus* is Christian in nature. Second, it offers a palpable, concrete and easily understood motive for what may have turned out to be one of the most successful literary frauds in the world's history. This point should be tested by surveying the historical circumstances at the time of the *Corpus*' gestation.

### Fraud – That Terrible Word

Dealing with the pseudepigraphic nature of Pseudo-Dionysius E.R. Dodds once wrote that “it is for some reason customary to use a kinder term; but it is quite clear that the deception was deliberate”.<sup>7</sup> This was in 1933. More recent scholarship tends to prefer the “kinder” option. The authoritative *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states in its online entry on Dionysius that “‘forgery’ is a modern notion”.<sup>8</sup> According to this entry Dionysius had not claimed to be an innovator and by adopting a pseudonym he had merely been applying a fairly common rhetorical device. Yet Late Antiquity did know the phenomenon of literary forgery as well as the ambition and the methods of detecting and exposing it.<sup>9</sup>

Innovation would have been a strange idea for most of the writers on divine things in Pseudo-Dionysius' time. Placing Dionysius on the same level with Plotinus and the Cappadocian fathers, as the authors of the entry to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* have done, is as amazing as considering Origen, Athanasius, Cyril and Augustine as equals to Dionysius in their general relation between philosophy and religion, as John Rist has endeavoured to do.<sup>10</sup> In both cases Dionysius is the only one who is hiding his true identity. Iamblichus' procedure in *De Mysteriis* comes closer to that of Dionysius. Whether Iamblichus goes beyond literary trickery could be debated. Dionysius certainly does. Charles M. Stang tells us that “the scholarly consensus here is that in the late antique Christian imagination the distance between the historical

---

Proclus is just the one who had revealed this subterfuge. So he also writes under a pseudonym, that of Dionysius, an Athenian priest. The real Dionysius, a member of the Areopage and converted by the apostle Paul, had become the first bishop of Athens. Should he not take the identity of this bishop of Athens, if he wants the pagans in the late fifth or the beginning of the sixth century to hear about God's prodigies?”

<sup>7</sup> E.R. Dodds, *Proclus. The Elements of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford, 1963), p. xxvii, note 1.

<sup>8</sup> K. Corrigan and L.M. Harrington (2004) “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (website: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>). Last accessed 7th Oct 2010.

<sup>9</sup> See W. Speyer, *Die literarische Fälschung im heidnischen und christlichen Altertum – ein Versuch ihrer Deutung* (München, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Rist, “Pseudo-Dionysius, Neoplatonism and the Weakness of the Soul,” in H.Westra (ed.), *From Athens to Chartres* (Leiden, 1992), p. 159.

past and present can be collapsed or ‘telescoped’, such that the apostolic (and sub-apostolic) age and the contemporary world may be fully present to one.”<sup>11</sup> The holy man was transforming himself into an “‘extension’ of the personality of the ancient authority”, in the fury of writing understood as “a devotional exercise” (ibid.).

In the light of these more recent pronouncements Dodds’ statement that “[i]t is for some reason customary to use a kinder term, but is quite clear that the deception was deliberate,”<sup>12</sup> takes on a new significance. Someone with a mindset imbued by the spirit of *laïcité* may begin to suspect that the explanation for Dodds’ inclusion of the phrase “for some reason” is simply that fakes should not be customarily called fakes in historiography, if they appear to be inspired by Christian motives. Stangs’ theory could, after all, explain quite well how hagiography and Christian pseudepigraphy were produced. But even then the Areopagite confronts us with a different kind of phenomenon, one that cannot be reduced to holy men constructing “holy lies”. The Dionysian case cannot be explained in this way because the author of the *Corpus* did not identify himself as some saint of bygone days who lacked particular inspired prose. Dionysius was cutting and pasting, tampering and modifying specific contemporary collections of texts whose genuine origin was very well known to him as well as to his intended readers. He claimed that the ideas in these texts and much of the actual wording were hundreds of years old and belonged to the ideal treasure of a religious movement (Christianity) which the actual creators of these ideas (Proclus and the pagan Neoplatonic school at Athens) regarded as a catastrophe for their world.

From an early date in the transmission two scholia were customarily appended to the manuscripts between the Dionysian text itself and the commentaries of John of Scythopolis. The first of these tries to soothe the uneasiness which someone who has the opportunity to read Dionysius and Proclus side by side may feel:<sup>13</sup>

It should be known that some of the pagan philosophers, and above all Proclus, make frequent use of the doctrines of the blessed Dionysius and often literally with his own

---

<sup>11</sup> C.M. Stang, “Dionysius, Paul and the Signification of the Pseudonym,” in S. Coakley and C.M. Stang (eds) *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Chichester, U.K., 2009), p. 19. Beate Suchla, in her recent book which recapitulates for wider audience results of life-long work dedicated to Dionysian research, opines that there is no forgery, no lie and coverage in the *Corpus*, we are simply dealing with the literary figure, an implicit author with a specific literary program. The question of fraud rose up only later when Dionysian writings were introduced as weapons for Christological struggle. Suchla even says that the name is not pseudonym. I have to admit that I am unable to understand this line of argument. Are we not dealing with the tautological circle? Dionysius could not be a forger, because he is Dionysius and we could convince ourselves of this by reading Dionysius? See B.R. Suchla, *Dionysius Areopagita. Leben - Werk - Wirkung* (Freiburg i. Br., 2008), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Dodds, *Proclus. The Elements of Theology*, p. xxvii, note 1.

<sup>13</sup> Hathaway cites this scholion but he assumes that the commentator was George Pachymeres (d.-1310), R.F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague, 1969), p. 12, note 45. In contrast, Saffrey, following Suchla’s findings, points out that these scholia are joined to the *Corpus* already in the most ancient manuscripts which originate from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Saffrey, *Recherches*, p. 242. See also the discussion in his study on the survival of Proclus’ Platonic Theology, Saffrey, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne, VI* (Paris, 1997), pp. li-lvii.

words. This justifies the belief that the older philosophers of Athens had appropriated Dionysius' works, as the author relates in the book here, and held them hidden in order to appear themselves as the fathers of the divine discourse of Dionysius. And it is evidence of divine providence that this book has appeared to the public for convicting their vainglory and laziness. And the divine Basil teaches that the pagans have the habit to usurp our doctrines in his homily on "In the beginning was the Word", which states that: "I know very well that most of those who were alien (to truth) admired this formula: 'In the beginning was the Word,' and they were not afraid to place it in their writings, as the devil is a thief, and he discloses to his henchman our teachings." So much for Basil. And with regard to the words of Numenius the Pythagorean, he says openly: "What is Plato but a Moses who speaks Greek?" which no one can deny, because he is not one of ours but is one of our opponents, as is evidenced by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, who taught that it is not only now that the representatives of alien wisdom steal from us but so it was even before the coming of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

The second scholion states that the *Corpus*' author must have been a genuine pupil of the apostle Paul because otherwise his claims—to have seen a supernatural eclipse during the time of Christ's passion when Dionysius was in Heliopolis (with a friend, Apollophanes, who remained a pagan), to be present at the dormition of Saint Mary (where his teacher Hierotheus was the main speaker after the apostles), and to have been a correspondent with apostle John—would make him a liar and a lunatic outcast from society.<sup>15</sup>

In this scholion the real chain of influences and events is reversed. I am unable to state whether or not these remarkable scholia should be read as part of the deception or as some of the earliest pieces of evidence of its efficacy.

### The Cycle of Rebellions against Proclus and the Proclean Re-conquest in Dionysian Territory

A systematic and decisive critique of nineteenth century scholars culminated with the works of Koch and Stiglmayr<sup>16</sup> who irreversibly demolished the image of Dionysius as an apostolic writer and put the Dionysian *Corpus* as an object of scientific study into a Proclean context. After that shift, a peculiar spiral movement has prevailed in Dionysian studies. On the one hand, Dionysius' dependence on Proclus has been demonstrated again and again in an ever-increasing range of topics, and more and

---

<sup>14</sup> Provisional critical edition and French translation in Saffrey, *Recherches*, p. 240; the English translation is mine.

<sup>15</sup> Saffrey, *Recherches*, pp. 240-42.

<sup>16</sup> These classic works are H. Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895), pp. 438-54; and J. Stiglmayr, "Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Uebel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895), pp. 253-73 and 721-48.

more Proclean treatises have been shown to have influenced Dionysius. On the other hand, as each turn of findings has been completed, the supposed radical difference between the writings of Dionysius and those of Neoplatonism has again and again been asserted on a slightly modified basis.

In the first round of Dionysian studies the Areopagite was more or less seen as an orthodox Christian who incorporated some Neoplatonic details. In the meantime it has become common informed opinion that Dionysius was decisively inspired by Neoplatonic ideas, but, for all that, his thinking constitutes an autonomous body of work, a kind of Christian transformation of ancient Neoplatonism. Referring to *DN* 816C-817A, Eric D. Perl comments:

This repudiation of Proclus' polytheism is often regarded as one of Dionysius' most significant "Christianizations" of Proclus and one of the most profound differences between them. Instead of positing a multiplicity of productive divinities subordinate to the One, Dionysius regards the constitutive perfections of all things as the immediate differentiated presence of God himself. But is the difference really so great? ... All perfections of all things are modalities of unity, and hence all reality, for Proclus, no less than for Dionysius, is the presence of the One, in differing modes and degrees.<sup>17</sup>

One can add that Proclus and Dionysius share not only a common fundamental approach, but in practice Dionysius has transposed all of Proclus' henadological and theophanic teachings, which were articulated in ontic triads, into dimensions of the doctrines of trinitarian Thearchy and angelology. But is it the case that just because Dionysius makes no explicit mention of Proclus' classes of gods as gods, he cannot be viewed as a pagan? Naturally he has to omit all overtly polytheist prose because otherwise he would destroy the Christian surface that is indispensable for his project.

We still encounter in scholarship tenacious efforts to minimize the Neoplatonic element in Dionysius. Sometimes the very same doctrines which were earlier thought to depict a radical difference between Dionysius and Proclus are now seen to share common traits, for example, their theories of love.<sup>18</sup>

Dionysian *agnosia* and "apophatic anthropology", cited by Stang in his study, are in effect both Proclean tenets belonging to Proclus' theory of divine interfaces, that is, henadology and the doctrine of the hypernoetic cognition. I find it puzzling how Ysabel de Andia, who has refuted in her monumental study so many claims made in previous scholarship concerning there being a radical difference between Dionysius and Proclus, can resort to a categorical statement such as this: "If it is undeniable that the explanation [for the *Corpus*] is that Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite's texts derive from Proclean sources, the intention – and therefore the significance – of the texts is [nevertheless] Christian."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> E.D. Perl, *Theophany* (Albany, 2007), p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Compare repeated statements in earlier studies distinguishing Dionysian *agape* and Neoplatonic *eros* with the modern treatment of the Dionysian theory of love in Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis. L'Union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 145-64.

<sup>19</sup> De Andia, *Henosis*, p.168. The translation is mine (TL).

Can it really be held that we can derive the significance of a literary work from the assumed intention of its author? Certainly, in the case of Pseudo-Dionysius we cannot consider the question of his intention without reflecting on some actual facts derived from history such as the seriousness of the author's self-proclaimed denominational allegiance. This could offer some explicit hypothesis on the historical context of the birth of the *Corpus*. One has to wonder about the origins or reasons for the tendency in Dionysian studies to interpret possible theoretical differences between Dionysius' and Proclus' views as differences between pagan Neoplatonic and Christian thought. Why not ask first, for example, whether this assumed difference perhaps mirrors the deviating positions of Proclus' and Damascius' circles? This question points to the fact that in practice Dionysian and Proclean studies have often taken divergent paths. And perhaps there is also an explanation here why the technical terminology of pagan Neoplatonism is sometimes effaced in modern translations of the Dionysian Corpus.

Colm Luibheid's translation, for example, is a valuable work that makes Dionysian texts more accessible to a contemporary English reading public, but it is, as Eric D. Perl says, "almost a paraphrase rather than a translation".<sup>20</sup> Gregory Shaw points out that this translation systematically ignores the term theurgy and its cognates.<sup>21</sup> This *de facto* standard English translation is read usually with Rorem's commentary, which, although it is in principle fair in its portrayal of pagan Neoplatonism, ignores most of the pertinent Proclean material. Thus an innocent reader might get the impression that concepts that have crucial importance in Dionysius' thought, as, for example, the symbolism of dissimilar similarities, where the highest divine truths are revealed by the most incongruous and insulting symbols,<sup>22</sup> are Dionysian innovations, when in fact they were established devices of the hermeneutics of the Athenian school.<sup>23</sup>

The ever resurgent rebellion against acknowledging the Proclean foundations of the Dionysian ideas is nowadays resorting to ingenious theories concerning pseudonymity and is emphasizing especially Pauline inspiration for Dionysius. Christian Schäfer argues that Dionysius' aim was to recreate the Pauline situation, the first encounter between philosophy and Christian faith with the difference that pagans formed Paul's audience, while Dionysius' aim was to reassure Christians of the rational grounds of their doctrine. Schäfer criticizes strongly those who read Dionysius according to the "Proclus-caveat", that is, those who see in Dionysius "a diluted version of Proclean

---

<sup>20</sup> Perl, *Theophany*, p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> G. Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7 (1999), pp. 573-99 at 573. Shaw also convincingly refutes Rorem's and Louth's attempts to prove that there is a fundamental difference between Iamblichean and Dionysian theurgy. For a current detailed study of theurgy in Pseudo-Dionysius see M.-W. Stock, *Theurgisches Denken: zur kirchlichen Hierarchie des Dionysius Areopagita* (Berlin, 2008), especially pp. 152-71.

<sup>22</sup> P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York, 1993), pp. 53-57.

<sup>23</sup> In effect, *The Elements of Theology* is the only work of Proclus included in Rorem's bibliography. Rorem has dedicated to these issues an influential monograph, P. Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto, 1984). However, even in this study the use of the Proclean corpus seems to be minimal.

thought” and so “are proverbial fools that would stare at the finger when the finger points at the moon.”<sup>24</sup>

Schäfer points out that for Dionysius the cyclical triad of causation is systematically present in a non-Proclean order (procession, remaining, return), and thus the moment of “remaining” expresses an existential and ontic “stand-still”, where the theophanic creation-process comes about on different levels, and these “halt”-points should be understood as God’s images in creation. The Divine Names in Dionysian discourse are terms for these different phases. Since God is unknowable, they cannot tell us about God as God itself (*καθ’ αὐτό*), but only *καθ’ ἡμᾶς*, that is, from the viewpoint of a created thing or rather only knowing what God permits us to know about him. Schäfer seems to think that this “shift of perspective from an interpretation *per se* to an agent-relative perspective”<sup>25</sup> marks an innovation in Dionysius and is somehow derived from Pauline positions. That Dionysius turns to the problem of evil in the middle of his discourse on divine names is surprising only at first glance, argues Schäfer, because it is a natural consequent from the adopted viewpoint. “After all, ‘evil’ is not a theonym; the philosophical question of evil must be addressed in order to develop a credible and consistent explication of the world *καθ’ ἡμᾶς*.”<sup>26</sup>

Schäfer’s discussion has great merits; however, at least two points are problematic. First, the demand that in regard to this enigmatic author we should suspend the usual principles of historical criticism, since “in Dionysius’ case the author is so completely absorbed in his fictitious self that he basically forces an acceptance of this fictitious self upon the interpreter”.<sup>27</sup> Second, it seems that most of the areas which Schäfer claims to be independent Dionysian territory should be returned to Proclus. Proclus too, in a very similar manner as Dionysius, discusses evil in the midst of a discourse on divine attributes.<sup>28</sup> We find an emphasis on the *καθ’ ἡμᾶς* theory of divine names in him too. We cannot name an unknowable primal principle, Proclus says, but we have two names through which to refer to it because they are adopted by secondary realities as images of the primal: these are the Good and the One.<sup>29</sup> In general it seems to me that the model for Dionysius’ doctrine on divine names are Proclus’ discussion of the Platonic divine attributes and its conclusion concerning divine names, especially in the *Platonic Theology* (part I, chapters 13-29. Although one of the main topics of Schäfer’s treatise is to ponder the relationships between Dionysius and Proclus, we find in it surprisingly little Proclus (see his *index locorum*). The *Platonic Theology*, directly relevant to the themes dealt with, is mentioned only once and even then it is only concerning Salvatore Lilla’s findings regarding the use of irenic categories in the *Platonic Theology*.

---

<sup>24</sup> C. Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 169-70.

<sup>25</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, p. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, p. 172.

<sup>27</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, p. 170.

<sup>28</sup> *Theol. Plat.* I 18, 82.8-88.10.

<sup>29</sup> *Theol. Plat.* II 42, 16-24, see also 64, 1-9.

The most “Proclean” Dionysius in current research is that of Werner Beierwaltes, whose fine article carries the title “Dionysius the Areopagite – a Christian Proclus?”<sup>30</sup> Beierwaltes criticizes “apologetic intention, which would make Dionysius a ‘Proclus in Christian clothing’, in the manner that Proclus’ language is seen only as external borrowing”. Instead, Beierwaltes is himself of the view that Dionysius’ “theology is the most extreme example of a ‘hellenization of Christianity’”.<sup>31</sup> But I think that not even Beierwaltes’ formulation, written in 1998, is radical enough considering all that we know today about the extent of Proclus’ paraphrased presence in the Dionysian Corpus and the methods that Dionysius used.

In his analysis of the relationship between the first books of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology* and the Dionysian *Divine Names*, Istvan Perczel summarizes Dionysius’ technique as follows:<sup>32</sup>

- 1) Heathen references are changed into Christian ones, gods to Trinity, etc.
- 2) Dionysius changes practically all of Proclus’ words to synonyms, while preserving the structure and sometimes even rhythm of the sentence.
- 3) Some characteristic words are retained, but their place in the structure of the sentence is changed.
- 4) Whole passages are broadened and filled with additional elements.

Dionysius’ theoretical debt to general Neoplatonist principles as well as his direct dependence on Proclus in many specific issues has been shown many times. Yet the inventory that exists is far from exhaustive. As a minor suggestion for an additional aspect that has not yet been considered but may merit a special examination I would like here to point out that a concise exposition in Dionysius’ 9th letter on how to read Scriptures symbolically derives from Proclus’ theory in his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic* and *Platonic Theology*. Perczel claims that there are at least nine cases of textual correspondences between the 9th letter and chapters 4 to 6 of the first part of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*. If one were to look more closely at Dionysius’ exegesis of the “house of wisdom”, the “mixing bowl”,<sup>33</sup> spiritual food and drink, and the holy

---

<sup>30</sup> I have used here the Italian version, W. Beierwaltes, “Dionigi Areopagita – un Proclo cristiano?” in *Platonismo nel Cristianesimo*, trans. Mauro Falcioni (Milan, 2000), pp. 49-97. The translations from this work are mine (TL).

<sup>31</sup> Beierwaltes, *Platonismo*, p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> I. Perczel, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic Theology: A Preliminary Study,” in A.P. Segonds and C. Steel (eds), *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne* (Leuven, 2000), pp. 491-532 at 503. See also examples by which Saffrey completes the image of Dionysius’ dependence on Proclus, analysing his methods and conclusions: “Citing Proclus in this way, Denys reveals in what school he was trained and naturally he tried to hide this dependency by citation of Saint Paul combining it with that of Proclus. This method is typical for him.” Saffrey, *Recherches*, p. 246.

<sup>33</sup> “... immediately preceding his interpretation of the mixing bowl, Ps.-Dionysius had mentioned that not only scriptures but the whole perceptible world order (κόσμος) also revealed the things of God, an unmistakable hint at the meaning of the mixing bowl symbol, which for Proclus and his students could mean only one thing, the mixing bowl (κρατήρ) in which Timaeus says that the intelligible world order was combined.” Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, p. 110. Following Dodds, Hathaway

banquet, I suspect that even these would turn out to be completely Proclean. In this particular case the model is Proclus' exegesis of Phaedrus in the fourth book of the *Platonic Theology*, where Proclus speaks about the "plain of truth", the "manger" (of the horses of soul-chariots), ambrosia and nectar, and the banquet of the gods.<sup>34</sup> This is typical of Dionysius. He introduces his treatment with allegories from the Bible and gives the impression that he is interpreting "The Scriptures", but in reality he is paraphrasing Proclus.

### Carlo Maria Mazzucchi's Version of the Crypto-Pagan Hypothesis

It may be surprising that notwithstanding over a hundred years' debate on Dionysius, a debate full of accusations against Dionysius as being "too Neoplatonist" and thus "objectively" not a "genuine" Christian (and thus consequently a pagan?), only one scholar has clearly claimed that what the author of the *Corpus* did was effectively carrying out a fully intentional crypto-pagan stratagem. This scholar is Carlo Maria Mazzucchi, and his position deserves for this very reason a detailed exposition and criticism.<sup>35</sup>

Not that there were no attempts at all to follow the crypto-pagan track. Some time ago Ronald Hathaway (1969) and Rosemary Griffith (1997)<sup>36</sup> proposed that the author of the Dionysian *Corpus* should be looked for in the circle of Damascius. In the case of Hathaway it seems that eventually Heraiscus became the strongest candidate for being the author of the *Corpus*. However, the appetite to follow through this path to its conclusion seems limited. Opinions like that of Rosemary A. Arthur, as expressed in her recent book of 2008, are more typical. According to Arthur the crypto-pagan hypothesis has to be abandoned on the grounds that "[y]et here and there in the text,

---

suggests also that a Dionysian interpretation of symbols of liquids implies a connection to pagan libation rituals (ibid. p. 114).

<sup>34</sup> In his commentary on the letter, Rorem says that "both explicitly and implicitly, Dionysius presents God in the Neoplatonic language of 'remaining, procession, and return (or reversion)'" ; Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 27; but Rorem seems to be unaware of the specific Proclean background of this concrete piece of Dionysian exegesis. Proclus' crater passages are relevant here, but even more *Theol. Plat. IV*, especially 46, 7 – 48, 9, which seems to me to be the context inspiring Dionysius.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Lamberton in his *Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonist allegorical reading and the growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1986) comes very close to the crypto-pagan hypothesis in his comments on Hathaway's position. However, for Lamberton, too (ibid. p. 249), the "deliberate masquerading" carried out by the author of the *Corpus* means ultimately "a christianization (or more properly a de-paganization)" of Proclean thought. Lamberton thinks that Dionysius was most probably "in fact an Athenian Neoplatonist, and he may well have been a Christian student of Proclus himself" (ibid. p. 232. Stock (*Theurgisches Denken*, 2008) in her study otherwise providing one of the best current discussions of the status of the Dionysian studies and especially authorship question unfortunately ignores Mazzucchi's contribution.

<sup>36</sup> See Hathaway, *Hierachy*; and R. Griffith, "Neo-Platonism and Christianity: Pseudo-Dionysius and Damascius," *Studia patristica* 29 (1997), pp. 238-43.

like granules of gold in a muddy river bed, are passages which could only have been written by a devout Christian”.<sup>37</sup>

In Mazzucchi’s view Hathaway’s opinion is based on a happy intuition, while he sees his own contribution as a “motivated proposal.” (He seems not to be aware of that of Griffith.)<sup>38</sup> Mazzucchi feels so certain about the force of his arguments that he would like to transfer the burden of proof to those who deny Pseudo-Dionysius being Damascius.<sup>39</sup> According to Mazzucchi, the Dionysian *Corpus* is literary fiction, made up by Damascius, and “represents an extreme counter-offensive of paganism against the already dominant Christian thought”. The purpose of the false writings “would, therefore, be to transform Christianity into Neoplatonism in all respects”. Giovanni Reale represents Mazzucchi’s findings as a working hypothesis which, however, still requires, “in order to be accepted, [some form of] analytical control of the linguistic and conceptual concordance and correspondence between the *Corpus* and the *De principiis*, Damascius’ masterpiece...”<sup>40</sup>

Mazzucchi begins his treatment by listing the persons mentioned in the *Corpus*. He thinks that persons who are known only from this source are most probably literary fictions. He introduces the problem of Hierotheus with the famous description of Dionysius and his master’s presence in the dormition of the Virgin and points out that Dionysius’ testimony was actually one of the main sources in the development of the dogma of κοίμησις.<sup>41</sup>

In his listing of the surviving and lost Dionysian works, Mazzucchi proposes that the latter group never existed. “This system of self-quotations does not only allow Dionysius to redirect to another location (which does not exist) a reader who wants to know his thoughts on two key issues, such as sin and redemption, but it also helps us to determine the succession of his bibliography, which is constituted - as it happens! - by twelve works, five surviving and seven lost.” Mazzucchi thinks that these numbers are not accidental but have symbolic value, but he says that he has not found so far a persuasive explanation for what that might be.<sup>42</sup>

Mazzucchi does not see Dionysius as a defender of Monophysitism but thinks that the author’s starting-point is (Chalcedonian) affirmative theology, and he ends with a (Neoplatonic) apophatic and mystical vision. He summarizes the *Corpus* system into a set of five principles:

<sup>37</sup> R.A. Arthur, *Pseudo-Dionysius as Polemicist: the development and purpose of the angelic hierarchy in sixth-century Syria* (Aldershot, 2008), pp. x-xi.

<sup>38</sup> C.M. Mazzucchi, “Damascio, autore del *Corpus Dionysiacum*, e il dialogo *Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*,” *Aevum* 80 (2006), pp. 299-334. The article is reprinted as an “integrative essay” (pp. 707-62) concluding with the new Italian version (with Greek text) of the Dionysian *Corpus* in P. Scazzoso and E. Bellini (eds, with introduction by Giovanni Reale), *Dionigi Areopagita. Tutte le opere* (Milan, 2009). Translations from this text are mine (TL).

<sup>39</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” p. 753.

<sup>40</sup> G. Reale, “Introduction,” in *Dionigi Areopagita*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 714-17.

<sup>42</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 717-19.

- 1) All proceeds from God as emanation without God's (personal) thought and will,
- 2) there is no evil,
- 3) God is absolutely unknowable,
- 4) the role of Christ, human-god, is to prompt humanity to ascend to and unite with God, with the ascending process opposite from the derivation of reality from the primal cause,
- 5) the Church is constituted according to a strict hierarchy as an image of angelic hierarchy, and it could not be otherwise because a gradual hierarchy is a godly norm for Being and Truth itself.<sup>43</sup>

According to Mazzucchi there is no room in Dionysian thinking for a personal God, i. e. “for the terrible mystery of liberty, for the Creator, or for evil and sin which have required redemption through the Cross ... Indeed, one might even wonder where the space is for Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

In his treatment of the reception of the *Corpus* in Byzantine ecclesiastical culture in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century, Mazzucchi also presents the famous inverse thesis of the scholiast, who made Proclus a plagiarist of Dionysius. Referring to Suchla’s opinion, Mazzucchi thinks that the author of the scholion could be John Scythopolis.<sup>45</sup>

Mazzucchi’s opinion is that there was a radical difference between Dionysius’, the apologists’, and the Church Fathers’ use of “Platonism”. These latter representatives of early Christian thought regarded Platonism as an incomplete anticipation of some Christian tenets, which Christianity superseded. Contrary to this view, the *Corpus* made Neoplatonism the substance of Christianity, and all the rest (dogmas, rituals, and so on) are only accidents. Earlier attempts to introduce “Platonism” to Christianity had no need for such a meticulously crafted fiction as that which Dionysius produced. For this reason Mazzucchi concludes that the *Corpus*

“...seems to be the ultimate weapon in the battle against the Christian struggle, which was going to end in certain defeat, unless a stroke of genius, a painstaking effort, and the coldest confidence could succeed at the last moment to turn the winners into losers. I think that precisely this happened, and the great man who carried out this undertaking was the philosopher Damascius, in the years when he lived in Athens as the last head of the Academy.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Mazzucchi, Damascius had lost all hope for the restoration of paganism through political action, and this is seen in his famous passage of the “attempts” after Julian in Damascius’ *Philosophical History*. The Neoplatonic circle was capable of creating Christian fiction because it had sufficient acquaintance with the Christian traditions. Damascius was the right man to carry out such a bold action,

---

<sup>43</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 721-23.

<sup>44</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” p. 724.

<sup>45</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 727-29.

<sup>46</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” p. 736.

if we trust the description of his psychological character noted by Photius and seen in his style, argumentation, and even in some of his explicit statements, which portray his most outstanding traits: “absolute, unwavering self-confidence” and “sense of superiority”.<sup>47</sup>

Analysing more closely Damascius’ attempt to absorb Christianity into Neoplatonism, Mazzucchi returns to the image of Hierotheus. The interpretative key to explaining how the *Corpus*’ fictive characters and enigmatic stories reveal Dionysius’ own life is the idea that they correspond to real persons and real events in Damascius’ life. The story of Apollonanes and Dionysius bearing witness to an eclipse in Hieropolis of Egypt corresponds to what Asclepiades told about celestial appearances witnessed by him and later Damascius and Isidorus themselves in the Heliopolis of Syria.

Mazzucchi also sees the same kind of isotonic symmetry between the names of Apollonanes and Asklepiades. The dormition of the Virgin corresponds in Damascius’ personal life to the funerals of Hermeias’ spouse Aidesia, on which occasion Damascius had the honour of making a speech. Mazzucchi finds striking similarities in the words with which Damascius describes how Proclus and the Athenian philosophers paid respect to Aidesia during her visit to Athens (ὁ τε ἄλλος χορός τῶν φιλοσόφων καὶ ὁ κορυφαῖος Πρόκλος) and the Dionysian tale of the company of the Apostles and leading hierarchs who were present at the last terrestrial moments of Mary (Πέτρος and) ἡ κορυφαία καὶ πρεσβυτάτη τῶν θεολόγων ἀκρότης. Then Mazzucchi concludes that Hierotheus refers to Damascius’ teacher, Isidorus. “There is no doubt that in the life of Damascius, Isidorus and Proklos had analogous roles (with the apostle Paul). Παῦλος – Πρόκλος; Ἱερόθεος – Ἰσιδώρος; Διονύσιος – Δαμάσκιος. They share the same initials, finals, isosyllaby, and isotony.”<sup>48</sup>

Mazzucchi points out that the name “Hierotheus” is otherwise unknown to Greek sacral and profane literature, that it does not appear in the papyrology, and that the few cases of its appearance in Medieval times are derived from the personality invented by the Areopagite. In principle, this name could, according to Mazzucchi, possibly be formed following the model of φιλόθεος. Is it by pure chance, asks Mazzucchi, that the only known occurrence of Hierotheus comes from the honorary epigraph for the fallen heroes of a battle in 409 BC, which was raised on the side of the road from the city to the site of the Academy? The name of Proclus’ *Elements* given in plural to the cited work of Hierotheus is, according to Mazzucchi, Damascius’ provocative way of expressing contempt for the credulity of the Christians.<sup>49</sup>

One more argument for the Damascian origin of the *Corpus* could be found even in *De divinis nominibus* which according to Mazzucchi is the only work of Dionysius for which it is not easy to find a equivalent in the Neoplatonic traditions. There is

<sup>47</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 738-47.

<sup>48</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” p. 748.

<sup>49</sup> Mazzucchi, “Damascio,” pp. 748-49.

however one precedent, Porphyry's work *Περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων*. Dionysius refers to "Father" in many places of his works, but just here in his list of the divine names, this single and most important name for God in the Christian tradition is not to be found. Dionysius' position could be defended on the ground that he is not interested here in dealing with the names of God regarding the different persons of the Trinity but rather in the sense that they refer to the Trinity as such. However, the facts remain that the concept of God-Person, acting as a subject of will (volition) *θέλημα*, is faint and almost imperceptible in Dionysius. In his Mystical theology Father and Son are replaced by the abstract Fatherhood and Sonship (*πατρότης, υἱότης*).<sup>50</sup>

Before concluding, Mazzucchi adds two more arguments. He refers to Procopius, who tells us of a man named Arsenius, a Samaritan by religion, but nevertheless so well versed in Christian thought, that he could play the role of theological councillor to the emperor and compose writings supporting Justinian's Christological views. This seems to be for Mazzucchi some kind of parallel to Damascius as a person, who, though a non-Christian, had sufficient knowledge of Christian theology to formulate an opinion about it.

The second argument is congruity of style. Mazzucchi spaciouly quotes Photius' assessment of Damascius' style and points out that the characteristics mentioned by Photius are not in effect to be found in the surviving fragments of the *Vita Isidori* but instead describe aptly the Dionysian *Corpus*; they also have some similarity with the most related passages of Damascius' *De principiis*. These characteristics are:

- 1) Writing in an authoritative (and authoritarian) tone,
- 2) Use of extended periods without reasonable measure,
- 3) Construction of phrases which are not well articulated but dense and strange,
- 4) Continuous increase in the use of *ὑπέρ* and analogous decorations.<sup>51</sup>

Mazzucchi believes that Damascius did not enter his forgery into circulation in Athens because the manoeuvre would have been easily revealed in that small city. Instead, he used his contacts in Alexandria and indirectly in Emesa for dissemination, thus bringing about the emergence of the Syriac translation of the *Corpus* by Sergius of Reshaina and the exegesis of John of Scythopolis.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, Mazzucchi produces some fanciful speculations about what Justinian, who according to Mazzucchi was aware of the affair through his secret services, might have thought about this operation. The article concludes with reflections about an interesting anonymous treatise on political theory (*Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*). Its author was very keen on the ideas of hierarchy and ideology representing an imperial system as an image of divine order, and for this reason Mazzucchi seems to deal with him as a representative of parallel ideas to those of Damascius, but it escapes me why

<sup>50</sup> Mazzucchi, "Damascio," p. 753.

<sup>51</sup> Mazzucchi, "Damascio," pp. 756-57.

<sup>52</sup> Mazzucchi, "Damascio," p. 759.

this topic should be necessarily raised with the issue of the Damascian origins of the Dionysian *Corpus*.<sup>53</sup>

#### The Problems with Mazzucchi's Position

The first point in my critical remarks is that Mazzucchi's summary of the Dionysian principles is unpersuasive. The question is much more nuanced, both with regard to Dionysius as with pagan Neoplatonism, than Mazzucchi allows for. There are also passages in Dionysius which resemble the traditional view of creation in the spirit of mainstream Christianity. Then again, it could be argued that there are elements to do with "thought" and "will" also in the pagan Neoplatonist assertions concerning the highest divinity. That Plotinus ascribed some kind of noetic life for his primal One is, I assume, a widely held opinion in scholarship, and even Damascius could attribute some kind of volition to the One.

Nor is Mazzucchi's position regarding Dionysius' whole-sale denial of the existence of evil convincing. Even if Dionysius had held this opinion, it would not have been Neoplatonic. In fact Dionysius' concept of evil is very similar to that of Proclus. For Proclus the problem of evil arises naturally from partial points of view on reality, and evil is not non-existent but a parasitic side-effect of the real causes.

That God is absolutely unknowable is not a concept which should define one who holds it as a Neoplatonist. For example, the Cappadocian Fathers subscribed to such an idea. In pagan Neoplatonism this question has nuances as well. For Damascius the ultimate ineffability of the first principle is a basic tenet, but at the same time he held the view that the second principle, corresponding to that of the original Neoplatonic One, is in some sense knowable.

Mazzucchi's explanation of why Dionysius refers to his own and to Hierotheus' (fictitious) works I find basically correct. There is no sectarian fury in the Dionysian *Corpus*. Dionysius did not take a clear stand on the Christological controversy: if he was a Monophysite, this trait was so mild that the Neo-Chalcedonian John could have easily turned him into an adherent of Orthodoxy. Whenever he approaches problematic discrepancies in the contemporary debate, he refers to an inexistent further discussion of inexistent works. Thus his partisanship will ultimately remain without definitive corroboration. As a consequence, the fact that he rather avoids than transcends the controversy of Christ's nature seriously weakens interpretations which construe his principal motive as an attempt to resolve this controversy.

Mazzucchi's emphasis on Christ's absence in the Dionysian *Corpus* seems to be in line with Vanneste's critique,<sup>54</sup> but this interpretation has been strongly challenged by

---

<sup>53</sup> Mazzucchi, "Damascio," pp. 761-62. Mazzucchi's title suggests a comparison between Damascius and the author of the anonymous dialogue, but the latter is dealt with only in the two last pages of the study, which as a whole comprises of more than sixty pages.

other scholars. Both Mazzucchi and Vanneste, and many others, seem to think that somehow they have at their disposal an adequate concept of “genuine” Christianity with which to compare and judge Dionysius’ works. In effect, this kind of measure is after all very difficult to define.

Mazzucchi puts far too much weight on his argument regarding the isosyllaby and isotony of names: this argument seems to me to be particularly weak. However, pondering Hierotheus’ role in the *Corpus*, he comes very close to a solution which I admit is plausible. A forged book of Hierotheus was known in the Syriac monastic communities in the sixth century. Its connection to a person invented by the author of the Dionysian *Corpus* is not clear. Perczel in his contribution from 2008 thinks that the *Corpus* was originally born as an esoteric work among the Origenists.<sup>55</sup> Sheldon-Williams suggests that Dionysius introduced Hierotheus in order to cover his pagan sources.<sup>56</sup> This explanation is not quite satisfactory. Why would he need Hierotheus when he was a man of wisdom himself? Even more difficult is the explanation for why he would render Hierotheus a master on Christian issues as well. Why is the apostle Paul not enough? Dionysius refers to and also quotes Hierotheus’ book, the *Elements of Theology*. The title in itself is significant because it alludes to Proclus’ systematic treatise.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu* (Bruges, 1959).

<sup>55</sup> A.L. Frothingham JR, *Stephen Bar Sudhaili. The Syrian mystic (c. 500 A.D)* (Leiden 1886, repr. Amsterdam, 1981). See also I. Perczel, “The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius,” in Coakley and Stang (eds), *Re-thinking*, pp. 27-41.

<sup>56</sup> I.P. Sheldon-Williams, “Pseudo-Dionysius,” in A.H. Armstrong (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 457, introduces Hierotheus as “possibly” being a fictive character. In an earlier article originating from 1963, Sheldon-Williams, “The pseudo-Dionysius and the holy Hierotheus,” *Studia Patristica* 8.2 (1966), pp. 108-117, was still defending the interpretation according to which Hierotheus was a historical person and most probably a bishop. Sheldon-Williams’ attempt to link Dionysius’ thought to that of the predecessors of Proclus was influenced by the first wave of “revanchist” readings, culminating in the late 1950s (Pera, Turolla, Elorduy), and was hardly convincing then and is certainly out-of-date today. Because of the striking similarity between the Proclean doctrine of love and that which Dionysius attributes to his master, Ysabel de Andia (*Henosis*, p. 153) says that “one could ask whether Hierotheus is Proclus”.

<sup>57</sup> “The book attributed to this fictive teacher carries a name which calls to mind Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*”, says also René Roques in his introduction to Maurice de Gandillac’s *Denys l’Aréopagite* (my translation, TL): *La Hiérarchie céleste* (Paris, 1958), p. 103. Equally intriguing is the name of the other work attributed by Dionysius to his mentor: *Erotic Hymns*. As we know, Proclus was also a great hymn writer and among his surviving poetry we have two hymns celebrating Aphrodite. In contribution to the speculation about the chosen identity of the author I agree with the view that the placeholder offered by St. Paul was almost destined to be filled by some contemporary in need of apostolic authority, but from the view point of the crypto-pagan hypothesis it can be argued also that Dionysius is a very appropriate name. One of the main theories of the *Corpus* is the doctrine of divine love, and for Proclus Aphrodite was ἐρωτοτόκος, “Love-bearer” (Procl., *Hymni*. 2.11.13) and goddess in the providential love of a superior deity for Dionysus (*In Crat.* 180). The Areopagite dedicated his works to Timotheus, Paul’s disciple from Asia Minor. Suchla sees here one more argument for her theory of the *Corpus* being Neoplatonic philosophy subsumed under a Pauline view (*Dionysius*, p. 19). Let us remember

My suggestion is that Hierotheus' passages are consciously worked out in a way that they closely resemble the passages where Proclus repeatedly praises his mentor Syrianus and recognizes his debt to him. Thus we have in Proclus a chain of the gods, Plato, Syrianus, and Proclus himself; in Dionysius we have a chain of Christ, Paul, Hierotheus, and the Areopagite himself. I claim that the literary figure of Hierotheus is produced intentionally in order to evoke the image of Syrianus in Proclus.<sup>58</sup>

Mazzucchi's notion of the exceptionality of the *Divine Names* in the Neoplatonist tradition is not completely true because we find in Proclus similar studies, e. g. in the *Platonic Theology* and in his commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*.

A sufficient explanation is lacking for Mazzucchi's claim that Damascius tried to portray Neoplatonism as a substance of Christianity. Defence of the traditional Greek religions was the *raison d'être* of the Athenian school. Helping to transform the Christian view of the highest god from an "ontological-creationist-voluntaristic" conception to a "henological-emanative-transcendental" one would not have been enough for them. But Neoplatonists were naturally concerned about the direction in which Christianity was developing. Thus why should falsifiers not introduce themes that could help the state religion to assume a more pleasant form? There are places where Dionysius seems to advocate genuine toleration. What is most remarkable is that he does not deride or aggressively criticize pagan cults.<sup>59</sup> Pagan Neoplatonists would have found the idea of "defeat" difficult to grasp considering their cyclical view of history and culture. Nevertheless, they would have valued the survival of the Neoplatonist texts in anticipation of a future recovery after a temporary "defeat" in their medium- to long-term view of the future.

Mazzucchi's findings on the parallels of Dionysius' autobiographical data in his *Philosophical History* and in tales told in the *Corpus* are important and significant, but they do not prove that Dionysius was Damascius. They only show that the author of the *Corpus* was aware of Damascius' work.

---

that Proclus dedicated his *Platonic Theology* to Pericles, whose hospitality he enjoyed during his self-imposed exile in Lydia. Could this too be a crypto-pagan pointer?

<sup>58</sup> See *CH* 20A, *EH* 376D, *EH* 392A, *EH* 424C, *DN* 648C-652A, *DN* 680A-684, *DN* 713A-713, and *DN* 865B. *DN* 681A especially comes very close to what Proclus says about Syrianus and his predecessors in *Theol. Plat.* I 6.16-21. Here the holy chorus of the Platonic exegetes is described as truth's bacchantes, that is, ... dionysiases. For Sheldon-Williams, Dionysius' explanation that he is expounding Hierotheus' thought in order to redeem the promise given to a certain Timothy "rings true". He is also of the opinion that "the vividness of language in which Hierotheus is described seems to preclude the possibility that he is a symbolic or type figure" and "such language could surely be used only of a real person" (*Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 110). Rist ("Pseudo-Dionysius") deals interestingly with the figures of Hierotheus and Apollonophanes, but he also ignores a connection between Dionysius' Hierothean and Proclus' Syrianic passages. Klitenic Wear and Dillon have observed reminiscent terms but do not develop further possible implications of the issue (*Dionysius*, pp. 9-10). We have now an excellent new study of Proclus' eulogies by Syrianus: Angela Longo, "L'elogio di Siriano e i proemi dottrinali procliani," *Ktēma* 35 (2010), pp. 137-144.

<sup>59</sup> Dionysius' conciliatory tone is noted among others by Schäfer, *Philosophy*, p. 109.

The earliest unequivocal mentioning of the Dionysian *Corpus*, as Mazzucchi points out, was made when Severus referred to *De divinis nominibus* in his polemics against the apthartodocetist Julian of Halicarnassus. Severus' writing bears the exact date of the year 839 in the Seleucid era (= 528 AD). Four years later, the Monophysite party turned to these writings in preparation for the discussion between the Severians and the Chalcedonian Diophysites under the aegis of the emperor Justinian.<sup>60</sup> In these discussions the Chalcedonians raised doubts about the authenticity of the *Corpus*. Dionysius is mentioned as well in one of Severus' letters which dates either in the same year, 532, or possibly as early as 510. According to René Roques "one can say without temerity that the Areopagite must have been written either before 525 or before 510."<sup>61</sup> The first known scholiast to comment on Dionysius in detail was John of Scythopolis, who was active in this work already in the 530s.<sup>62</sup> He tried not only to demonstrate the authenticity of the *Corpus* but also its doctrinal compatibility with the Synod of Chalcedon.<sup>63</sup>

István Perczel has recently proved Dionysius' great dependence on Proclus' *Platonic Theology*.<sup>64</sup> The transmission of the *Platonic Theology*, according to its authorities, Father Saffrey and Leendert Gerrit Westerink, tells us that<sup>65</sup>

"The *Platonic Theology* was almost unquestionably Proclus' last work. It was definitely edited long after Proclus' death, during the last years of the Athenian Academy (that is to say not long before 529, possibly by Simplicius), and the magnum opus of Proclus

<sup>60</sup> Zacharias Rhetor, *HE*, IX 15. For an English translation of the document see W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 362-66.

<sup>61</sup> R. Roques, "Denys l'Aréopagite," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique* 3 (1957), cols 244-429 at 249. Generally forgeries of late antiquity, whether used in an intra-Christian battle or in a struggle between Christianity and paganism, were not left to linger but were used immediately. A Christian collection of false oracles, in which, for example, Apollo declares his defeat in the hands of Saint Mary, was compiled in the reign of Emperor Zeno (474-491) and refers to the oracles supposed to be revealed as recently as during the period of Leo I (457-474); see F.R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370-529* (Leiden, 1994), pp. 22-23. The Oracle of Baalbek produced 502-5, was directed against Monophysites and the emperor Anastasius and was also intended for immediate use, see Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, pp. 140-141. Thus The Dionysian *Corpus*, too, was probably not produced long before its first public use. Rosemary Arthur (*Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. xi) is of the opinion that "round about 530" would be better dating than the customary "round about 500".

<sup>62</sup> For I.P. Sheldon-Williams, the probable date for John's scholia is 529: "The reaction against Proclus," in Armstrong (ed.) *Cambridge History*, pp. 473-78. Rorem and Lamoureux defend with good grounds a later date, ca. 540, P. Rorem and J.C. Lamoureux, "John of Scythopolis on Apollinarian Christology and the Pseudo-Areopagite's True Identity," *Church History* 62 (1993), pp. 469-82.

<sup>63</sup> John wanted to convince fellow Chalcedonians that the Dionysian *Corpus* was not one of the forgeries of the adversary party. See the references under note 61 and P. Rorem and J.C. Lamoureux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>64</sup> See Perczel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Platonic Theology."

<sup>65</sup> Saffrey and Westerink, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne*, I, especially cl-clvi and VI, especially xlv-liv.

was never explicitly cited by and possibly not even known to the Neoplatonists of Alexandria and Gaza.”

In fact, along with Damascius and Simplicius, Dionysius is the only late-antique philosopher who extensively utilizes Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*. No work of Proclus was as important for Dionysius as the *Platonic Theology*, Perczel writes.<sup>66</sup> Damascius assumed his position as head of the school at the latest in 515.<sup>67</sup> Dionysius could not have done without the *Platonic Theology*, and yet this text was then available only to insiders at the Academy. Mazzuchi’s argument about the relations between Damascius’ *Philosophical History* and Dionysius, and my own readings thus far, convince me to think that the *Corpus*’ author was aware of the Damascian works. If these findings are connected to Perczel’s findings regarding the importance of the *Platonic Theology* for Dionysius and to Saffrey’s and Westerink’s on the editorial history of that work, then for me the obvious conclusion is that the author of the *Corpus* was someone who belonged to the inner circle of the Academy during the time of Damascius.

There is – to state it in a Dionysian manner – a superabundant amount of technical terminology in the Dionysian *Corpus*, which is typical of Athenian Neoplatonism. In fact, Dionysius is the most theurgical writer after Proclus, as can be seen if one counts his explicit mentionings of the term “theurgy” and its derivatives (48 in Dionysius, 51 in Proclus).<sup>68</sup> This is even more significant if we take into account the different size of the two *corpora*. Dionysius also frequently uses the term *synthema* in a peculiar mystical sense, a usage which originated in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and was later re-introduced to the kernel of the Neoplatonist doctrine by Iamblichus after which it faded away.<sup>69</sup> The compound *ἐρὰ συνθήματα* occurs only in Damascius and Dionysius.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Perczel, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*,” p. 496. Saffrey also sees the *Platonic Theology* with Proclus’ *Commentary of Plato’s Parmenides* as background of the entire Dionysian work, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne*, VI li.

<sup>67</sup> Thus Combés in his introduction, L.G. Westerink and J. Combés, *Damascius, Traité des Premières Principes*, I, (Paris, 1986), p. xix.

<sup>68</sup> I will not now go into the issue of the relationships between Neoplatonist and Dionysian theurgy, which have been in recent times a topic of many excellent studies; note especially Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy”, and Stock, *Theurgisches Denken*, mentioned above note 20; and D. Burns, “Proclus and the Theurgic Liturgy of Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Dionysius* 22 (2004), pp. 111-32, but it would be worthwhile to be reconsidered. It is enough to recall here that Saffrey points out that Dionysius and his commentator John of Scythopolis subscribed also to one of the most enigmatic dimension of understanding the goal of theurgy: that of “making themselves god(ly)”, which goes clearly beyond the traditional Christian theory of deification (of the soul): *Recherches*, p. 244. But on the most generic level, theurgy simply means the practical, sacramental, and liturgical aspects of religion. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, terminology did not necessarily have the strange, magical aura of modern studies. Thus John the Lydian (*De mensibus* 102.7-14) could call Julius Caesar a theurgist, when he tried to explain in Greek terms what the Latin word *pontifex* signifies.

<sup>69</sup> Most of the uses of this term in Dionysius are to be found in *Ep.* 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ep.* 9 1.43, *Damasc. In Parm.* 94.18. For other possible dependencies of Dionysius on Damascius’ style, terminology, and concepts, see Griffith, “Neoplatonism and Christianity.”

That Athenian Neoplatonism is the spiritual home of the author of the *Corpus* is undeniable. But if we are trying to locate more precisely the author's position within this tradition, it seems to me that Dionysius is a post-Proclean parallel to Damascius rather than a follower of distinctly Damascian ideas. The Dionysian *Corpus* shares Damascius' pursuit of enhancing the transcendence of the first principle and uses some common terms as well. As is shown above, its biographical passages seem to suggest that they have been modeled on Damascius' works. But the doctrinal content clearly shares no reformulation or rectification of the Proclean system which were peculiar to Damascius. Its style and modes of presentation are not, as Mazzucchi argues, similar to those of Damascius. He too has elated chapters but much less than Proclus, for example, in his polished prefaces. Damascius' difficulty does not lie in his language or style but comes from the very specific context of his effort which is an aporetic dialogue with the Proclean system. In my view, Damascius is actually a lucid but uncompromising writer who is unwilling to simplify topics in order to analyse them; rather, he examines them with hypercritical thoroughness. Since his whole thought and mode of presentation is inherently joined with his predecessors' teachings, he requires from the reader a deep knowledge of the Proclean system.

Then again, Dionysius has a very modest amount of proper philosophical argument too, as he states dogmas and tries to keep his wording in a constantly inspired tone. This pompous, hyperbolic language and preciousness permeates the work throughout and causes for some readers (including myself) a feeling of strangeness and general sense of affectation.<sup>71</sup> But these are subjective experiences of reading: others may with good grounds think differently seeing in the Dionysian style an example of the mystical language of unsaying, an attempt to go to the outer limits of language in order to capture the transcendent. *Gustibus non est disputandum*: we cannot use the style of this writer as an argument to judge the authenticity of his discourse.

The basic weakness of Mazzucchi's approach is shared by all other attempts to prove Dionysius' partisanship (whether it is Chalcedonian, Monophysite, Origenist, or whatever). Dionysius' works were after early misgivings enthusiastically accepted by all contending parties of the Christological controversy, and he was destined to be hailed as a master of Christian apophatic theology and mysticism.

The Dionysian *Corpus* is Christian by its reception and its overt claim. But we can only guess at its intention on the basis of its content and our knowledge of the historical context of its birth. Vanneste's guess that the intention was a personal project without a definite audience is as defensible as, for example, Schäfer's that it was an attempt directed at the Christian audience in order to assure Christians of the rational basis of their doctrines. But it cannot be denied that the intention might have been crypto-

---

<sup>71</sup> He even has *αὐτοῦπεραγαθότης* (DN 820E). Some of his best formulations belong to the most effective and touching literary pieces of Later Neoplatonism, and some are so soaked with hyper- and privative language that they are touching on parody. Among the first group, for example, DN 869C-D and among the latter MT 997A-B.

pagan. Stating that this specific crypto-pagan intention was an attempt to smuggle pagan Neoplatonism into rival spiritual currents and transform its “substance”, as Mazzucchi does, is in my opinion claiming too much. I think that a more plausible version of the crypto-pagan hypothesis is to assume that the operation was carried out in a situation where the school was preparing to go underground and was pondering the best possible conditions of recovery in the medium-long term perspective of the future.

#### For Whose Benefit was the Corpus Created? – The Later Neoplatonist Predicament

Let us now deal with the last question of this inspection: *Qui prodest, cui bono*. What were the real motives behind this forgery? Saffrey says that Dionysius wanted to give Christians the best of the philosophy of his times, that he wanted to express Christian truths within the philosophical concepts of the age. A secondary motive according to Saffrey was to convert pagan intellectuals. Dillon’s and Klitenic Wear’s explanation could be called a radicalized version of Saffrey’s. In their view Dionysius’ immediate motive was to overcome the Chalcedonian-Monophysite controversy by producing a solution that would have been acceptable to both parties; but the real motive was his will to return to and claim back for Christians the philosophical wisdom that had its primitive roots in the Logos of the Christian God. This “philosophy” was exclusively Christian. This wisdom and truth really belonged to the Christians only. Klitenic Wear and Dillon refer to this project as “despoiling the Hellenes”, and they see Dionysius, as far as this project is concerned, as a successor of Clement of Alexandria.<sup>72</sup>

Maybe it was so. Never can we irrefutably establish the real motives of the author of the Dionysian *Corpus*. Against Saffrey’s explanation, however, one can say that there was no longer a need for trying to convert pagans with a new form of Christian Neoplatonism. There was such a thing that worked remarkably well, the Platonism of the Cappadocian fathers, which was compatible with Plotinus and, paradoxically, also with Porphyry. If Dionysius was really infatuated with Proclus’ system, is his blatant mode of expropriation psychologically credible? Criticising the second explanation, it is one thing to state, as did Clement, that God’s truth is the same as the original pagan wisdom, which later (post-Christian) paganism deviated from, and it is quite another thing to consciously dissect a concrete body of text, disguise sources of information, and pretend to be its legal owner. Unnamed citation is not the main point here, but the

---

<sup>72</sup> Klitenic Wear and Dillon, *Dionysius*, pp. 130-33. Vanneste, *Le mystère*, p. 180, thought that Dionysius was his personal project, and Ben Schomakers is of the opinion that we are dealing with a marvelous demonstration of inter-textual playfulness with no aim to mislead anyone, in his “The Nature of Distance: Neoplatonic and Dionysian Versions of Negative Theology,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 82 (2008), pp. 593-618.

fact that the author's sources were contemporary and that he was transposing "truths" from the "enemy territory" and presenting them as his own.

Fortunately, we need not seek a more complex explanation if the phenomena are explicable by a simpler interpretation using the same evidence. Let us remove futile epicycles. The Neoplatonists had a very concrete motive and tangible need to perform this fraud. Using Tacitus' expression, theirs was not such a "rare age when one can choose his opinions and speak about them".<sup>73</sup>

The young Proclus aroused astonishment for his courage among his future teachers by openly displaying his fidelity to the old religion when he first arrived in Athens.<sup>74</sup> Only a decade earlier Christianity had for the first time demonstrated its power in Athens, when severe restrictions were introduced for local pagan cults. There was a serious wave of persecutions at imperial level in the 430s, and the temples of Athens were closed some time before the year 460.<sup>75</sup> Philosophy had to act not only in the role of the theoretical defender of the traditional cults but also as a kind of substitute for them. Life under the dominant and actively persecuting Christian religion explains why the more esoteric modes were adopted in later Neoplatonism, which reflects the circumstances prevalent at the time.

In 448 an imperial edict decreed Porphyry's treatise *Against the Christians* to be burned.<sup>76</sup> It is hardly by chance that the most explicit hints at Christianity in Proclus' writings were in his earlier works including his commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Republic*. However, Proclus remained confident. He did not feel as though he was living in "an age of anxiety" or at the edge of an abyss, as older scholarship may have sometimes assumed.<sup>77</sup> Proclus regarded the "great confusion", a phrase with which he alluded to Christianity, as dangerous and powerful, but in his view it was destined to fade away, albeit not in the foreseeable future.<sup>78</sup> He was thinking in long periods. On the largest scale there was an inevitable cyclical destruction and resurgence of human culture and population, and in the shorter duration of memorable history Platonic

---

<sup>73</sup> Studies that address various dimensions of the predicament of the Later Neoplatonism under Christian dominance, without however raising the question of the Areopagite in this context, include P. Athanassiadi, "Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993), pp. 1-29; E. Kutash, "The Prevailing Circumstances: Theological Rhetoric and the Athenian School," chapter 2 in *Ten Gifts of the Demiurge: Plato on the Timaeus* (London, 2010); E.J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities* (Los Angeles, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli* 11.

<sup>75</sup> E.J. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 96-110.

<sup>76</sup> *Cod. Iust.* i. 1. 3.

<sup>77</sup> E.R. Dodds saw in post-Iamblichean Neoplatonists an example of "a despairing intelligentsia which already felt la fascination de l'âbime": "Theurgy and its Relationships to Neoplatonism", p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> Already a classical study: H.D. Saffrey, "Allusions antichrétiennes chez Proclus, le diadoque platonicien," *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 59 (1975), pp. 553-65 = Saffrey, *Recherches*, pp. 201-212.

philosophy too had experienced dark periods and seemingly disappeared in the period between immediate successors of Plato and Plotinus.<sup>79</sup>

The perspective of the immediate future turned darker for Neoplatonists after the suppression of the revolt against Emperor Zeno in the 480s, the last years of Proclus' life. Pamprepius the grammarian, an active figure in the revolt, had been a pupil of Proclus, although not in the inner circle. He tried to add to the power intrigues a dimension of pagan resistance. People of his kind were considered adventurers, if not provocateurs, by the successors of Proclus; for example, Damascius thought that Pamprepius' actions had served only the adversaries.<sup>80</sup>

After the revolt there was a new wave of repression in 488-89, which also affected Neoplatonists in Alexandria. On the side of the monks and fanatical mobs emerged a new group of enemies, the *philoponoi*, who harassed pagan professors working in higher education. They did not want to physically destroy their pagan enemies but pursued their moral surrender with forced conversion. In Alexandria and Gaza they developed a method using an element of provocation to escalate the conflict. Both approaches proved successful: the clandestine pagan shrines were violated and the authorities were reminded of their responsibility to behave as a "secular branch", the clerical authority was reinforced, and pagan intellectuals were terrorized into being baptised. The famous Horapollon of Alexandria and Leontius of Gaza converted in order to return securely home to their teaching.<sup>81</sup> It is even possible that Ammonius, the son of Proclus' companion Hermeias adopted the state religion. Whether or not that was the case Damascius accused him of a shameful compromise and addressed him with the statement "he who has the care of the prevailing religion" (that is the patriarch of Alexandria).<sup>82</sup> From Ammonius himself we have the assertion, "though the soul may be forced by tyrants to profess an impious doctrine, she can never be forced to inner assent and to belief."<sup>83</sup> Simplicius, writing probably not much later,

---

<sup>79</sup> For example, Proclus believed in the historicity of the war between the Athenians and the people of Atlantis, he was convinced that Assyrians had observed the stars for 270 000 years and that Egyptian traditions had even longer roots (*In Tim.* I 100.29). From the Neoplatonist point of view humanity could temporarily blind itself and abandon the cult of the gods; however, the defeat could only be of a short or medium duration, and in the great cycle of times all things would return to their natural state.

<sup>80</sup> Damascius on Pamprepius in his *Philosophical History*, ed. and trans. P. Athanassiadi (Athens, 1999): "Being ambitious and wishing not to appear inferior to anyone, he competed with everybody except Proclus and the other philosophers..." (fr. 112) "Pamprepius was an effective instrument of that Necessity which opposes the good." (fr. 113).

<sup>81</sup> Zacharias, *Vita Severi* 20-26.

<sup>82</sup> Damascius, *Philosophical History* Fr. 118.

<sup>83</sup> The citation has come down to us through Philoponus, *De Caelo* 104.21-23; see Westerink's discussion of it in his introduction: L.G. Westerink (ed. and tr.) *Anonymous prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam, 1962), p. xii.

expressed similar thoughts, such as, “under the circumstances of the current tyranny”, when seeking consolation by studying the Stoics.<sup>84</sup>

One additional feature of the situation was the theoretical attacks against Proclus launched by Christian intellectuals which culminated in John Philoponus’ famous work.<sup>85</sup> These attacks were ominous because Proclus was stamped as an equal to Porphyry, an arch-anti-Christian polemicist. We have an echo of this in the Suda which speaks about how Proclus “used an insolent tongue” against Christianity.<sup>86</sup> Philoponus’ *Against Proclus* was published in 529, which was the fateful date of Justinian’s legislation, and when Damascius saw his school forcibly closed, he preferred exile to baptism, although he later returned, probably thanks to the good services of the Persian king.<sup>87</sup> The period of the gathering storm, beginning with events in Alexandria, was also the period of the birth of the Dionysian *Corpus*. The writings of the Areopagite were born not only in constant reference to Proclus but with the precise aim, understandable in these historical conditions, of preserving and protecting the Proclean heritage, securing the survival of Proclus’ writings, especially his main work, the *Platonic Theology*. There is no doubt that the Neoplatonists knew quite well what was going on in the Christian camp, and Damascius especially, who was keenly interested in something which could be called “comparative study of religion”, was familiar with all things Christian, even concerning detailed questions of rites. Dionysius dosed his ingredients well, offering Proclean conclusions without lengthy Proclean argumentation and flavouring with Scriptural citations instead of Orphic materials and the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Nothing was served which could have allured pagans versed in Neoplatonic doctrine; the intended consumers were obviously Christians, not pagans. He had only as much Christian doctrine as was needed for claiming minimal credibility and only some hints of the direction which he hoped the Church would take (toleration and the adoption of dogmas not too distasteful to the pagan mind). This meagre doctrinal consideration was presented carefully in the best irenic spirit, avoiding offence to the factions in the intra-Christian struggle without

---

<sup>84</sup> Simplicius, *In Enchiridion* 138.19.

<sup>85</sup> See H. Chadwick, “Philoponus the Christian Theologian,” in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), p. 42: “The date of his *de Aeternitate Mundi contra Proclum* (529) invites the suggestion that Philoponus saw the Athenian affair as an opportunity and a challenge whether he wrote in order to attract Justinian’s favour by an attack on the principal architect of late Neoplatonic dogmatics or to avert unwelcome attention from the Alexandrian philosophers by demonstrating that not all of them were motivated by a cold hatred of Christianity as Proclus was.”

<sup>86</sup> *Suida Lexicon*, IV, p. 210, Saffrey-Westrink, *Proclus. Théologie platonicienne* I clv.

<sup>87</sup> On the end of the Athenian school see A. Cameron, “The Last Days of the Academy of Athens”, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 15 (1969), pp. 7-29; H.J. Blumenthal, “529 and Its Sequel: What Happened to the Academy?” *Byzantion* 48 (1978), pp. 369-85; G. af Hällström, “The Closing of the Neoplatonic School in A.D. 529: An Additional Aspect,” in P. Castrén (ed.), *Post-Herulian Athens. Aspects of Life and Culture in Athens A.D. 267-529* (Helsinki, 1994), pp. 141-60.

committing himself to any one point of view. His credentials regarding the Christian tradition, on the contrary, were presented with ostentation, verging on arrogance, so that he compelled them to be accepted (or totally rejected), and his general mode of presentation was calculated to contain a monkish aggression and to flatter and seduce the episcopal hierarchy. If a forgery could create the impression among the Christian clergy and authorities that there were more apostolic truths hidden in Proclus, then the master's writings had more of a chance to avoid the same destiny as Porphyry's work.

Of course, there was no constant, active persecution. There were waves of violence and times of distension. Persecution was sporadic, like the earlier persecution against the Church. This irregularity had much to do with the weakness of the repressive power of any pre-modern state. Justinian still could not have even imagined carrying out such a feat as Philip Le Bel was able to do with a simultaneous mass arrest of the Templars in his regime. However, the destruction of books under the vigorous early Byzantine rule turned out to be quite effective after all. In the year 537 Justinian banned the works of the Monophysite leader Severus, and as a consequence none of his Greek manuscripts remain extant. The important point is that if we underestimate the reality of persecution, then we easily slide to the apologetic Christian view according to which the decline of traditional religion was due to its inherent weakness and not to persecution. The function of persecution was to impose silence, then conformism would do its work without active violence. This is how repressive regimes have acted ever since.

## Conclusion

Thus, my conclusion is that Mazzucchi is right in seeing the *Corpus Areopagiticum* as a crypto-pagan project. Much of his specific arguments, however, are untenable. Perczel is right in seeing the *Corpus* as an esoteric text, but I do not think that it was Origenist but rather a work which functioned as a pointer to Proclus. Mazzucchi's version represents an infection- or virus-thesis. According to it Damascius realized that the victory of Christianity was inevitable. Then at the last moment he succeeded to inoculate a Neoplatonist notion of God into Christianity. This, I think, is a wrong interpretation of the later Neoplatonists' view of the future. They could not think of their true religion in terms of defeat. They could envisage a long historical period, during which shadow, or "confusion", as Proclus put it, would rule, but according to their view of a constant cyclical process of history victory was on their side: Things would eventually return to their natural (pre-Christian) state. Second, for the specific branch of Athenian Neoplatonism to impregnate the highest God of the monotheistic religion by apophasis and a way of mystical ascent would not result in an acceptable compromise. The reality of the divine henads as genuine gods in all their individuality and the adoration of the whole divine series with a proper cult were really dear and

unforfeitable for Athenian Neoplatonism. It could temporarily live on under forced oppression without the practice of the latter, but not abandon its vision of the former.

The essential pagan ingredient in the Dionysian *Corpus* is its Proclean-Damascian completeness. It simply contains too much of this element for a Christian project, and the author was acting in a time when the “Pauline” project of integrating Christianity with philosophy had already long been consummated. Playing with the duplicated pseudo-identities (Hierotheus and Dionysius) could be easily explained by pointer theory. This conclusion cannot be proven, but neither are any of the alternatives fully demonstrable. Thus we are left with conjectures, where each reader should ponder which guess appears more plausible. What is needed is further investigation of such topics as, for instance, the image of holy guide and master – Syrianus in Proclus and Hierotheus in Dionysius, the relationship of Dionysian monotheism and Christology to Proclus’ henadology, and more detailed comparative studies between Dionysius and pagan Neoplatonists.

It should also be asked what a conscious crypto-pagan hypothesis would mean for evaluating the *Corpus* and its influence philosophically. Even if we concede that the *Corpus* was originally a crypto-pagan project, this does not deprive it, of course, of its afterlife specifically in the Christian mystical tradition. In its reception the *Corpus* was accepted as a Christian source and fulfilled its function as such, and this is also an indisputable historical fact, even though there may be some irony in this. Even if the motive of the author of the *Corpus* was an ulterior one, the theoretical positions in it are still expressed philosophically and deserve to be analysed as such. Keeping this in mind research might benefit in particular from comparing the *Corpus* with the earliest authentic Christian Dionysian tradition beginning with John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor.