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Dionysius the Areopagite and the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan Trinitarian Perspective

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1. *Introduction*

This paper aims to reflect on the problem of the relationship of Dionysius the Areopagite's theology to the orthodox view of the Trinitarian God that emerged in Christianity between the first Nicaean Council (325) and the Constantinopolitan Council (381). As scholars have amply shown, Dionysius lived between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century;[1] this means that

1 As to the problem of the real identity of Dionysius: I shall note that in this regard, scholars have sustained several positions, even opposites of each another. The most important recent contribution is the one made by Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi. He identifies the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* with Hegias of Athens – a member of the Athenian Neoplatonic School who converted to Christianity. Hegias – who might have also been helped by an équipe – could have written the *Corpus Dionysiacum* under the request of the emperor Justinian in search of an ecumenical Orthodox text to be spread all around the Empire (cf. Ernesto S. Mainoldi, *Dietro 'Dionigi Areopagita'. La genesi e gli scopi del* Corpus Dionysiacum, Institutiones, Paradigma medievale 6, Città Nuova, Roma 2018, 113-142 and 483-513). The most disconcerting position is the one adopted by Carlo Mazzucchi, who thinks that Dionysius should be identified with the Pagan Neoplatonist Damascius, the last head of the Athenian School who, in order to save Paganism, would have intended

he lived at a time when the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan Trinitarian theology had long been considered as the only orthodox choice. At the same time, I will try to show how some items in Dionysius's thought make it interesting to analyse the problem of how his way of thinking is in harmony with the anti-subordinationist and Uni-trinitarian idea of God, which emerged clearly at the end of the fourth century. Before looking more closely at Dionysius, it will be necessary to give a brief picture of the theological debates through which the orthodoxy was established.

2. *The making of orthodox Trinitarian theology*

The end of the fourth century marks the beginning of Trinitarian theology, which finally began to have its own unitary physiognomy in the Christian world, shared by both East and West. The formula of the μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις, sanctioned in 381 in Constantinople, allowed the pacification of a religious atmosphere, which had been subject to bitter conflicts over the fourth century and debated between a Western faction tending towards monarchism, and an Eastern

to create a *corpus* of texts through which Pagan philosophy could have been planted in the heart of Christianity (cf. Carlo Mazzucchi, *Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum, e il dialogo Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*, in *Aevum* 80 (2006), 299-334). This hypothesis seems quite difficult to be defended, also because the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (at least in my perspective) is more Proclian than Damascian. Mazzucchi's hypothesis of the Pagan identity of Dionysius has been taken up again (and also criticized) by Tuomo Lankila, who proposes to identify Dionysius with a Pagan Neoplatonic author, whose identity would not be that of Damascius (cf. Tuomo Lankila, *The* Corpus Areopagiticum *as a Crypto-Pagan Project*, in *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 5 (2011), 14-40). However, what is clear by just looking at the perspectives of these contributions, is that there is great consent among scholars about the fact that Dionysius's philosophy should be understood in the broader framework of the Athenian Neoplatonism.

one tending towards subordinationist tritheism. Indeed, Manlio Simonetti has masterfully shown[2] that the Arian controversy must be understood as one of the greatest clashes between the two mentioned theological-philosophical horizons that struggled to understand each other – at least, since Clement and more in particular with Origen and the whole era of Alexandrian Origenism.[3]

At the same time, it must be pointed out that although Arianism could be seen as a deepening of the Origenistic-Alexandrian tradition, it is to be conceived as a strong radicalization of the latter, that – making the Son a creature, subordinated in an extreme way to the divinity of the Father – goes far beyond in respect to Origen's thought.[4] Moreover, to correctly understand the position of Arianism within the fourth-century theological debate, it should be underlined that – though starting from an opposite path – it comes to conclusions that have unexpected similarities with the Western perspectives. In fact, even in extreme monarchism, in the form of the Sabellian doctrine, only the Father is conceived as the true God, like in Arianism. Nevertheless, precisely for this reason, Sabellianism arrives at an opposite conclusion, rejecting the possibility of thinking of the Son in hypostatic terms: if God is One, and God is the Father, the Son (like the Spirit) can be nothing other than modes of his manifestation. In different ways, then, both Monarchians and Arians base their perspective on the idea

2 Cf. Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo*, Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 11, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Roma 1975; it should be noted that Simonetti's reconstruction, though considered essential to a correct understanding of the fourth century theology, has also been criticized for some of its aspects. For example, an alternative reconstruction of the events related to the Council of Nicea has been given by Henryk Pietras (cf. Henryk Pietras, *Concilio di Nicea (325) nel suo contesto*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma 2021), who gives less emphasis to the Arian controversy as the crucial theme of the Council.

3 Cf. M. Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo*, 11-25.

4 Ibid., 54-55.

that the true God is the Father – the former de-hypostatizing the Son and the Spirit, the latter making them strongly subordinate to the Father.[5] This clearly shows that Arianism is not to be understood just as a radicalization of Alexandrian theology: on the contrary, it is one of the most prominent symptoms of an ongoing reflection on the very grounding principles of Christian theology. The events related to the period that ran from the Council of Nicaea in 325 to the Council of Constantinople in 381 were an attempt – by Christianity – to overcome its *impasse* and finally arrive to a conception capable of harmonizing the need to think of God both as One and Trinitarian.[6] Reaffirming the Nicaean symbol and deepening it based on more than half a century of theological discussion, the Constantinopolitan Council stated the equality of the three Persons and the generation before all time of the Son, unambiguously criticizing all forms of subordinationism. At the same time, following the perspective elaborated in the East by the Cappadocians, the concern was to safeguard, not less than unity, also the distinction within God. To this end, God's Uni-trinitarian nature was expressed by means of the idea that in God there is only one οὐσία (according to the Nicaean symbol, the Son and the Spirit are ὁμοούσιοι with respect to the Father), but three distinct ὑποστάσεις. Then, this perspective will radically influence the later Christian theological-philosophical tradition. At the same time, the Origenian influence

5 Ibid., 46-47.

6 Among the novelties of the results of the Constantinopolitan Council with respect to that of Nicaea, crucial was the deepening of the reflection on the nature of the Holy Spirit, following the controversies that started around 360. In accordance with the perspective proposed, in particular by Basilius of Cesarea, the Constantinopolitan symbol expresses the idea of equal theological dignity of the Spirit respecting both the Son and the Father since it says that "we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-Giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets". On this topic, cf. again Simonetti's contribution: Ibid., 536-542.

will not be lost with these events. On the contrary, it will be alive, among the others, in one of the most important authorities of Late Patristics, such as the anonymous author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, possibly the one among the Fathers who was most influenced by the Neoplatonic tradition (and more specifically by Proclian philosophy).[7] A tradition that, as known, was by its very nature tending to think in hierarchical terms of the divine world.[8] Having said this and given the

7 As already said (see footnote no. 1), most scholars agree that Dionysius should be understood in a Neoplatonic framework: one of the most important scholars of Neoplatonism, such as Werner Beierwaltes, stated that Dionysius is to be conceived as a "Christian Proclus" – cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Dionysios Areopagites – ein christlicher Proklos?*, in *Platonismus im Christentum*, Philosophische Abhandlungen 73, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1998, 44-83. The bibliography on the relationship of Dionysius with Proclus is remarkable – here are some of the most important contributions on the topic: Eugenio Corsini, *Il trattato* De Divinis nominibus *dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al* Parmenide, Pubblicazioni della Facoltà di lettere e filosofia XIII, 4, Giappichelli, Torino 1962; John M. Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite*, in Stephen Gersh (ed.), *Interpreting Proclus. From Antiquity to Renaissance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, 111-124; the section *Ps.-Dionysius, Byzantium and the Christian Inheritance of Proclus*, in David D. Butorac – Danielle A. Layne (eds.), *Proclus and his Legacy*, Millennium-Studien 65, De Gruyter, Berlin 2017, 161-288; István Perczel, *Pseudo Dionysius and the Platonic Theology. A Preliminary Study*, in Alain-Philippe Segonds – Carlos Steel (eds.), *Proclus et la théologie platonicienne*, Leuven University Press – Les Belles Lettres, Leuven – Paris 2000, 491-532.

8 This way of conceiving the Divine is proper of Neoplatonism, starting from its very beginning with Plotinus, through the distinction between the level of the One, that of the Nous, the soul and the physical world. From a certain perspective, to speak about a hierarchical conception is a simplification because the One is not something just transcendent over the other levels of reality – on the contrary, it is immanent at every level of being. Nevertheless, insofar as here it will not be possible to deal specifically with the topic, we use the concept of hierarchy as a hermeneutical tool in order to present a picture of some basic structures of Neoplatonic metaphysics (on the concept of hierarchy in Neoplatonism, cf. Pauline Remes, *The first Principles and the Metaphysical*

enormous importance that Dionysian thought will have for the entire Medieval and Renaissance tradition and beyond,[9] the interest in trying to understand how his Trinitarian theology is to be positioned with respect to the Trinitarian conception that emerged from the debates of the fourth century is justified. Nevertheless, this attempt becomes even more urgent if we consider the fact that, as scholars have sometimes pointed out, no explicit reference to the Nicaean ὁμοούσιος is ever made in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.[10] The reasons for this are unknown; however, the attempt to understand the Dionysian perspective is even more valuable because of this circumstance.

3. *Dionysius' Trinitarian theology*

The possibility – and the terms – of speaking of Trinitarian theology in Dionysius' thought is in itself a matter which has already troubled scholars in the past. In fact, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* does not deal with it in an articulated or conclusive manner. There are

Hierarchy, in *Neoplatonism*, Ancient Philosophies 4, Routledge, Milton Park 2014, 35-76). This hierarchical conception is later radicalized, as we can see in particular in Proclus, who divided all these levels of reality in themselves through a very complex triadic structure (on the concept of triad in Proclus, cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik,* Philosophische Abhandlungen 24, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1965, 24-164).

9 On Dionysius' *Wirkungsgeschichte* cf. the recent Mark Edwards – Dimitrios Pallis – Georgios Stereis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, OUP, New York 2022; and Ysabel De Andia (ed.) *Denys L'Aréopagite Et Sa Postérité En Orient Et En Occident: Actes du colloque international de Paris, 21-24 septembre 1994*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 151, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1997.

10 Cf. Bernhard Brons, *Gott und die Seienden: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von neuplatonischer Metaphysik und christlicher Tradition bei Dionysius Areopagita*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 28, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1976, 103; and Werner Beierwaltes, "Unity and Trinity in Dionysius and Eriugena", in *Hermathena* 157 (1994), 1-20.

elements from which the grounding aspects of Dionysius' perspective on the topic can be sketched, but, given their non-systematic character – which goes hand in hand with the Dionysian systematic use of the pagan Neoplatonic tradition – the problem of understanding how cogent Trinitarian theology is for expressing the nature of Dionysian metaphysics remains strong. In this sense, two parties can be fundamentally distinguished among scholars: those who have held, in the final instance, that the Dionysian God is the simple One prior to any determination and distinction proper to the Neoplatonic tradition;[11] and those who have instead attempted to show that, beyond ambiguities, the Dionysian God should be conceived as originally Trinitarian.[12] The problem, then, is twofold: 1) which Trinitarian conception is proper to Dionysius – *i.e.* whether it is orthodox with respect to the one that emerged from the Constantinopolitan Council of 381; and 2) whether Trinitarian theology allows us to resolve the question on the nature of the Dionysian God – *i.e.* what relation there is between it and the conception of the Divine that Dionysius inherited from the Neoplatonic tradition.

From a programmatic point of view, the Dionysian Trinitarian theology engages a central role in the *De divinis nominibus* – a work that, as it will be emphasized further on, endeavours to enumerate all the different names that can be attributed to God on the basis of the way He is participated in by creatures. The Trinitarian theme is

11 Summarizing the *communis opinio* shared by many scholars, Louis Dupré said regarding Dionysius that: "Neoplatonic as no Christian theologian had ever dared to be, [he] identified God with the nameless One. Even the divine relations of the Trinity were ultimately only in the order of manifestation" (Louis Dupré, *Mysticism*, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols., MacMillan, New York 1987, vol. 10, 245-261, 252).

12 Cf. in particular John N. Jones, "The Status of the Trinity in Dionysian Thought", in *The Journal of Religion* 80 (2000), 645-657; and also W. Beierwaltes, "Unity and Trinity in Dionysius and Eriugena".

not itself extensively dealt with in the Dionysian text; however, in the context of its opening Dionysius makes it clear that all the names that will be attributed to God are to be referred not to a single Person rather than to another, but to God as a whole, to be thought of in Trinitarian terms.[13] Hereafter, the *De divinis nominibus* will focus on a description and an in-depth study of the properties of these divine names. But what is the nature of the God-Trinity to whom they are to be referred? The question becomes even more interesting if we consider the fact that, however obscurely, there is a clue in the Dionysian work that would seem to steer Dionysius towards a subordinationist position. Indeed, the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* states that

> Moreover, we learned from the Sacred Scriptures that the Father is the original Godhead, while the Son and the Spirit are, if one must say so, divine germs of the Divinity that generates God, and resembling flowers and supra-substantial lights. How this happens can neither be said nor thought.[14]

The Father, therefore, is presented here as the primordial Godhead: He seems to be characterized by a metaphysical status of his own, in some way superordinate with respect to both the Son and the Spirit, who are the fruits of His "divine fecundity", according to a

13 Cf. Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* (=DN) 122, 6-10. The critical edition of Dionysius' texts to which I will refer is Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, 2 voll., Beate R. Suchla – Günter Heil – Adolf M. Ritter (eds.), Patristische Texte und Studien 33, 36, De Gruyter, Berlin-New York, 1990-1991.

14 Πάλιν, ὅτι μέν ἐστι πηγαία θεότης ὁ πατήρ, ὁ δὲ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς θεογόνου θεότητος, εἰ οὕτω χρὴ φάναι, βλαστοὶ θεόφυτοι καὶ οἷον ἄνθη ὑπερούσια φῶτα, πρὸς τῶν ἱερῶν λογίων παρειλήφαμεν. Ὅπως δὲ ταῦτά ἐστιν, οὔτε εἰπεῖν οὔτε ἐννοῆσαι δυνατόν (DN 132, 1-4). Although we do not have enough space here to address the issue, it should be noted that the idea of the Father as the divinity that generates God (θεόγονος θεότης) is in perfect harmony with the idea – which is developed later in this paper – that the original source of the Divine for Dionysius coincides with a "ὑπέρθεος θεότης".

scheme that seems to recall the subordinationist theological tradition. Moreover, this image calls to mind the metaphysical process typical of the Neoplatonic tradition, in which, starting from the One – the original Principle, often also called Father – there is a production of a hierarchical order of all reality, from the intellectual realm (conceived as the son of the One) to the psychic realm and our world.[15]

As far as the Christian tradition is concerned, it is interesting that such an image of the Son and the Spirit as flowers deriving from the Father also recalls the description of the relations between the Persons used in the third century by Dionysius of Alexandria, who, as known, was the protagonist of one of the most important Pre-Nicaean debates on Trinitarian theology between the Alexandrian tradition and the Western one. While he was bishop in Alexandria, some Monarchians reported to the bishop Dionysius of Rome the accusation that he conceived the Son as a creature, to be thought as alien to the essence of the Father.[16] This accusation was an exaggeration of Dionysius'

15 To get a picture of this metaphysical-symbolic structure of reality, it's useful to recall the image that Plotinus depicts at the beginning of the second treatise of the fifth *Ennead*, when he says that the One generates Being such as parent who generates his son (οὐκ ὄν, γεννητὴς δὲ αὐτοῦ – Plotinus, *Enneades*, V,2,1,6-7) Then, Being turns towards the One and – impregnated by the One like a woman by a man – it becomes Nous (τὸ δὲ γενόμενον εἰς αὐτὸ ἐπεστράφη καὶ ἐπληρώθη καὶ ἐγένετο πρὸς αὐτὸ βλέπον καὶ νοῦς οὗτος, Ibid., 9-11).

16 In fact, he was accused of believing "ποίημα καὶ γενητὸν εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ μήτε δὲ φύσει ἴδιον, ἀλλὰ ξένον κατ' οὐσίαν αὐτὸν εἶναι τοῦ πατρός" (Athanasius, *De sententia Dionysii*, 4,2,1). As to the topic regarding the relationship of Dionysius of Alexandria with the Arian debate, cf. Henryk Pietras, "L'unità di Dio in Dionigi di Alessandria", in *Gregorianum* 72 (1991), 459-490; Manlio Simonetti, *Aspetti della cristologia del III secolo: Dionigi di Alessandria*, in *Bessarione*, Quaderno 7, Roma 1989, 37- 65; Luise Abramowski, *Dionys von Rom (268) und Dionys von Alexandrien (264/5)* in *Den arianischen Streitigkeiten des 4. Jahrhunderts*, Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte 93 (1982), 240-272. Abramowski tried to defend the hypothesis that Dionysius of Alexandria's fragments were pseudepigraphic and written during the Arian controversy;

position, who maintained an Origenian subordinative perspective that remained temperate. To defend himself against the charge, he then tried to explain his perspective to Dionysius of Rome. To do so, he expressed some further sensible images that could allude to the process through which the Father gives birth to the Son, propagating His unique nature while remaining strongly distinct from the Son. The way in which this relationship of identity-diversity comes about is clarified by Dionysius of Alexandria precisely by means of the image mentioned above. To imagine this process, the Alexandrian says:

> I stated that a plant, coming up from a seed or a root, is different from the one from which it sprouted, and at the same time completely of its own nature: and that a stream flowing from a spring receives another form and another name, for the spring is not called a river, nor the river a spring, and that both exist, and that the spring is regarded as the father, while the river is water from the spring.[17]

The Son and the Spirit trace the nature of the Father, but ultimately, they are something else to the Father and, to some extent, inferior in respect to what they are sprouts of. It is no coincidence that the thought of Dionysius of Alexandria would later be taken up again by the

but both Simonetti and Pietras have adequately shown the problems of this perspective, also considering that Dionysius' language seems to be very traditional and not posterior to the third century (cf. H. Pietras, "L'unità di Dio in Dionigi di Alessandria", 461).

17 "καὶ γὰρ καὶ φυτὸν εἶπον ἀπὸ σπέρματος ἢ ἀπὸ "ῥίζης ἀνελθὸν ἕτερον εἶναι τοῦ ὅθεν ἐβλάστησε, καὶ πάντως ἐκείνῳ καθέστηκεν όμο "φυές. καὶ ποταμὸν ἀπὸ πηγῆς ῥέοντα ἕτερον σχῆμα καὶ ὄνομα μετειληφέναι- μήτε "γὰρ τὴν πηγὴν ποταμὸν μήτε τὸν ποταμὸν πηγὴν λέγεσθαι καὶ ἀμφότερα ὑπάρχειν "καὶ τὴν μὲν πηγὴν οἱονεὶ πατέρα εἶναι, τὸν δὲ ποταμὸν εἶναι τὸ ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς ὕδωρ" (Athanasius, *De sententia Dionysii,* 18, 3, 4-8).

opponents of the Nicaean creed,[18] precisely insofar as the distinction between the Persons is marked in a very strong way – which is why he received the accusations of tritheism. A similar idea seems to emerge from the *De divinis nominibus* passage quoted above, where the Areopagite seems to set the Father as the true and unique paradigm of divinity from which the development of the nature of both the Son and the Spirit is given. The image in its substance is analogous, also in terms of terminology: to express the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Alexandrian uses the verb βλαστάνω, which indicates precisely the process of sprouting. Similarly, Dionysius calls the Son (as well as the Spirit) βλαστός – a sprout coming from the Father. The very idea of the Father as original divinity – also connected to the idea of an actual personal subsistence of both the Son and the Spirit, and therefore in opposition to any form of Sabellianism – echoes the grounding structure of the Arian and pro-Arian tradition. Indeed, in this perspective, the attempt was to safeguard the unity of God – understood as Father – without thereby eliminating the individual reality of the Son and the Spirit through the affirmation of a strong metaphysical priority of the former over the other two. How to take this clue? Is it possible that one of the most influential of the Fathers, such as the Areopagite – decisive with his *Wirkungsgeschichte* on the subsequent Christian theological tradition – could have upheld a subordinationist doctrine and maybe even pro-Arian? Continuing with the analysis of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, it can be shown how, despite such ambiguity, Dionysius clearly affirms the equality of the three Persons. In fact, in DN 126, 14 - 127, 7, he states that

18 In fact, as known, Athanasius wrote a text named *De sententia Dionysii* (see footnote no. 16), in order to attack those Arians who had the tendency of using Dionysius of Alexandria's theological perspectives to provide support to Arianism. Athanasius also informs us on the charges of which he was accused by Dionysius of Rome – cf. again H. Pietras, "L'unita di Dio in Dionigi d'Alessandria", 462-466.

> in the divine union – that is supra-substantiality – are unitary and common to the Trinity, which is the principle of unity, the supra-substantial Substance, the Supra-divine Godhead (ὑπέρθεος θεότης), the Goodness superior to the Goodness [...] the mutual permanence, if one may say so, of the unitary hypostases and the mutual position united beyond all union and in no part confused; just as the lights of the lamps, to use sensible and familiar examples, which are in a house and all are mutually interpenetrated and have a precise and unmixed distinction each from each, united in distinction and distinct in union.[19]

God, as Trinitarian, is presented here as intrinsically relational – so that all the names we apply to Him must refer to all three Persons, "united in distinction and distinct in union (ἡνωμένα τῇ διακρίσει καὶ τῇ ἑνώσει διακεκριμένα)". Many are the lamps (the divine Persons) and yet they shine with the same light – a unique God manifests himself through the three objects. Also, just as it happens when there are several lamps in a house, there will be a single and indivisible light "and no one, I think, could distinguish the light of this lamp from that of the others, because the air contains all the lights, nor see one light without seeing the other, all being mixed together without confusion".[20] In addition to the affirmation of the unitary character of the *Deus Trinitas*, the specific feature of this image is the idea of equal metaphysical dignity of the three Persons. Thus, it becomes clear that the previous passage, which seemed to allude to a subordination of the

19 "ἐπὶ τῆς ἑνώσεως τῆς θείας ἤτοι τῆς ὑπερουσιότητος ἡνωμένον μέν ἐστι τῇ ἐναρχικῇ τριάδι καὶ κοινὸν ἡ ὑπερούσιος ὕπαρξις, ἡ ὑπέρθεος θεότης, ἡ ὑπεράγαθος ἀγαθότης […] ἡ ἐν ἀλλήλαις, εἰ οὕτω χρὴ φάναι, τῶν ἐναρχικῶν ὑποστάσεων μονὴ καὶ ἵδρυσις ὁλικῶς ὑπερηνωμένη καὶ οὐδενὶ μέρει συγκεχυμένη, καθάπερ φῶτα λαμπτήρων, ἵνα αἰσθητοῖς καὶ οἰκείοις χρήσωμαι παραδείγμασιν, ὄντα ἐν οἴκῳ καὶ ὅλα ἐν ἀλλήλοις ὅλλοις ἐστὶ καὶ ἀκριβῆ τὴν ἀπ' ἀλλήλων ἰδικῶς ὑφισταμμένην ἔχει διάκρισιν ἡνωμένα τῇ διακρίσει καὶ τῇ ἑνώσει διακεκριμένα".

20 "καὶ οὐκ ἄν τις, ὡς οἶμαι, δύναιτο τοῦδε τοῦ λαμπτῆρος τὸ φῶς ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἐκ τοῦ πάντα τὰ φῶτα περιέχοντος ἀέρος διακρῖναι καὶ ἰδεῖν ἄνευ θατέρου θάτερον ὅλων ἐν ὅλοις ἀμιγῶς συγκεκραμένων" (DN 127, 10-12).

Son and the Spirit to the Father, should not be taken too seriously.[21] This outcome is avoided insofar as Dionysius disruptively emphasizes the substantial unity of God (the one light shining through the three lamps). Moreover, it shall also be noted that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is a text designed to have the widest possible circulation, as it is clear even by just looking at the fact that its author pretends to be the Dionysius converted by Paul at the Areopagus. Given this situation, it is evident how he had to present a Trinitarian theology that could be interpreted as orthodox with respect to the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan creed. In fact, he lived in a period in which the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan theology had by a long time become the official creed of Christianity: it would have been reckless to deny – at least explicitly – the grounding principles of the orthodoxy. However, there is also a different problem, a philosophical one: one thing is the historical necessity that the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* had to spread his works all around Christianity; another one is the one regarding the esoteric (in the sense of hidden, beyond the explicit letter of the text) grounding structures of his metaphysics, so strictly connected as they are with Neoplatonic philosophy.

My intentions are to try to investigate the latter problem. To achieve the task, it will not be useless to go back to the passage on the lamps. In this passage – although in an obscure way – it can be seen a further emerging aspect which results quite interesting for the present inquiry. Indeed, the example of the three lamps, which is a sensible image of the infra-trinitarian relationships, also manifests the Dionysian awareness of the anteriority of the root of the energy emanating from the lamps with respect to the lamps themselves – that is, as I will show, the anteriority of the source of the Divine with respect to the Trinity.

21 In this regard, I agree with Werner Beierwaltes' perspective: cf. W. Beierwaltes, "Unity and Trinity in Dionysius and Eriugena", 9.

This source of the Divine is called by Dionysius "ὑπέρθεος θεότης", supra-divine Godhead. Looking at the passage on the lamps, it can be seen that this expression also appears as an oxymoronic name of God. In fact, as in this case, the appellation is also addressed to the Trinity itself, which could seem strange if at the same time conceiving the ὑπέρθεος θεότης as the source of the Trinity. Nevertheless, this ambiguity, as I will show, is not incompatible with the Dionysian perspective proposed in this paper: in fact, even being beyond the Trinity, in some sense, the ὑπέρθεος θεότης is the Trinity itself, but only insofar as Trinity is considered as its manifestation. Holding both divinity and supra-divinity together in the same expression, the idea of ὑπέρθεος θεότης for Dionysius alludes precisely to the ineffable process by virtue of which what is beyond God becomes God himself.

4. *Beyond the Trinity*

In the *De divinis nominibus*, Dionysius prefers the use of cataphatic theology, focusing on the divine names pertaining to God in His giving birth to reality. It is in the *De mystica theologia* that the ontological difference of God is instead most vividly outlined, in a context in which there are clues to understand the meta-trinitarian nature of the Dionysian source of the Divine.

The text opens with an exclamation that would seem to give reason for the Dionysian God's resolution into Trinity: in fact, Dionysius prays to the "supra-substantial super-divine and super-good Trinity"[22] to lead the soul towards Himself. In such expression, the Trinitarian dimension comes to stand together with the attribution of properties to God, such as those of the "super-divinity", that compete with his more abysmal dimension (as occurred in the passage of the *De divinis*

22 "Τριὰς ὑπερούσιε καὶ ὑπέρθεε καὶ ὑπεράγαθε" (Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* [=MT] 141,1).

nominibus quoted before). However, these expressions shouldn't deceive the reader: they paradoxically hold together affirmation and negation – the affirmation of the Trinitarian character of God and his constituting Himself as supra-divine – precisely to show his paradoxical excess with respect to every determination. Continuing in the text, it can be seen how, on the one hand, Dionysius explicitly places the distinction between the Persons of the Father, the Son and the Spirit within the affirmative theology, while showing on the other hand that he considers negations better than affirmations,[23] and ultimately God as beyond both cataphatic and apophatic theologies. Such a perspective, conducted in the radical manner typical of Dionysius' way of proceeding, also implies the overcoming of the *Deus Trinitas*. In fact, at the end of the text, Dionysius states that

> Therefore, continuing to ascend, we say that it is neither soul nor intelligence; it possesses no imagination or opinion or reason or thought; it is neither speech nor thought, it cannot be expressed nor thought [...] it is neither substance nor eternity nor time; it is not intellectual apprehension; it is not science nor truth nor kingdom nor wisdom; *it is neither one nor unity nor divinity nor goodness; it is not spirit as we may understand it, nor filiation nor paternity*.[24]

While extolling the fundamental role of affirmative theology – which finds new vigour in virtue of the idea that the *Parmenides'* second hypothesis also describes the nature of God and not a reality subordinate to Him[25] – Dionysius is still aware, in his Neoplatonic

23 Cf. Chapter III of the *De mystica theologia*; specifically, MT 146,1-147,21.

24 "Αὖθις δὲ ἀνιόντες λέγομεν, ὡς οὔτε ψυχή ἐστιν οὔτε νοῦς, οὔτε φαντασίαν ἢ δόξαν ἢ λόγον ἢ νόησιν ἔχει- οὐδὲ λόγος ἐστὶν νόησις, οὔτε λέγεται οὔτε νοεῖται [...] οὔτε οὐσία ἐστὶν οὔτε χρόνος- οὐδὲ ἐπαφή ἐστιν αὐτῆς νονητὴ οὔτε ἐπιστήμη, οὔτε ἀλήθειά ἐστιν οὔτε βασιλεία οὔτε σοφία, οὔτε ἓν οὔτε ἑνότης, οὔτε θεότης ἢ ἀγαθότης- οὐδὲ πνεῦμά ἐστιν, ὡς ἡμᾶς εἰδέναι, οὔτε υἱότης πατρότης" (MT 149,1-150,1).

25 Cf. E. Corsini, *Il trattato* De Divinis nominibus *dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al* Parmenide, 75-111. This is a crucial innovation of Dionysius'

perspective, that in the final instance all affirmations must be transcended, so that affirmative theology will have to sublimate itself into a negative theology. According to the path proper to negative theology, all names must be denied to God: He is beyond every creature, from the lowest up to the highest beings.[26] Hence, in this passage, Dionysius dedicates himself to summarizing the different steps of this path, starting from the denial to God of what is closest to us – the soul – and arriving to the highest divine names: wisdom, one, unity, divinity, goodness, and finally the very names of the Persons – in order, Spirit, Son and Father. This assertion must be taken very seriously: in fact, it is a philological demonstration of the Dionysian awareness that the assertion of infra-trinitarian distinctions, which are also at the apex of the hierarchical ladder ordering the divine names

exegesis of the *Parmenides*, which, looking at the previous Neoplatonic tradition, could be in this sense compared only to the exegesis that appears in the anonymous Commentary on the *Parmenides* attributed by Pierre Hadot to Porphyry (for what concerns the similarity of Dionysius' exegesis with the Commentary, cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Das seiende Eine. Zur neuplatonischen Interpretation der zweiten Hypothesis des platonischen Parmenides*, in *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1985, 193-225; for what concerns the identification of its anonymous author with Porphyry, cf. Hadot's edition of the text: Pierre Hadot (ed.), *Fragments d'un commentaire de Porphyre sur le Parménide*, Revue des Études Grecques 74 (1961), 410-438; cf. also Giuseppe Girgenti, *Il pensiero forte di Porfirio. Mediazione fra henologia platonica e ontologia aristotelica*, Temi metafisici e problemi del pensiero antico 48, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1996, 167-192).

26 The overcoming of affirmative theology does not imply its abandonment: indeed, it describes the nature of God in His constituting the fundamental structure of being; at the same time, paradoxically, He exceeds the dimension of being. To say it with Dionysius' own words, God is "πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων" (DN, 119, 9). For a contextualization of this Dionysian perspective within the Neoplatonic tradition, cf. Eric D. Perl, *The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, SUNY series in Ancient Greek Philosophy 32, SUNY Press, Albany 2007, 17-34.

(moreover, they are the ones that are denied last to God here), must finally be transcended. In the final instance, Dionysius's source of the Divine is a God prior to Uni-trinity, and such that in itself we find the crucial traits of the conception typical of the Neoplatonic tradition: insofar as absolutely simple, God is to be conceived as beyond any manifold, no matter how 'pure' it might be. This idea finds a radical expression during the period of the Athenian Neoplatonic School. Even if in different ways, both Proclus and Damascius conceive God as something ἄσχετον,[27] absolutely unrelated, since any form of relationship with something 'other' would make it determined and therefore always somehow multiple. The unrelated character of the Neoplatonic God – a necessary corollary of its being absolutely simple and prior to any form of distinction and multiplicity – also inevitably determines the aporetic character of the process through which God acts as the Cause of reality. That of causality is, in fact, a relation to something that is caused – but how can that, unrelated, give rise to this fundamental relation through which every being is produced?

27 It will not be useless to quote here the very own words of these two last philosophical authorities of the Athenian Neoplatonism. Proclus affirms clearly the a-relational nature of the First God insofar as he says that: "Ἔστιν ἄρα τι πρὸ τοῦ ὄντος ἕν, ὃ καὶ ὑφίστησι τὸ ὂν καὶ αἴτιόν ἐστι τοῦ ὄντος πρώτως, ἐπειδὴ τὸ πρὸ αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς ἑνώσεως ἐπέκεινα καὶ τῆς αἰτίας ἦν, ἄσχετον πρὸς πάντα καὶ ἀμέθεκτον ἀπὸ πάντων ἐξῃρημένον" (Proclus, *Theologia platonica*, III, 8, 31, 14-18) Even if in a different way, the idea of the unrelated nature of God is addressed also in Damascius, who says: "ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς τῇδε τὸ ἄσχετον πάντη τιμιώτερον τοῦ ἐν σχέσει καὶ τοῦ συντεταγμένου τὸ ἀσύντακτον […] οὕτω καὶ ἁπλῶς αἰτίων καὶ αἰτιατῶν καὶ ἀρχῶν ἁπασῶν καὶ ἀρχομένων τὸ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐκβεβηκὸς καὶ ἐν οὐδεμιᾷ συντάξει καὶ σχέσει ὑποτιθέμενον" (Damascius, *De principiis*, 1, 8, 16-24). It will not be possible here to analyze the very complex problem of the relationship – and conflict – between their Neoplatonic perspectives. A recent monograph focused on the topic is Jonathan Greig, *The First Principle in Late Neoplatonism. A Study of the One's Causality in Proclus and Damascius*, Philosophia Antiqua 156, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2020.

Such a conception of the divine is precisely the one inherited by Dionysius, even if he does not conceive the passage from the Simple to that which is compounded as the passage from a first God (the One) to a second, subordinated God (the Nous), but as a development of the unique God in Himself, from the unrelated ὑπέρθεος θεότης to the Trinity. Insofar as God is Uni-trinitarian, he has in Himself a form of relationality unknown to Pagan Neoplatonism, being paradoxically both distinct in Himself in the three Persons and absolutely simple. Nevertheless, what remains in Dionysius beyond this dimension is that Neoplatonic conception for which the source of the Divine is to be conceived as beyond any distinction, even if Trinitarian. If possible, the ineffable simplicity of the primordial Dionysian God seems to be even more pronounced than that which had been a characteristic of the Neoplatonic tradition. In fact, the Dionysian God is so hidden in His ineffable and incomprehensible nature that He is beyond even regarding the notion of divinity itself. In short, in the Dionysian perspective, the idea of God's intrinsic relationality – which is granted by the fact that He, *as God,* is originally Trinitarian – is combined with His ineffable and paradoxical a-relationality, insofar as He is considered in His being in an absolutely primordial way before Himself – that is, before His constituting Himself as God, in His supra-divine Godhead. Insofar as He is ἀρχή of all reality – insofar as He creates every being – God is intrinsically Trinity. Nevertheless, if He is considered not in his being ἀρχή, but in His absolute depth, prior to His constituting Himself as Creator of creation, then He must be conceived as prior to the God-Trinity Himself. Indeed, in the final instance, the absolutely ineffable that stands for Dionysius at the beginning of the constitution of reality, which we have repeatedly called God, *is not properly God*: in fact, God is, in terms of Christian Orthodoxy, Uni-trinity. Dionysius does not deny this and tries to remain faithful to the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan symbol. Nonetheless, before God, an even more initial reality dawns: a ὑπέρθεος θεότης, an ineffable and unrelated beginning of all reality.

Abstract

Lo scopo fondamentale del presente saggio è quello di indagare la posizione di Dionigi Areopagita rispetto alla prospettiva teologico-trinitaria emersa all'interno dei dibattiti teologici del IV secolo fra il concilio di Nicea e quello di Costantinopoli. Da un lato, si potrà vedere come in Dionigi vi siano alcune ambiguità che parrebbero proiettarlo in un orizzonte di tipo subordinazionista; ma, dall'altro, si mostrerà come esse possano essere risolte in modo da confermare l'idea che, affermando la pari dignità metafisica delle tre Persone, Dionigi intenda presentarsi come ortodosso rispetto al simbolo niceno-costantinopolitano. Al contempo, si potrà vedere come nel pensiero dionisiano, ancor prima del Dio Trinità, emerga una dimensione più originaria e ineffabile che rievoca i tratti della concezione del divino tipicamente neoplatonici, condensati da Dionigi per mezzo dell'espressione "ὑπέρθεος θεότης".

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