

“A CONTEMPLATIVE AND A LITURGIST”:
FATHER GEORGES FLOROVSKY ON THE
CORPUS DIONYSIACUM

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In his obituary of Fr. Georges Florovsky, published in the 1980 volume of *Sobornost*, Rowan Williams states that Father Georges’ “stature as a creative theologian of the first order becomes more and more plain,” and, later on, defines his “originality” as “invariably a rediscovery of the perennial freshness of the heart of the Gospel, in scripture and liturgy, and in the great fathers of the Church.”¹ He goes on to observe that Father Georges saw Christianity’s appropriation of late antique Hellenism through the medium of patristic literature as “an achievement of Christian freedom,” such that Christian Hellenism “cannot therefore be ignored or canceled out,” but remains “an inescapable datum” for all theologizing to come.²

It was, to use a much beloved Florovskian adverb, precisely in this spirit that Fr. Georges undertook his analysis of the Greek ascetical and mystical writers, a work recently made available in English in Volume X of his *Collected Works*.³ The whole study is set in the frame of a reply, on behalf of Christian Hellenism, to the Reformation critique of Christian asceticism, and in particular as a response to the influential book by Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*. A section answering Nygren by name both begins the book⁴ and concludes it,⁵

1 Rowan Williams, “Georges Florovsky (1893-1979): The Theologian,” *Sobornost* 2:1 (1980) 70.

2 *Ibid.*, 70-71.

3 *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* (Belmont, MA, 1987).

4 *Ibid.*, 20-25.

5 *Ibid.*, 249-252.

and, at many points in between, Florovsky is at pains to come back to his argument against the Swedish theologian. Nygren's fundamental thesis was that the ascetical and mystical tradition of Christian antiquity represented a betrayal of the Gospel, in sum a surrender of the biblical faith to paganism, and in particular to the theme of an ascending *eros* so prominent in Platonic thought from Plato's own *Symposium* to the works of Proclus.⁶ For the Lutheran bishop, "Christian Hellenism" was strictly a non-starter, an oxymoron.

Nygren certainly had a solid basis for his objections to classical Christian mysticism in the original writers of the Reformation, and especially in the latter's founding teacher, Dr. Martin Luther. Luther's rejection of the writings and influence of the mysterious Dionysius the Areopagite is well known, for example: "Dionysius is most pernicious; he platonizes more than he christianizes," and, "I advise you to shun like the plague that 'Mystical Theology' of Dionysius and similar books."⁷ Nygren must have had these declarations in mind throughout the writing of much of his book. Dionysius, for both Luther and his latter day disciple, was the very epitome of a Christianity gone awry: "The fundamental Neoplatonism," writes Nygren concerning the Areopagite, "is but scantily covered with an exceedingly thin Christian veneer."⁸ In addition, backwards and forwards along the tradition running from the Alexandrines through the fourth century monks to

6 See, for example, Nygren's introductory remarks on "Two Opposed Fundamental Motifs," 30-40, and on "The Heavenly Eros," 49-58, in *Agape and Eros*, trans. Phillip S. Watson (Philadelphia, rev. ed. 1953). For Nygren on Plato, see 166-181, esp. his view that *eros* is, by definition, "egocentric love," 179-181, and for Plotinus, 186-199, and Proclus, 566-575.

7 Nygren quotes these and other observations of Luther. See *ibid.*, 705-706, and the notes to both pages. They are from, respectively, the "Disputation of 1537" and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. See also the article by Karlfried Froehlich, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works*, trans. and ed. Colm Liubheid and Paul Rorem (N.Y., 1987), 33-46, esp. 41-42, notes 36-38.

8 *Agape and Eros*, 576.

Gregory Nyssa, and beyond to John of the Ladder (the territory, with the exception of the first, covered by Florovsky's volume), Dionysius provided a key to what had gone amiss in the literature of Christian experience prior to Luther's discovery of *Galatians*.⁹

It is therefore no accident that Fr. Georges, after two long chapters on the place of asceticism in the New Testament and a consideration of fourth century and Reformed objections to monasticism, consecrates the most extensive of his considerations of individual patristic writers to Dionysius.¹⁰ His analysis of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is altogether impressive and, equally, marked as well by certain, distinct reservations and questions. The essay is first of all remarkable for its assimilation of the best of twentieth century scholarship available to the writer right up to the years just before his death. There is no vain effort, for example, to defend Dionysius' sub-apostolic provenance. Florovsky fully accepts the work of H. Koch and J. Stiglmayr, at the century's beginnings, which first conclusively demonstrated the *corpus*' ties with Proclus and late Neoplatonism.¹¹ In this connection, I

9 In Nygren's presentation, *ibid.*, 576-593, Dionysius is the climax of the betrayal begun by the Alexandrians, 349-392, and institutionalized by the "monastic piety" of Maximus the Confessor and John of the Ladder, 594-603, after whom, in the ninth century, "the victorious march of Pseudo-Dionysius through the West" began, 603-604. For a recent presentation of much the same thesis, though shorn of the *eros/agape* distinction as a key to the question, see Paul Rorem's commentary on Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: a Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (N.Y., 1993), especially the analysis of the *Mystical Theology* and its influence on the West, 183-225. In his treatment of the Latin reception, 214-225, Rorem lays particular emphasis on the addition the "Western" theme of love for the crucified Christ to Dionysius' essentially Christless and loveless presentation of the mystical ascent. He is honest, though, and acknowledges his debt to the tradition of the Lutheran Reform on page 239. For his more recent critiques of Dionysius from a Lutheran perspective, see his essays, "Martin Luther's Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality," *Lutheran Quarterly* XI (1997) 291-307, and "Empathy and Evaluation in Medieval Church History and Pastoral Ministry: A Lutheran Reading of Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* XIX.2 ns (1998) 99-115.

10 *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, 204-229.

11 *Ibid.*, 204, on Proclus generally, and 222 on Dionysius' debt to the latter's doctrine of evil. Both H. Koch and J. Stiglmayr published in the same year, 1895, on

can also detect traces of V. Lossky and J. Vanneste in his handling of—and difficulties with—the philosophical and theological structures of the text.¹² He has also clearly taken into account and digested the works of Stiglmayr, Lebon, Honigmann, Hornus and Dalmais, among others, linking Dionysius to the region of Syria-Palestine,¹³ as well as P. Sherwood's and H. von Balthasar's contributions with regard to the probable milieu of the *corpus*,

Dionysius' dependence on Proclus. Koch later, 1900, published his massive work, *Pseudo-Dionysius in seinen Beziehungen zum Neoplatonismus und Mysterienwesen*, ever after an essential tool for Dionysian research, while Stiglmayr's *Das Aufkommen der Ps.-Dionysischen Schriften* (Feldkirch, 1895), traced the reception of the corpus and placed it in Syria-Palestine. The relationship to Proclus had been noted in the *Scholia* attached to the MSS of Dionysius from at least the late sixth century (PG 21D), though the scholiast tried to argue that the pagan had cribbed from the Christian. Koch thus opened his article on Dionysius and Proclus with the observation that the relationship should simply be reversed.

- 12 Father Georges' reference to the "dynamism" of the Dionysian "analogies," or paradigms, on page 218 recalls V. Lossky, "La Notion des 'Analogies' chez Denys le Pseudo-Aréopagite," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* V (1931), 179-309, while his difficulties in reconciling the Areopagite's "Theological Vision" with his "Structure and Order of the World," 221-226, brings to mind the chasm between these two aspects of Dionysius emphasized especially by J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu* (Brussels, 1959), esp. 30-36.
- 13 See Florovsky's remarks on pages 206 and 210. Stiglmayr, *Aufkommen*, and "Eine syrische Liturgie als Vorlage des Pseudo-Areopagite," *Zeit.f.kath.Theologie* 33 (1909) 383-385, for the Syrian ties. Florovsky also dismisses, 205, the attempts to identify Dionysius with any known figure in the early sixth century, especially Severus. The latter's candidacy was advanced by Stiglmayr in two articles printed in *Scholastik* 3 and 7 (1928 and 1933) 1-17 and 161-189, and 52-67, but refuted by J. Lebon in another pair of articles in *Revue de l'histoire ecclésiastique* 26 and 28 (1930 and 1933) 880-915 and 296-313 respectively. The Dionysian corpus' Syrian trajectory was traced by J. Hornus, "Le corpus dionysien en syriaque," *Parole d'Orient* 1 (1970) 69-73. Father Georges may also have had in mind the attempt by E. Honigmann to identify Dionysius as Peter the Iberian, *Pierre l'Ibérien et les écrits du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite* (Brussels, 1952), replied to R. Roques, "Pierre l'Ibérien et le corpus dionysien," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 145 (1954) 69-98, but recently revived by M. van Esbroeck, "Peter the Iberian and Dionysius the Areopagite: Honigmann's thesis revisited," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 59,1 (1993) 217-227. There are aspects to Honigmann's thesis which are tantalizing, in particular his description of Peter's milieu in Palestine, 39-45, and the latter's contacts with Athenian platonism via the Empress Eudoxia while at the imperial court, but too little hard evidence to make a positive identification stick.

that is, their work on, respectively, Sergius of Reshaina and John of Scythopolis.¹⁴ C. Pera, W. Voelker, H. Puech, R. Roques and others also receive their due, although (like all the above) none are cited, with respect to the Alexandrian, Cappadocian and generally fourth century influences on the *Areopagitica*.¹⁵ In short, the modern debate is fully represented in this twenty-five page analysis—and I shall return shortly to that note of debate.

Secondly, however, Fr. Georges is never merely the compiler or echo of other people's opinions, whether ancient or modern. The very considerable body of Dionysian scholarship is placed in the

- 14 Florovsky touches on John and Sergius, Dionysius' first translator into Syriac, in 205-206. The *Scholia* were identified as chiefly John's work by Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Das Scholienwerk des Johannes von Scythopolis," *Scholastik* 15 (1940) 16-38, and more recently seconded with singular force by Beate Maria Suchla, "Die sogenannten Maximus Scholien des Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum," *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaft in Goettingen* (1980) 31-66. For Sergius, see P. Sherwood, "Sergius of Reshaina and the Syriac Versions of the Pseudo-Dionysius," *Sacris Erudiri* 4 (1952) 174-184, and "Mimro de Serge de Reshaina sur la vie spirituelle," *Orient syrien* 5 and 6 (1960 and 1961) 433-457; 95-111 and 121-156.
- 15 Florovsky on the Alexandrian influence, 225, on the Cappadocians (especially Nyssa), 211ff., and on Cyril of Jerusalem, 228. C. Pera, "Denys le mystique et la *Théomachia*," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 25 (1936) 5-75, was the first to detail Dionysius' links with the Cappadocians, though in the service of an attempt to date the corpus in the late fourth century. H.-C. Puech's "La ténèbre mystique chez le pseudo-Denys l'aréopagite," first published in *Études Carmélitaines* 23,2 (1938) 33-53, and rep. in *En quête de la gnose* vol. I (Paris, 1978), 119-141, placed the Areopagite's famous "darkness" firmly in the context of Philo and then Origen and Nyssa on the *Song of Songs*. W. Voelker's *Kontemplation und Ekstase bei Ps.-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden, 1958), provides a great many parallels from the whole of patristic literature prior to the *Areopagitica*, chiefly from the Alexandrian, Cappadocian, and mystagogical writers, but does so regrettably without much critical sense, being too often satisfied by the simple juxtaposition of texts. R. Roques' *L'univers dionysien* (Paris, 1954) makes occasional references to the patristic background (about eighty in a work of nearly four hundred pages). L. Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, trans. M. Ryan (N.Y., 1982), 384-392, and von Balthasar in *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Aesthetik* vol.II (Einsiedeln, 1964), 228-289, provide perhaps the best, brief attempts to place Dionysius within the patristic continuum. Von Balthasar in particular is markedly sensitive to the importance of the Origenist tradition, especially Evagrius.

service of a typically brilliant, lapidary—verging at times on the curt, or even gnomic—exposition of the *corpus*' main lines of thought, its place in Eastern Christian literature, and with an eye cocked toward the response to Nygren. In connection with the latter, Florovsky, in a way reminiscent of Lossky on the Dionysian "Analogies," underlines the dynamic character of the Areopagite's cosmos, in particular his *logoi* or *paradeigmata* as comprising the key to a profound re-working of the cosmos of Plato and the later Neoplatonists.¹⁶ In contrast to both the latter, the "prototypes are not things themselves...but also goals...the implementation [of which] presupposes co-participation...*theou synergon genesthai*."¹⁷ Here is the mystery of the rational creature and the sovereignty of its will in response to its Creator that forms the core of Fr. Georges' answer to the Reformers, his book's *leitmotif* as announced in its opening pages, that "in freely creating man God willed to give man an inner, spiritual freedom."¹⁸ The bulk of the rest of his analysis of the Areopagite serves to illustrate the latter's continuity with the tradition. Themes covered in the discussion of earlier writers, whether the role of motion (*kinesis*) and repose (*stasis*) in Evagrius, or the imageless quality of prayer in Nilus, whether the soul's divestiture of itself through wholly putting on God—the "mystical theology"—of Mark the Hermit, or Diadochus of Photiki's stress on silence, whether Gregory of Nyssa's role as "chief inspirer" of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, or the echoes of the fourth century mystagogues such as Cyril of Jerusalem in the treatise on the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, all find their place in the account of Dionysius.¹⁹ The Areopagite thus appears, with the one very notable exception being the *Macarian Homilies* (Florovsky's

16 Florovsky, 218.

17 *Ibid.*, quoting *Celestial Hierarchy* III,2 165B.

18 *Ibid.*, 21.

19 The parallels in *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* are as follows: Evagrius on *stasis* and *kinesis*, 177-178 paralleled by 215 on Dionysius; Nilus on imageless prayer 184 by 212-213 on the analogue in Dionysius; Mark the Hermit 189 and Diadochus of Photiki 196-197 on silence by 213 on Dionysius; Gregory of Nyssa 144 with 213 on Dionysius; and Cyril of Jerusalem 228 on the mysteries.

second largest chapter devoted to a single writer), as providing a kind of summary of the writers who preceded him. Dionysius is himself summed up early on in the chapter with the phrase I have chosen for the title of this essay, as "not so much a theologian as a contemplative observer and a liturgist."²⁰

The expression, "not a theologian," applies in what I take to be a double sense. First, as Koch noted a century ago and Couloubaritsis much more recently, Dionysius is not much given to argument or demonstration.²¹ Even his celebrated pirating of Proclus' *de malorum substantia*, though reproducing many of the latter's conclusions, is largely devoid of the Athenian philosopher's detailed argumentation.²² What remains is in good part a series of *dicta*, statements, on the nature of evil whose inadequacy Florovsky rightly notes, but whose fundamental agreement with Gregory of Nyssa, "at least in meaning," he also points out—and perhaps it is only fair to add that Gregory himself does not do all that well on this subject.²³ The second sense of "not a theologian," however, is much more serious. It takes us back first of all to that note of reserve and question I referred to above in Fr. Georges' analysis. Second, it recalls the questions raised about Dionysius' Christianity by Luther and his disciples. Thus, third, it introduces us to the heart of the debate which still whirls around this mysterious writer. If Florovsky speaks on the whole quite approvingly of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

²¹ H.Koch, "Proklos als Quelle der pseudo-Dionysius Arcopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* (1895) 438-454, and L. Couloubaritsis, "Le sens de la notion 'Démonstration' chez le Pseudo-Denys," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 75 (1982) 319-335. More recently still and in greater detail on Dionysius' lack of originality here, see C. Steel, "Proclus et Denys: de l'existence du mal," in Y. de Andia, ed., *Denys l'aréopagite et sa postérité en orient et en occident* (Paris, 1997), 89-116.

²² Koch, "Quelle," 446 and 451-452, and Couloubaritsis, 329-330.

²³ *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, 221-222. For the difficulty Gregory, and the Cappadocians in general, had with evil, see Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a coherent System," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958) 94-124. For Dionysius and Gregory on the subject, Pera, "Denys le mystique," 33-34. The latter's views on Dionysius' essential debt to fourth century arguments, whether or not mediated by Proclus, was seconded by E.Corsini, *Il Tratto De Divinibus Nominibus* (Torino, 1962), esp. 12-35.

the *corpus*' "Theological Vision," he is markedly disapproving when it comes to Dionysius' understanding of the "Structure and Order of the World."²⁴ The problem here is the "staircase principle," Fr. Georges' phrase for the Dionysian hierarchies.²⁵ This principle, Florovsky complains, acts to "shield" God from man through the interposition of the angelic orders and thus "reveals a certain vagueness in Dionysius' christological ideas."²⁶ Referring to the *corpus*' 3rd Epistle, he adds that the Areopagite "overemphasizes the mysteriousness and ineffability of the [Christ's] manifestation. The Godhead stays hidden after the this manifestation and even in the manifestation itself."²⁷ This leads to the conclusion that "the image of the God-man is not the focal point of Dionysius' spiritual experience."²⁸ The hierarchic element in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is simply "too sharp," too "harshly colored," after the manner of Clement and Origen, "by the late Judaic and Hellenistic idea of mediation."²⁹

This is quite a significant admission. The argument against Nygren and company "hiccoughs" when it comes to the writer whom we might take as an *Ansatzpunkt* for the Reformation critique of earlier Christian mysticism. With respect to a very important point, nothing less than the person of Jesus Christ, Dionysius emerges as, indeed, more a "platonizer" (or at least a Hellenizer) than a Christian. Credit must be given Fr. Georges for honesty here. He has admitted a weak point in his defense of the tradition, especially after having sketched earlier in his essay the near immediate reception and enormous prestige Dionysius enjoyed on the appearance of his *corpus* and in subsequent Christian thought.³⁰

24 Dionysius' "Theological Vision" is Florovsky's sub-heading for 211-220, his "Structure and Order of the World" for 221-228.

25 *Ascetic and Spiritual Writers*, 221.

26 *Ibid.*, 225.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, 205-206.

In his usual laconic way, Florovsky has also put his finger on what is perhaps the problem most exercising Dionysian interpreters this century. How does the picture of Moses climbing up Sinai to enjoy the immediate experience of God, as expressed in the *Mystical Theology*, square both with the role of Christ and with the apparently immutable nature of the "staircase principle" insisted upon in the treatises on the hierarchies?³¹ In the terms of Fr. Georges' sub-headings, how does Dionysius' theological vision relate to the structure and order of his world?

In the space left to me I would like to attempt a reply to that question. I will do so, first, by using certain hints already present in the volume on *Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Writers*, both in the chapter on Dionysius and elsewhere, and, secondly, by bringing to bear on the issue some advances in scholarship, with respect both to Dionysian and to other areas of inquiry, which have appeared since Fr. Georges' death. In so doing, I hope I may lend amplification to some of his own observations as well as offer a modest contribution toward strengthening his reply to Nygren.

The Florovskian observations I have in mind are four. First, Fr. Georges' summation of the Areopagite as contemplative and liturgist. Second, there is his gnomic statement, although quite undeveloped, that "One should look for his [Dionysius'] homeland in the East, and in Syria rather than Egypt."³² Third, we have his remark that Dionysius' "path to God leads through the Church,"³³ and fourth, a sentence which comes at the very beginning of the chapter on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*: "It hardly seems

31 The question was posed sharply and elegantly by J. Hornus, "Quelques réflexions à propos du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite et de la mystique chrétienne en général," *Revue de l'histoire et de philosophie religieuse* 27 (1947) 37-63, esp. 39-41. Roques, *L'univers*, and more emphatically, Vanneste, *Mystère*, see the tension as reflecting two different and unrelated ways of approaching God. B. Brons, *Gott und die Seienden* (Goettingen, 1976), in particular sees the role of Christ in the *corpus* as an ornamental concession to Christian sensibilities, but without any effective place in Dionysius' thought—a mere "doublet" of the universal action of divine Providence.

32 *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, 214.

33 *Ibid.*, 226.

possible that the patent anachronism of the document could have remained unnoticed...historical memory at the time was not *that* weak.”³⁴ The latter remark, with almost plaintive tone, and in view of the problems that “hierarchy” apparently poses for an orthodox Christology, is clearly an implicit question. How could this man have been accepted, and accepted so thoroughly, given the theological problems his writings seem to represent? Here, too, is the real danger the Dionysian “hiccough” poses the larger project of replying to Nygren and company. The latter would surely reply that Dionysius found a ready audience because, obviously, the Christian tradition had already been drinking far too long and much too deeply at Plato’s well.³⁵

My own view, the fruit of some years pondering the *Areopagitica*, together with a couple of recent discoveries in an unlikely quarter, is that the apparent tension between theology, that is, the experience of God, and hierarchy, and thus between both and Christology, is more apparent than real. P. Rorem’s publications on the *corpus* during the 80’s, and this very year,³⁶ have done much to bind the seeming

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁵ See note 9 above. The usual explanations for Dionysius’ rapid acceptance invoke in particular the effect of his pseudonym together with the efforts of John of Scythopolis and Maximus Confessor to supply a “christological corrective.” For a summary of this view, see J. Pelikan’s “The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality.” *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Complete Works*, 11-24, esp. 15ff. In my mind and—I think—Florovsky’s, this explanation is inadequate. Rather, one must surely ask why John and Maximus, and even Severus before them, were so anxious to embrace and defend the orthodoxy of the *corpus*. Why trouble if he were clearly a fake and deeply heterodox? Both men, moreover, were quite sufficiently versed in late antique thought to discern his sources in Neoplatonism. The answer must be that they, like the mysterious author, saw something in the philosophers that they thought good and worthwhile. Further, I would add that they *recognized* in him, as opposed to reading into him, themes and approaches in the Tradition that all of them embraced. Here then is the real force, and sting, of Nygren’s argument, as well as of Fr. Georges’ implicit question.

³⁶ See his *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto, 1984), together with the works already cited. On Moses and the ascent up Sinai, see his “Moses as the Paradigm for the Liturgical Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Studia Patristica* 18,2 (1989) 275-279.

chasm between hierarchy and theology previously emphasized by J. Vanneste and reflected by Fr. Georges.³⁷ On the other hand, Rorem scarcely replies to the question of a non-Christocentric Dionysius—if anything, his views on that subject are much stronger than Florovsky's.³⁸ I think that the answer lies in the *corpus*' understanding of the Church, and that we will find an important clue to Dionysius' presentation of "our hierarchy" in that Syrian connection which Fr. Georges left hanging so suggestively.

The assertion that Dionysius belongs to Syria is well grounded and generally accepted, but to date no one has thought to seek a link between the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and one of the most influential works ever to come out of a Syrian milieu, the *Macarian Homilies*. We recall that the latter is the one work which Fr. Georges does not include at all in his presentation of Dionysius' summation of so much of the prior tradition. C. Stewart has recently demonstrated that the *Homilies*, though written in Greek, employ typically Syriac Christian themes and idioms. They are not therefore a popularization of Gregory of Nyssa's ascetic theology, as Florovsky (following W. Jaeger) maintains, but representative of an already extant, indigenous, and Semitic-speaking, Christian tradition.³⁹ We noted above that Fr. Georges singled out Nyssa as a

37 See note 12 above.

38 One may find an unambiguous statement of his views on this question in "The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. LeClercq (N.Y., 1988), 132-138, esp. 144, on Christ's appearance in the corpus as "merely cosmetic," together with the diffident suggestion that the Areopagite was perhaps connected with the Platonic Academy at Athens, 133, and so (by implication) comes to Christianity as a kind of pagan wolf in Christian sheep's clothing. The latter view is certainly derived from R. Hathaway's *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letter of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague, 1969), where the emphasis on the Areopagite as subversive colors this otherwise useful book throughout. Rorem's most recent work, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary*, drops the last suggestion but, albeit in muted form, keeps the note of Christ's cosmetic presence. See notes 9 above and 44 below.

39 See *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* 149-168 for Florovsky on Macarius, and 152 for the latter's dependence on Nyssa. In response to Jaeger's *Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius* (Leiden, 1954), see R.

primary inspiration of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. It now appears, though, that Gregory in turn was sufficiently impressed by the *Homilies* to have written his *On Christian Perfection* as a correction, a sort of tidying-up for a cultivated, Greek-speaking readership, of Macarius' *Great Letter*. On that basis alone "Macarius" would seem worth a second—or, really, a first—look in relation to the *Areopagitica*. Certain themes which Fr. Georges singles out in "Macarius" especially caught my eye in relation to Dionysius. Florovsky sees the *leitmotif* of the *Homilies* appearing in *Homily 1*, the meditation on Ezekiel's vision. The soul is the "throne" of the divine glory, and it is there, "in the depths of the heart... [that] a certain, inner, secret, most profound light flashes out."⁴⁰ This light is Christ. In the present life, the manifestation of the light of Christ within is momentary, occasional, and fleeting, but it points toward that day when the inner glory will become manifest. The prototype for this eschatological fulfillment is the Gospel narrative of Christ's transfiguration.⁴¹ At this point I should like merely to recall the use of the Transfiguration in a very similar way in *Divine Names I,4*, together with the singular importance of light for Dionysius to which Fr. Georges himself draws attention.⁴²

But how, in Dionysius at least, are the two, light and the presence of Christ, connected? Put another way, what do the ascent of

Staats, *Makarios-Symeon: Epistola Magna* (Goettingen, 1984), esp. 28-42. See also C. Stewart, "Working the Earth of the Heart": *The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to A.D. 431* (Oxford, 1991), esp. his treatment of Macarius' vocabulary and metaphors, 96-233, and, most recently, K. Fitschen, *Messalianismus and Anti-Messalianismus: Ein Beispiel ostkirchlicher Ketzergeschichte* (Goettingen, 1998), 145-175. For a quick survey of the literature on Macarius and Messalianism, see G. Maloney "Introduction" to *Pseudo-Macarius: The Spiritual Homilies* (N.Y., 1992), 7-11.

40 *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* 154, referring to *Homily I*, 1-3 (H. Doerries, *Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios* [Berlin, 1964] 1-5).

41 *Ibid.*, 167-168, referring to *Homily VIII,3* (Doerries, 79).

42 *Ibid.*, 216. For Dionysius, see *Divine Names I,4* 592C (Suchla, *Corpus Dionysiacum II* [Berlin, 1990] 146:13-150:14), and as related to the experience of God, *Epistles 1*, 2, and 5 1065A-9A (Heil and Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum II* [Berlin, 1991] 156-159 and 162-163).

Sinai in the *Mystical Theology* and the *mysteria* of the Church discussed in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* have in common? Is there any connection? More importantly, how are both related, if at all, to Christ? P. Rorem, as noted above, has provided a beginning by underlining the function of Moses in the *Mystical Theology* as a type of the Christian hierarch.⁴³ The climbing of Sinai thus has a distinct liturgical echo. Here, as Fr. Georges noted, we indeed find the "path to God" leading "through the Church." But I think there is something else at work here, something which will lead us to a direct parallel with the *Macarian Homilies* and, more generally, Dionysius' Syrian roots. The text I have chiefly in mind comes from the opening of the *Celestial Hierarchy*. If, *pace* Rorem, we are to accept the ordering of the *corpus* as found in Migne and in most ancient manuscripts as Dionysius' own intention, then this treatise is also the beginning of the ascent which will conclude in the *Mystical Theology*.⁴⁴ The text in question is from *CHI*, 3:

43 See his article cited in note 36 above, as well as *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols*, 140-142.

44 On the ordering of the treatises, Rorem makes a case for the placement of the *Mystical Theology* after the *Divine Names*, as usual, but before the treatises on the hierarchies. See *Pseudo-Dionysius: a Commentary*, 208-210 and, at greater length, "The Place of the *Mystical Theology* in the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus," *Dionysius* 4 (1980) 87-98. His argument in sum is that the *MT* represents a methodological prologue defining how one is to interpret first the Bible (*CH*) and, second, the liturgy (the *EH*). The dialectic of simultaneous affirmation and negation outlined in the *MT* provides thus the means for the proper assimilation and transcendence of biblical and liturgical symbols. This thesis is basic to Rorem's understanding of the *corpus*' unity, in contradistinction to Vanneste (see *Symbols*, 7-10). On the other hand, it also serves very well to demonstrate the "cosmetic" quality of Christ and the Christian tradition since, effectively, the negative theology simply dissolves any specific Christian elements. Rorem's reading therefore presupposes a certain agenda: Dionysius does not really mean what he often seems to be saying, but is instead hiding behind ostensibly Christian themes. Rorem is thus obliged to insist time and again throughout his *Commentary* on the "timeless" quality of the *Areopagitica*, and on its consequently being "devoid of eschatology" (e.g., *Commentary* 120-122). This a very serious charge, to be sure, but quite difficult to sustain in view of the fact that Dionysius mentions the "last things" not only in *DNI*, 4 (acknowledged by Rorem, *ibid.*, 122), but in the entire chapter he devotes to Christian burial in *EHVII* (552D-565C, Ritter/Heil 120:13-130:12), as well as occasional references else-

It would not be possible for the human intellect to be ordered to that immaterial imitation and contemplation of the heavenly hierarchies unless it were to use the material guide which is proper to it, reckoning the visible beauties [of the liturgy] as representations of the invisible beauty, and the physical perfumes impressions of the intelligible distributions, and the material lights an icon of the immaterial gift of light... the exterior ranks of the clergy [an image] of the harmonious and ordered habit [*hexis*] [of mind] which leads to divine things, and [our partaking] of the most divine Eucharist [a symbol] of our participation in Jesus.⁴⁵

The text speaks, first, about the earthly liturgy as an imitation and revelation of the heavenly liturgy. Thus far, as Fr. Georges remarks, there is nothing new.⁴⁶ Secondly, though, Dionysius also states that our hierarchy, that is the ranks and orders of the clergy, is an image of that certain state or condition, presumably of the

where. In addition, Rorem is confronted with the fact that Dionysius insists, presumably echoing Heb 10:1, that the liturgy offers an "exact image" (*akribes eikon*) of the heavenly things (see 401C and relatedly 404B, Heil/Ritter 77:8 and 21—the latter reference, incidentally, being in the context of another reference to the bodily resurrection) and nowhere states or suggests that it is to be transcended in this life (*DN* I,4 says it will be, but at the eschaton). My reading of the *corpus* in what follows is therefore based on the assumption that Dionysius does allow for a certain tension in his thought, a tension that derives exactly from the gap between the eschaton as inaugurated in Christ (the "exact image") and fulfilled at the general resurrection. It is the Church and the Church's liturgy which, in the present life, mediate between the eschaton and the Christian soul. The reader will have to judge between this reading of Dionysius and Rorem's. The key questions which any reading must answer are two: how does the *corpus* hang together and why was it so readily received? Rorem provides a reply to the first, but not really to the second—see note 35 above. In any case, given my reading, the *MT* fits in at the end of the *corpus* as the climax of the process begun in *CH* I, and, in addition, reprised in *Epistles* 1 through 5.

⁴⁵ *CH* I,3 121D-124A (Ritter/Heil 8:8-9:6).

⁴⁶ *Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* 226. The heavenly liturgy reflected in the earthly is a theme going back at least to the New Testament, e.g., Heb 12:22-24 and Rev 4-5 (and throughout the latter). For comment on Revelation, see J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia, 1979) and P. Prigent, *Apocalypse et liturgie* (Delachaux et Nestlé, 1964).

intellect (*nous*), which allows for the vision of God.⁴⁷ The outer church, the visible elements and human celebrants of the sacred rites, are together an icon of the inner liturgy of the soul. There are, in short, three "liturgies" going on here, three "churches" as it were: the heavenly (invisible) church, the earthly (visible) church, and the "little church" of the soul. Something very like the idea of the *nous* as church appears, for example, in Evagrius of Pontus' *Kephalaia Gnostica*,⁴⁸ but both together, that is the earthly mirroring the heavenly liturgy and the soul as microcosm of the worshipping community as macrocosm, would appear to be quite new were it not for the fact that this threefold equation and—most importantly, simultaneous—coordination was already an established motif in Syriac writers of the fourth and fifth centuries. One thinks, of course, of K. McVey's article on "The Domed Church," but that Syriac hymn spoke only of the church building as microcosm, not the soul, and in any case is contemporary to or just after

47 Curiously, the Scholiast does not really pick up on this idea. In *PG* 4 33C he defines *hexis* readily enough as an "indwelling quality," *poiotes emmonos*, but proceeds to try to identify it exclusively with the angels. If this is a refusal to deal with the theme of microcosm/macrocosm, or "little church," then I would suggest that it is because the latter notion may have been under some suspicion, tied up too closely with the still controversial Macarian writings and hence with "Messalianism." On the latter "heresy," he is anxious to show that Dionysius is not guilty, see 169D-172A and 557B.

48 See his *Kephalaia Gnostica* V,84 (ed. A. Guillaumont), *PO* 28: 213, as well as the chapters supplementary to the *Kephalaia* collected by W. Frankenberg in *Evagrius Ponticus* (Berlin, 1912), esp. chapters 2 and 37 (425 and 457), together with Babai's comment on the former: the soul "is by nature a temple of the light of the Trinity." See also the *nous* as the "place of God," a reference to Ex 24:10 in chapter 21 (441), and recall *MT* I,3 and the *topos theou* (1000D, Ritter/Heil 144:5). The *nous* is the "altar of God" in ch. 45 (461). In the letters of Evagrius that Frankenberg has assembled, see esp. 25 (583), 29 (587), and in particular 39 (593). Letter 56 (605) also presents an interesting parallel to the opening of Dionysius' *Epistle* VIII and its emphasis on meekness. Both Evagrius and the Areopagite offer Moses and David as examples. Finally, note letter 58 (609) and its equation of knowledge of the Trinity with "the spiritual mountain." In light of what we have to say below on the *MT* and *Epistle* 3, two articles on these passages of Evagrius are of particular interest: A. Guillaumont, "La vision de l'intellect par lui-même dans la mystique évagrienne," *Mélanges de l'Université St. Joseph* vol. L (1984) 255-262, and N. S'ed, "La Shekinta et ses amis araméenes," *Cahiers d'Orientalisme* XX (1988) 233-242.

the writing of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.⁴⁹ We do, though, find exactly these three “churches” in the Chorepiscopus Balai’s hymn on the consecration of the church in Qennishrin, quoted by R. Murray in the latter’s seminal study of Syriac Christianity, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*.⁵⁰ More importantly, since Balai is also a rough contemporary of Dionysius, we see it in the fifth century homily of the Pseudo-Ephrem “On the Solitaries,”⁵¹ and, even earlier, as Murray and S. Brock have pointed out, in the 12th *Mimra* of a late fourth century text of great importance, the *Liber Graduum*.⁵² To quote from Brock’s translation of the latter:

It is not without purpose that our Lord... established this church, altar, and baptism which can be seen by the body’s eyes. The reason was this: by starting from these visible things and provided our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts which cannot be seen by the eyes of the flesh...As for the Church in Heaven, all that is good takes its beginnings from there, and there light has shone out upon us in all directions. After its likeness the Church on earth came into being, along with its priests and its altar; according to the pattern of this ministry

- 49 K.E. McVey, “The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 37 (1983) 91-121. The Church as Dionysius’ universe is theme and thesis of Roques’ magisterial study, *L’Univers*. McVey’s article shows this notion to have been an accepted theme in the Syrian church, exemplified by the microcosm of the church building.
- 50 R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: a Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975), esp.272-273.
- 51 “On Hermits and Desert Dwellers,” trans. from CSCO 334/Scr.Syr. 148 by J. Amar in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: a Sourcebook*, ed. V.L. Wimbush (Minneapolis, 1990), 66-80, here esp. 70:97ff, 72:181ff, and 79:485-496.
- 52 See Murray, *Symbols* 262-269; Stewart, “Working” 218-220; and S. Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kerala, 1989), 46-48, for the threefold church. For the critical text of *Mimra* XII from the *Liber Graduum*, see M. Kmosko, *Patrologia Syriaca* III (1926) 285-304. In view of my remarks on Evagrius above and note 48, it is perhaps of some interest that the *Liber* seems often to have traveled under the name of Evagrius. See A. Vocebus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient I: The Origins of Asceticism* (Louvain, 1958), 184 note 31.

the body ministers outwardly while the heart acts as priest inwardly. Those who are diligent in this visible church become like that heavenly church as they follow after it.⁵³

This text is neatly duplicated and expanded upon in the 52nd Macarian Homily of the longer, Vatican collection edited and published some years ago for the Berlin collection by C. Berthold.⁵⁴ As C. Stewart points out, the theme of the soul as "little church," the "temple of God" in accord with 1 Cor 3:16, is well established in the Macarian writings generally,⁵⁵ but the following passage dwells upon this motif at length and in a way which clearly recalls both the *Liber* and the passage cited above from the *CH*:

The whole visible arrangement [*oikonomia*] of the Church came to pass for the sake of the living and intelligible being of the rational soul which was made according to the image of God and which is the living and true church of God. And for this reason things which are bodily and without soul or reason were honored with names which are similar to the beings who are rational, living, and heavenly [the angels]: in order that the infant soul might be guided through the shadow [and] attain to the truth. For the Church of Christ and Temple of God and true altar and living sacrifice is the man of God . . . just as the worship and mode of life of the Law [were] a shadow of the present Church of

- 53 Translation by S. Brock in *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer* (Cistercian Studies 101) (Kalamazoo, 1987), 45-53. The passages assembled in my citation are from pages 46 and 48.
- 54 *Makarios/Symeon; Reden und Briefe: Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694(B)*, ed. H. Berthold, vol. II (Berlin, 1973). Homily 52 is on pages 138-142.
- 55 See Stewart, "Working," 218-220, and Murray, *Symbols*, 270-271, for references. Of interest, too, is that Evagrius also makes use of 1 Cor 3:16 in at least one place as proof of the Spirit's divinity. See his *Letter on Faith* (Frankenberg, 633). Dionysius himself refers to the same text while describing the holy man in *EH* III,3,7 433C (Heil/Ritter 86:10).

Christ, just so is the present and visible Church a shadow of the rational and true inner man.⁵⁶

The following, this time using a slightly amended version of Stewart's translation, is even clearer:

Because visible things are the type and shadow of hidden ones [*kryphion*], and the visible temple [a type] of the temple of the heart, and the priest [a type] of the true priest of the grace of Christ, and all the rest of the order [*akolouthia*] of the visible arrangement is [a type] of the rational [*logikon*] and hidden [*kryphion*] matters according to the inner man, we receive the manifest arrangement and administration of the Church as a pattern [*hypodeigma*] of [what is] at work in the soul by grace.⁵⁷

Father Georges is quite correct. It is the Church which is Dionysius' path to God, but not the Church or Christ as merely a stage to be surpassed. Rather, the Church is the living image of the human being sanctified by Christ, the very pattern, *hypodeigma*, of our transformation. Entry into it and contemplation of the ranks of the clergy celebrating its mysteries are, and at the same time represent, the entry of the soul into itself in order to discover Christ, "suddenly," on the altar of the heart just as He is present in the consecrated elements on the Church's altar. As Dionysius remarks in the fourth chapter of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, it is always "Jesus Who is our most divine altar, in Whom as consecrated and mystically consumed [*holokautomenoï*] we have access [to God]."⁵⁸

56 *Homily 52*, Berthold 138:1-11.

57 *Ibid.*, 140:3-8. The brackets belong to Stewart's translation, in "Working," 219, which I have altered somewhat—e.g., rendering *oikonomia* as "arrangement" rather than "dispensation." Macarius is clearly talking about the physical ordering of people within the church: clergy in the altar area and people in the nave. See my discussion of this homily in *Et introibo ad altare dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita* (Thessalonica, 1994), 380-385.

58 *EH IV,3,12 484D* (Heil/Ritter 103:4-7). Regarding this passage, esp. the "mystically consumed [*holokautomenoï*]," I for one would argue that Christ's presence on the altar is quite real for Dionysius, though it be "symbolical." That is, it is different