

Love Divine: A Reappraisal of *Erōs* in the Dionysian Hierarchies

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Commentators on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius have long been aware of a relationship between the *Corpus Dionysiacum*¹ and the writings of certain Greek philosophers, especially the Athenian Neoplatonist, Proclus.² Since the late nineteenth century,³ however, scholars have generally conceded that the character of the Areopagite's work is rather more Greek than Christian⁴ (even sympathetic interpreters acknowledge his

¹ Citations of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (hereafter designated CD) refer to the column number in J.P. Migne, PG 3, and in parenthesis to the volume, page, and line numbers of the critical edition: *Corpus Dionysiacum I: De divinis nominibus*, (ed. B.R. Suchla; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990) and *Corpus Dionysiacum II*, containing the hierarchies, the *Mystical Theology*, and the Epistles (eds. G. Heil and A.M. Ritter; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991). All translations are my own.

² The once common opinion that Proclus plagiarized Dionysius has been traced to John Philoponus (d. ca. 580), the probable author of an interpolation in the introduction to the CD written by John of Scythopolis (Paul Rorem and John Lamoreaux [*John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus* [New York: Clarendon Press, 1998], 106-107]). In this interpolation Philoponus attempts to explain the apparently recent vintage of the CD: "It must be known that even some outside philosophers, especially Proclus, have often used the contemplations of the blessed Dionysius, even the very words. But it is possible to grasp the significance of this: that the more ancient of the philosophers in Athens, having appropriated his treatises, concealed them, so that they might seem to be the fathers of his divine words" (PG.3.116.A).

³ In independent studies published in 1895, Hugo Koch and Jøsef Stiglmayer successfully demonstrated that Dionysius relied upon Proclus. See Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895): 438-454, and Stiglmayer, "Der Neuplatoniker Proklos als Vorlage des sog. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895): 253-273 and 721-748. See also Koch's *Pseudo-Dionysius in seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen* (Mainz, 1900).

⁴ This tendency to contrast Jewish and/or Christian writings, biblical and otherwise, with the writings of "Greeks" appears in Jewish apologetic works in the second century BCE, and later in Philo (*De Vita Mos.* 1.1-3) and Josephus (*C. Ap.* 1.1-46). Tatian (*Or. ad Graec.* 21; *ANF* 2.74) produces one of the most pointed expressions of the antithesis in early Christian literature: "We do not act as fools, O Greeks, nor utter idle tales when we announce that God was born in the form of a man. I call on you who reproach us to compare your mythical accounts (μύθους) with our narrations (διηγήματα)." But Greek writers could be cited to demonstrate *continuity* as well as discontinuity between Greek culture and that of Judaism/Christianity. This ambivalence is evident in the earliest commentary on the CD, the *Scholia* of John of Scythopolis. Roughly 30 references to "the Greeks" in the *Scholia* are evenly divided between negative or critical comments and positive or explanatory comments, according to Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux (*John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998] 109). On Jewish and early Christian apologetic literature

“tendency to atomize the biblical text in the service of an overriding systematic concern”⁵), but few have argued the point with greater insistence than Anders Nygren. In his classic study of the Christian idea of love Nygren articulated a view of history in which the *erōs*-tradition of Hellenism became intertwined and confused with Christian *agape*.⁶ According to Nygren, no one succumbed to this confusion more than Dionysius, who was so dazzled by the cosmic *erōs* of Proclus that he simply failed to comprehend the Christian idea of love.

In the nearly three quarters of a century that have passed since the initial publication of *Agape and Eros*, few scholars have ventured a direct response to Nygren’s critique of Dionysius;⁷ fewer still have taken seriously Dionysius’ claim that his understanding of *erōs* accords with the scriptures.⁸ In what follows I will consider Nygren’s application of motif-

see Arthur Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture*, Hermeneutische Untersuchung zur Theologie 26 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989). See also Frances M. Young (*Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002]), esp. chapter 2, where Young argues that the apologetic defense of scripture involved an appropriation of Greek methodology in a “cultural take-over bid”: an attempt to substitute scripture for the classics.

⁵ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*; Crossroad: New York, 2002): 162.

⁶ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (trans. Phillip S. Watson; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1957); repr. of *Eros and Agape* (trans. Phillip S. Watson; Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Part 1, 1932; Part 2, 1938); trans. of *Den kristna kärlekstanken genom tiderna. Eros och Agape* (Svenska Kyrkans Dikonistyrelsens Bokförlag: Stockholm, Part 1, 1930, Part 2, 1936).

⁷ Volume Ten in Georges Florovsky’s *Collected Works* is bracketed by sections answering Nygren’s assessment of Christian Hellenism. Florovsky concentrates primarily on Nygren’s debt to Luther’s theological anthropology, which Florovsky contrasts with an insistence in Eastern Orthodox Christianity on the intrinsic value of human nature, even fallen human nature, as a creation of God. See Florovsky, *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* (vol. 10 in the *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, ed. Richard S. Haugh; trans. Raymond Miller et. al.; Belmont: Büchervertriebsantalt, 1987), 20–25, 249–252. Pages 204–229 of the same volume deal with the CD. Alexander Golitzin (“A Contemplative and a Liturgist’: Father Georges Florovsky on the Corpus Dionysiacum” *SVTQ* 43 [1999]:131–161) remarks that Florovsky’s argument “hiccoughs” when it comes to his analysis of Dionysius, that is, with respect to christology and the Dionysian hierarchies, Florovsky paints Dionysius as more of a Platonizer than a Christian. Golitzin attempts to shore up Florovsky’s argument by contextualizing Dionysius’s ecclesiology within the generally accepted Syrian provenance of the CD, but does not address the theme of *erōs* and *agape*. For that one must turn to the brief article by John M. Rist, “A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *VC* 20 (1966): 235–243. See also Cornelia J. de Vogel, “Greek Cosmic Love and the Christian Love of God. Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the author of the Fourth Gospel,” *VC* 35 (1981): 57–81.

⁸ Important in this regard is Paul Rorem’s *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984). Rorem does not deal

history to the NT, and the peculiar results he achieves when he sets his resultant taxonomy of religions to the work of exegesis. In the second section of this paper I will review Nygren's critique of Dionysius and offer a constructive account of the place and function of *erōs* in the Dionysian hierarchies. Here I shall reconsider some of the interpretive difficulties posed by the tensive presence of seemingly incompatible Christian and Neoplatonic elements in the CD, symbolized for Nygren by the respective motifs of *agape* and *erōs*. Rather than ask whether or not Dionysius privileges Neoplatonism over scripture, or vice versa, I ask how he places a Neoplatonist such as Proclus in conversation with scripture. What does Proclus accomplish for Dionysius? Likewise what kind of work do the scriptures perform?⁹ In the end I hope to present a more nuanced portrait of Dionysius and his relationship to his sources of inspiration than has often been sketched.

The Fundamental Motif of Christianity?¹⁰

Nygren's study begins by identifying the putative fundamental motifs of Christianity (*agape*) and Hellenism (*erōs*). A third motif (*nomos*) accounts for Judaism but quickly drops

with Dionysius' interpretation of *erōs*, but he does suggest the possibility of a "fuller understanding of the Dionysian corpus" by "taking seriously its clear concern for the Bible and the liturgy" (149).

⁹ The approach I have adopted may be described as intertextual reading, referring primarily to the Bakhtinian notion described by Julie Kristeva (*Desire in Language* [ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, et. al.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1980] 64-66): "any text is composed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another." Scholars have traditionally approached the CD *diachronically*, i.e. by establishing a "correct" reading of Dionysius' sources (the Bible, Church Fathers, Proclus, etc.) and determining whether or not he faithfully represents them. This approach prioritizes Neoplatonic or biblical intertexts, depending upon the degree to which Neoplatonism and Christianity are viewed as compatible or otherwise by the interpreter. In other words, if it is determined that Dionysius accurately reproduces Proclus, then the biblical texts may be treated as secondary. If he can be shown to have faithfully represented the scriptures, then the Neoplatonic texts may be treated as secondary. A *synchronic* approach allows these intertexts to coexist in mutually interpretive relationships, the presupposition being that the peculiarly Dionysian juxtaposition of Procline and biblical texts (among others) creates a new *context* with significations that are both trans-Procline and trans-scriptural.

¹⁰ The title of this section is taken from a response to Nygren by Erwin R. Goodenough ("The Fundamental Motif of Christianity," *JR* 20 [1940]: 1-14). Although Goodenough did not disagree in principle with the idea of a fundamental motif he questioned how something so infrequently and imperfectly realized as Nygren's *agape* motif could constitute the fundamental motif of Christianity.

out of the picture, in keeping with the then common perception of Judaism as having become degenerate by the time of Jesus and more or less irrelevant after the apostolic era. Collapsing Judaism and Hellenism together under the functional category of “egocentric” religion, Nygren found the principle concern of both to be self-salvation through individual merit: the “Jew” earns salvation by obeying the Law, while the “Greek” acquires salvation by striving to grasp the divine life. Since Paul writes that there is neither Jew nor Greek in Christ (Gal 3.28), Nygren took this as evidence of the absolutely unique and paradoxically universal character of Christianity.¹¹ When Christianity appeared on the scene, therefore, it brought with it a radical “theocentric” way of salvation: the way of *agape*.

The *agape* motif first appears in the form of the double commandment issued by Jesus himself (Mark 12.30–31 par). Only in the letters of Paul, however, did Nygren find a purely theocentric conception of *agape*—the spontaneous, unmotivated, and creative love of God realized preeminently in the selfless act of Christ submitting himself to the cross—an *agape* contaminated neither by the vestigial influence of Jewish nomism, with its exclusive claim on God’s love, nor by the intrusion of Hellenistic metaphysics. Nygren used this cross-centered conception of *agape* to drive a wedge between the two commandments of love. Paul never mentions the command to love of God, for example, only the command to love one’s neighbor (Rom 13.8–9).¹² Any residue of uncertainty as to the origin and orientation of *agape* in the synoptic gospels is therefore “completely dispelled in Paul.”¹³ If *agape* refers

¹¹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 63. Karen King (*What is Gnosticism?* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003], 72) notes that the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach, which principally involved the method of motif-history, tended to merge “old and new discourses: the discourse of heresy and antisyncretism with Enlightenment historicism, developmental models of cultural progress, and Orientalism.” Although Nygren did not share the desire of many History of Religions scholars to eliminate dogmatic constraints on the study of Christianity, he did adapt their method to a dialectical framework. The multiple interacting, and sometimes conflicting, discourses which King has noted in the work of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* are also at work in Nygren’s representation of the Christian idea of love as something entirely new and unique, yet somehow anchored in ancient piety. Nygren sustained the paradox by distinguishing the religion of the Old Testament from the “legalism and externality” of its inheritors. This allowed him to portray Christianity more or less as an evolutionary bypass over “later Judaism” (Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 62) whilst reinscribing the ancient apologetic strategy of rooting Christianity in Judaism and using Judaism as a foil for pagan culture.

¹² *Ibid.* 123–124.

¹³ *Ibid.* 126

exclusively to love that descends from God, then the command to love God must not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that human love ascends to God. In fact human love for God should rightly be called *pistis* (faith) rather than *agape*.¹⁴ Likewise, if *agape* refers exclusively to unmotivated and selfless love which originates in God and flows in only one direction or, at best, in two directions (downward from God and outward from oneself) then the command to love one's neighbor as oneself excludes the possibility of self-love.

Nygren also cautioned against what he called "the duality of the Johannine idea of Agape."¹⁵ Whereas Paul held the line and preserved *agape* from the Hellenistic-Oriental-Gnostic tendencies of his Corinthian opponents,¹⁶ the Johannine literature "creates a spiritual environment in which there would be at least some points of contact for the otherwise alien Eros motif."¹⁷ Even though I John 4.8 represents the "supreme formal expression" of *agape*,¹⁸ the Johannine writings on the whole weaken the motif by introducing a metaphysic of *agape*, manifested most clearly in the idea of causality, e.g. "The Father himself loves you, *because* you have loved me" (αὐτὸς γὰρ ὁ πατήρ φιλεῖ ὑμᾶς ὅτι, ἐμὲ περιλήκατε, John 16.27).¹⁹ Since the introduction of causality implies that God's love can be activated or energized by something external to Godself, that it is a *reaction* to prior stimuli rather than an unmotivated *action*, Nygren concluded that the Johannine writings represent the initial conflation of concepts which were originally at home in diametrically opposed worlds, "the transition to a stage where the Christian idea of love is no longer determined solely by the Agape motif, but by Eros and Agape."²⁰

Erōs symbolized all that *agape* did not for Nygren: the acquisitive, upward-striving desire of human beings to grasp at and obtain their own salvation. It first appears in the souls

¹⁴ Ibid. Ironically this move recalls Dionysius' contention that one should attend to the force of the meaning rather than to the words themselves (DN 4.11; 708C [I.156.3-4]).

¹⁵ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 151

¹⁶ Ibid. 133-145.

¹⁷ Ibid. 159

¹⁸ Ibid. 147

¹⁹ Ibid. 152. That Nygren does not distinguish between *agape* and *philia* has been pointed out by others, e.g. Martin D'Arcy (*The Mind and Heart of Love: Lion and Unicorn, A Study in Eros and Agape* [London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1945]). D'Arcy suggests that *philia* "completes" the NT conception of love by signifying an aspect of mutuality otherwise lacking in both *agape* and *erōs*.

²⁰ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 158

of initiates to the ancient mystery cults, reaches its apex in Plato²¹—who provided a rational framework for what previously had been an ill-defined but widespread longing for salvation—and subsequently suffers its own declension at the hands of the Neoplatonists. The dichotomy that Nygren charted through his idiosyncratic deployment of motif-history pits selfish or self-centered *erōs* against selfless or self-giving *agape*. The question this paper considers, in response, is whether Dionysian *erōs* really is selfish love.

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?

Nygren’s critique of Dionysius depends heavily upon his portrait of the Areopagite as the linchpin in “a continuous line of Eros-tradition running from Neoplatonism and Alexandrian Theology... to Scotus Eriugena and the Mediaeval mystics.”²² “All true mysticism” belongs to this tradition according to Nygren; “its main preoccupation is essentially self-salvation by means of an ascent to the Divine.”²³ To the mystic’s egocentric and upward-striving quest to acquire God, Nygren opposed his concept of theocentric *agape*: the gracious condescension of God in Christ.²⁴ According to Nygren, Dionysius’ preoccupation with metaphysical causality blinds him to this grace. He betrays his veneer of Christianity when, in the fourth chapter of DN, he gives the divine One the name of *Erōs*. Thereafter he mechanically follows Plotinus and Proclus in the “monotonously repeated principle” by which divine *erōs*-forces are transmitted down the chain of causality.²⁵ This metaphysical connection between *erōs* and *erōtes* blurs the boundaries between human and divine by ontologizing God’s love and misconstruing it as something that is innate to human existence, a “divine spark” that makes salvation possible by providing something worth loving in an otherwise worthless creation.

²¹ On the mystery cults see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. Chapter 4 for a discussion of the relationship between Plato, *erōs*, and the mysteries.

²² Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 221

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Although “egocentric” and “upward-striving” appear to be contradictory, Nygren configures upward-striving love as acquisitive love.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 582

Even Nygren’s critics acknowledge Dionysius’ debt to Neoplatonism and especially to Proclus: “Dionysius speaks Proclus’ language when distinguishing four kinds of Love,” notes de Vogel,²⁶ yet Proclus himself mentions only two kinds of love: *erōs pronōētikos* and *erōs epistreptikos*.²⁷ Nygren explained the fact that the Procline *erōs* is descending and providential as well as ascending by suggesting that Christianity “exercised a modifying influence on the ancient sense of values.”²⁸ He did not ask whether Dionysius exercised a modifying influence on Proclus. This is not to say that Proclus borrowed his ideas from Dionysius, as the older view would have it, only to suggest that we should pay attention to what Proclus *does not* say.²⁹ Dionysius may speak Proclus’ language, but he has more to say about *erōs* than Proclus. The two writers both represent *erōs* as energy or activity, to be sure, and they both maintain that there is only one true *erōs* (as does Nygren, in a negative sense). In the works of Dionysius, however, this one true *erōs* moves in ways that Proclus’ *erōs* simply does not. These movements are therefore distinctive to Dionysius’ conception of *erōs*, and may be described as *erōs koinōnikos* and *erōs sunektikos*.

²⁶ de Vogel, “Greek Cosmic Love,” 59; cf. DN 4.10, 708A (II.155.8-13)

²⁷ Rist, “A Note,” 241

²⁸ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 569. Nygren reproduces the old claim of logical superiority based on chronological priority, the basic presupposition being that truth has only one original source; the closer a text is to that source, i.e. the older it is, the more accurately or completely it represents the truth. What is true in Plato, to cite only one common example, must have come from Moses (and ultimately from God). When Nygren encountered in Proclus the notion of a descending and providential love, so axiomatic for the Christian idea of love, he concluded that Proclus must have been influenced by the Christian idea. This argument carves out difference from similarity by establishing a hierarchy of texts based on their antiquity. It ought not be overlooked that the same logic informs Philoponus’ defense of the CD’s antiquity (see above, n.2), which implies that Philoponus, like Nygren, considered Proclus’ work to contain truth in some sense, though distorted and inaccurate.

²⁹ Rist (*Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964]) argues that the idea of descending *erōs* developed from hints within the Platonic texts themselves. See also Appendix I of Stephen Gersh’s *KINHΣΙΣ AKINHΤΟΣ: A Study of Spiritual Motion in the Philosophy of Proclus* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 123-127. Gersh observes that Proclus’ equation of divine love (ὁ θεῖος ἔρωσ) with activity (ἡ ἐνέργεια) implies a complete causal cycle of descent and ascent.

The adverb *koinōnikōs* occurs five times in the Dionysian corpus,³⁰ frequently in contexts that involve mediating activity by a person or group. The Son ascribes to the divine Spirit whatever belongs to himself and the Father, “cooperatively and in a unifying way” (κοινωνικῶς καὶ ἡνωμένως).³¹ Elsewhere, Dionysius characterizes the ecclesiastical hierarchy as both celestial and of the Law, “cooperatively sharing with the extremes by virtue of being a mean” (κοινωνικῶς τῆ μεσότητι τῶν ἄκρων ἀντιλαμβανομένη).³² Similar phrasing appears in connection with the archangels, whom Dionysius locates midway between the principalities and the angels: “But since there is no hierarchy that does not have first, middle, and last powers, the holy order of archangels cooperatively shares in the extremes as a hierarchical mean.”³³ With the principalities the archangels share the turning toward the “transcendent source,” and according to its “good regulations” and “invisible sovereignties” they unify the angels. With the angels they share the role of an interpretive order, “receiving the divine illuminations through the first powers and, as a good example, conveying the same to the angels, and through the angels to us.”³⁴

The image projected by these descriptions is of a constant *moving between*, a dynamic participation in the activity of both higher and lower. This *moving between* operates both on an *intra*-hierarchical level and an *inter*-hierarchical level, so it would be misleading to say that *erōs koinōnikos* is a constituent *element of being* as opposed to a particular *way of loving*, or to say that it is limited only to those beings who occupy the central rank of each level in the two hierarchies, celestial and ecclesiastical. Although Dionysius’ fascination with mean terms in triads undoubtedly derives from Neoplatonism, the model according to which he conceptualizes the cosmos appears to be Trinitarian in the Christian sense of the term. To my knowledge neither Iamblichus nor Proclus have much to say about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *erōs koinōnikos* of the Son, the archangels, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a whole is neither egocentric nor selfish in the sense outlined by

³⁰ CH 9.2, 257C (II.36.14–15), 260B (II.37.12); EH 5.2, 501D (II.105.19); DN 2.1, 637C (I.124.7); 4.10, 708A (I.155.10)

³¹ DN 2.1, 637C (I.124.6–8)

³² EH 5.2, 501D (II.105.18–19)

³³ CH 9.2, 257C (II.36.14–15)

³⁴ CH 9.2, 257D (II.36.20–21)

Nygren. If it is “upward-striving” and “acquisitive” it is only so to the extent that it represents an eternal opening upward, a welcome receiving of “every good and perfect gift coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas 1.17, cf. CH 1.1, 120B [II.7.1-2]), and this for the express purpose of redistributing those same gifts. This brings us to the question with which I opened this section.

At the very least, Nygren is persuasive in his argument that the two commands of love really are two and not three.³⁵ There is no third command hidden within the double commandment because loving ourselves comes naturally, we need not be told to do. Dionysius indicates that *erōs* includes self-love, the *erōs sunektikos*, but is such love always and everywhere self-*ish* love? Nygren, I think, would have answered with an unequivocal “yes.” To love our neighbor, in contrast, is to turn outward the love that would otherwise be misdirected inward. This view, however well-meaning, does not account for the dislocation of self that is central to the experience of so many mystics, and which Paul describes in its specifically Christian formulation: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who live in me” (Gal 2.20, cf. DN 4.13, 712A [I.159.5-6]). Moreover, this *aporia* of Pauline mysticism appears also in Dionysius, for the “divine Erōs is ecstatic, not allowing the lover to be a lover of themselves, but of the beloved.”³⁶

In the *erōs sunektikos* there is an *ekstasis*, a standing outside of oneself that is paradoxically accompanied by a direct and unmediated experience of *an* other, the very Other who is the source of one’s own being. In this way, to love oneself is to look upon oneself as one would look upon Christ. To love another *as oneself* is therefore to love them as Christ. This is the basis not only of Pauline mysticism, a tradition in which Dionysius consciously locates himself, but also of Pauline ethics. Dionysius expresses this tradition in Christian terms as surely as he expresses it in Neoplatonic terms, and it is the fusion of these two discourses, not their confusion, that has proven to be his most enduring contribution to the Christian mystical tradition.

³⁵ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 100

³⁶ DN 4.13, 712A (I.158.19-159.1)

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