
DYNAMEIS, PROODOS AND THEOSIS

ABOUT THE NATURE AND MEANING OF TIME IN

DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE'S VIEW

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Abstract

This paper exposes the concept of time in Dionysius the Areopagite's thinking. The fifth chapter of the treatise 'On the Divine Names' is essential in the Dionysian understanding of temporality. On the one hand, God is above and beyond time; on the other hand, all his creatures are subject to time. This supratemporality springs or, in other words, is the natural consequence of the existence of God. For this reason he does not fall at all in the time axis with its three moments - past, present, future; on the contrary, if all the other elements of creation are 'around Him', all these change in time: they have a past, a present and a future. In fact, being created by God, they enter into His eternal plan. The central image of the Dionysian thinking is that of a dynamic universe. Being initiated by love, movement is the living expression of the created being, existence itself means movement, change in accordance with the logos of each being, thus a continuous process to achieve one's own perfection.

Keywords: supratemporality, time, love, unity, deification

1. Introduction

“With Dionysius we have a unique case in the history of Theology, even throughout the whole intellectual history. A man of the highest rank and prodigious force, he conceals his identity not only of the centuries of credulity, but also of the critical domination of the modern era; it is precisely through this concealing that he has exercised his influence.” [1] H. Urs von Balthasar used these words to express the paradoxical situation of the 'Corpus' of writings attributed to Saint Paul's disciple in the Areopagus, a situation which has been described as being undoubtedly the 'Homeric' question of the Byzantine patristic [2]. But whoever be the author of the works transmitted under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite – Petrus from Iberia, Severus of Antioch, Sergios of Resaina, PetrusFullo, or even Dionysius the convert of Saint Paul or Dyonisius Exiguus [3] – it is important for us to remember that, having clearly demonstrated connections with Western Syria and with the Palestine of the first

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decades of the 6th century [4], the author gave attention to the problem of time in his advanced theological system of thinking.

The main contributions of the author of 'Aeropagite Corpus' upon the theological concept about time are to be found especially in one of the treatises that make up the 'Corpus', a treatise entitled 'On Divine Names'. I.P. Sheldon-Williams [5] summarizes the doctrine contained in 'On Divine Names': unspoken in itself, the Divine Good lets itself known to the intellect as Being, Life and Intelligence, to the soul as Wisdom, Power and Peace, and to the physical world as the Holy Spirit, Lord of Lords, King of Kings and God of Gods.

Endre von Ivanka [6] thinks that, although the treatise may seem rather chaotic at first glance, it can still be regarded as quite orderly: the treatise begins with an intelligible order with the triad of Proclus being-life-intelligence, which provides the basis for the following chapters: about Good (chapter 4), Being (chapter 5), Life (chapter 6) and Wisdom (chapter 6). We shall not deal with the following chapters of the Treatise 'On Divine Names' because, on the one hand, the order is not so clear – which made it difficult for von Ivanka to understand it – and on the other hand the Dionysian reflections on time can be found precisely in these first chapters. We are offered here a series of illustrations of the mutual relationship between the kataphatic and the apophatic theology – each chapter exposes what is revealed and then urges the mind to rise above, denying what is being revealed- offering at the same time the opportunity of a somehow parcelled exposure of various metaphysical topics which are fundamental in order to understand the universe in Dionysius' work [7].

2. God and Creation: supratemporality and temporality

Such a metaphysical issue is represented also by the issue of time. We find references in the fifth chapter of the areopagitical treatise 'On Divine Names' [8]. God's being 'the One who really exists' – that we can talk about only because of His 'emergence' – is stated here in a language that combines the kataphatic with the apophatic; in other words, we cannot say anything about the divine being, but only about and the divine energies in virtue of the divine energies to which the whole creation takes part: "And the naming of the One who is extends to all those which exist and above them" [8, p. 158]. After showing that this is true in terms of Goodness, Wisdom, Life and other attributes of God, Dionysius the Aeropagite analyzes the divine being in the light on the time-eternity relationship. If God is the cause of the existence of all creatures, He is also the cause of the existence of the time frame in which they subsist.

"He Who is" (Exodus 3.14) is "through power above the entire existence, He is the subsistent cause and the Creator of what exists, of existence, of hypostasis, of being, of nature, origin and measure of ages, substance of time and the age of those which exist, time for those which are done, the existence of those which are in any way, making of those which are made in any way" [8, p. 159]. Apostle Paul called God "King eternal" (I Timothy 1.17) because "God

does not exist in any way, but simply and indefinitely, unexpectedly having in Him the fact that He exists". The phrase 'unexpectedly' retains our attention because it wants to emphasize the very existence of God's eternity. And this supratemporality springs or, in other words, is the natural consequence of the existence of God since forever. For this reason he does not fall at all in the time axis of the three moments – past, present, future; on the contrary, if all the other elements of the creation are 'around Him' God can be, on the one hand, known only as the Cause of the whole existence and on the other hand, He is subtracting any attempt to define Him through the human categories of knowledge. Through forms which might be shocking at first, Dionysius the Areopagite does not even hesitate to declare that "God does not exist" – in the sense that He is beyond what we understand from the existence of the created nature. In terms of temporality, the repetition of God's identity with "the age of ages" clearly does not want to equalize Him with time, but to reinforce the idea of a God from eternity, "existing before all ages" [8, p. 159].

The importance of the things mentioned above is clear from the fact that the author of the Arepagite treatise keeps repeating and detailing the ideas given. The first key idea: God is the origin of time while existing beyond time, from eternity; then, all creation partakes of the attributes of Deity and subsists only by the will of God, the ratio being like that of 'the second' and 'the first', of course, the next logical consequence is that, being created, all creatures are subject to time limits, moreover, God's quality is not only that of a Creator but also that of a Provident of the world, i.e. He sustains creation not only in its beginnings, creating it from nothing (*ex nihilo*), but also in its time development. God "is age and beginning and measure of existence, before the being and the existence being the doer and the middle and the end of all". By analogy with the Sun shining over all, although they are different, Dionysius compares and unites them while keeping them alive, writing further on that God is therefore assigned "all the attributes and nothing from all, having all shape, all face, being without form, without beauty, having Himself anticipated, outside the relationship and high above all- the beginnings, middles and ends of all existences and enlightening them while being unblemished as the single supraunited cause" [8, p. 160].

"Thus the beginning and the end of all existences is The one Who pre-exists" concludes Dionysius the Areopagite. God is Alpha and Omega because, on the one hand, He is eternally in himself, in His being, and on the other hand, through His uncreated energies which are distinct but not separated from being, he is always 'emerging', constantly working in the world. This paradox is highlighted through an antinomian expression which is specific to the method of the theologized Areopagite: "He (God, n.n) is present everywhere and in everything as the One and the Same and He is everything and emerges to all, but also remains in Himself. And He stands and He moves, having neither beginning nor middle or end, and He is not one of the existences, nor is He anything in existence". Then, using the apophatic theology's method again, God is high above the transcendence of eternity and time, as The One Who 'is holding' the

time which measures the existence of the entire creation: “And nothing of what is eternal or what subsists in time fits Him, but He is above time and age and above those from age and time. For He is the age for Himself and for all the things which exist and He is the measure of all the things which are measured through Him and from Him.” [8, p. 161]

3. Nature of temporality

We also find reflections on time (related to eternity) in other chapters of ‘On Divine Names’: see for example chapter 8, Section 7, which denounces those who deny the divine justice, through which “everyone is given according to their worthiness” they do nothing but deny God as the cause of all things, causing a true ‘confusion’ in the order of the cosmos, in fact, they “say that the temporal things are eternal and the things moving through nature are immutable and eternal pleasures are transient: those of others” [8, p. 166-167]. But divine justice is truly justice, because “it gives according to the worthiness of each of the existences and saves its nature in its place and power”. However, most of the reflections on the nature and role of time are found in another chapter of this treatise, chapter 10. If in chapter 5 God’s absolute transcendence was expressed at the linguistic level by using contradictory expressions, the time-eternity relationship (relationship related to God, the ultimate cause of all the elements of creation) is rendered here by commenting some comparisons that are based on Old Testament texts.

The first idea that emerges from the reflections of the Areopagite Corpus’s author is that God is beyond time, both at its ‘beginning’ and ‘at its end’, and He is the One Who created time, sustains it - through the creation which prevails in time and the importance it has in the divine dispensation - and, will ultimately destroy it by returning all those created to Him as the Creator of all. This is the meaning of the word ‘all-ruling’ through which God is shown as “supporting and covering all, setting, founding, circumscribing and doing everything in Himself and making a living in Himself as from an all-ruling root and returning everything to Him, as in an all-ruling breast and holding them in Himself as in a comprehensive seat through a support that ensures all and is above them, not letting them fall out of it and be lost as removed from a comprehensive house” [8, p. 170].

Dionysius then resorts to some scriptural texts which come from Daniel 7.22, and 7.9. The expression ‘the Ancient of days’ is anthropomorphic and suggests that God deserves to be praised “for He is the age and time and He is before all days and before age and time”. Again we encounter the idea that God is the Creator and the sustainer of time which is also above it. This possibility of a god who can work in and on time, being simultaneously beyond it, is explained by the distinction between being and the uncreated divine energies (a distinction we also met at the previous Fathers such as Saint Gregory of Nyssa, but systematized by the author of the Areopagite Corpus) [9-11]. It is essential that God does not hold on to the created order, but He is its Creator, which gives

Him freedom in relation to the time limits - although we call Him 'time' and 'day' and 'age' and 'forever', He is "unchanged and motionless throughout the movement and by moving He remains in himself and the Creator of age and time and days" [8, p. 170].

What is then the meaning of the biblical terms 'old' and 'young', attributed to God in the Book of Prophet Daniel? Dionysius says that he shows Him "as being old from the beginning and also young, not aging". Or, "the oldest is the first in time, and the youngest is before the time number". As Father Stăniloae observed in a note, the meaning of those terms refer to God as cause and purpose of the whole world, a world that was based on the enthusiasm inspired by the Creator into union with Him (and this union takes place in time): "God is the oldest, being infinitely above all. But He is also the youngest, since He never ages and is what everything aims at. For what is our aim, is younger than us who move towards it. He never gets old, because He does not move, but He always remains Himself. He is the oldest, He moves, but He always remains Himself. He is the oldest, as the beginning of all movement, and also the youngest, being the unchanged aim that everything is moving at." [8, p. 243]

Particularly important in the Dionysian thinking is the delimitation of the significance of the nature of time starting from the distinction between being and the uncreated divine energies. Thus, although the Scripture sometimes refers to the elements of creation as eternal (see Psalms 23, 7, 9: "Lift up your eternal gates"), they should not be seen at all in terms of divine eternity (as an existing attribute of God). "As those which are called eternal and incorruptible and immortal and unchanged, are not absolutely undone and are truly eternal", says Dionysius, stating further on that these attributes of deity par excellence are only partly found in creation "the very old ones are often characterized as being eternal, and sometimes the entire length of our time is stated age, since the century is a characteristic of age, and lack of change is generally a measure of existence" [8, p. 170]. That some creatures may partially possess (in the sense of a gradual ontological difference) attributes of God is explained only through participation – in the case of time the acquiring of 'the incorruptible age' is nothing but 'age through participation'. We can now understand why throughout the Bible we sometimes find contradictory expressions like temporal world or eternal time, although the human being instinctively possesses the desire to categorically define the two perspectives – that of temporality and that of eternity – these expressions are not however illogical or irrational if understood this way: created in time, beings have eternity in the very purpose of their creation. They are kept in eternity by God's will (i.e. not through their being), participating in His eternal existence in different degrees or more precisely, sharing in 'part of the age/century, part of the time'. Only God unites time with eternity, in the sense that He is the cause of all time – and so, as I said, above or beyond it. Naturally, as the creator of time, God can and work in time or upon time – God the Creator is the One who changes (determines) time, according to His will and purpose. And being before and above age (Revelation 11.15), "and his kingdom is the kingdom of all ages" [8, p. 171].

4. The role of time

But what is the role of temporal duration in the ample Dionysian vision of the world? The whole world appears for Dionysius as the place of the manifestation of the divine glory which gives the being the possibility of ascending to divinity. Thus, “the life of the entire created universe is participation in Godhead” [12] is a sharing of gifts bestowed by the Creator for the deification of the whole created order.

In Dionysius’s conception there is an essential distinction between God *in Se* and God *ad extra*. It is about existence and the relationships inside the Trinity, specific to the three Persons, and the way they relate to creation. This leads us to events outside of Godhead that Dionysius presents with the term *proodos*, since “it is common and unified for the whole divinity, to be shared by and all that are shared” [8, p. 141]. The term generally means both divine movement towards the created order and hope for an anabasis of the creature to its source. From the very beginning, the creation has been given a push to return to God, for no creature closes in itself (this would mean self-destruction), but aspires to union with the Creator [13, 14].

When presenting the divine immanence, Dionysius calls for another term which is synonymous with the *proodos*, namely *dynamis*. The divine powers or energies are not reduced emissions of divine nature, which would decrease from the unity of this nature to the lowest being which was created, but another way through which God is manifested in creation. In ‘the Celestial Hierarchy’, *dynameis* is placed in close contact with *theosis*: “the elementary divine power permeates all and unrestrainedly passes through everything and is not shown again, not only as one that is higher than being, but also as one that secretly passes through all its providential powers” [8, p. 32]. The divine powers appear as ‘potencies’ of our communion with God towards deification.

The divine ideas or models are not contained in the divine Being, they are not the divine Being, but different principles by which the *dynameis* manifests God in creation. Calling them predeterminations or divine will, Dionysius clearly distinguishes them from the divine Being, putting them in close conjunction with the powers by which God is omnipresent, creating all and manifesting in all [15].

The divine paradigms appear to us as causes (*aitiai*) and beginnings (*archai*) of things, pre-existing in the divine powers, by which God can be known as the cause of the Universe [8, p. 138]. Causality has a very special meaning here; it is manifestation: the imperfect becomes perfect. Effects have, as far as possible, the images of the causes without having in them a likeness, for reasons appear superior to effects. If the relationship between cause and effect can be called manifestation, then the relationship between effects and their causes is participation (*methexis*) or imitation (*mēmesis*). Being divine will (*theiathelimitata*), paradigms are fulfilled by imitation through which the creatures are and tend to be what they should be, participating to the divine

models by the way bestowed to them. They are what every creature aims at and the determination of each and one of them [15].

The divine predeterminations do not introduce any duality in the unity and simplicity of the divine powers. They are the divine attributes perceived in their relationship with creation. Such as creation reveals aspects of the unknowable God, as paradigms they are archetypes of the creatural reality, forms determined by God's foreknowledge (Pronoia) "starting from existence, from procession and goodness, and pervading all and filling it all with its own existence and enjoying all, it has all the things in itself, meeting them in a simplicity which is beyond all duality" [8, p. 161].

What would be the role of these divine paradigms? It is to reveal God so that we can be lifted up to union with Him, 'that by knowing these we ascend to the cause of all'. There is a synergistic meeting of two wills: freedom of creature and predetermination that addresses every being. (Another term that the author of the Areopagite Corpus uses to express the ad extra manifestation of God is *isenergeia*, most often found in conjunction with *proodos*: "For it should be pondered that he is moving in a pious way, not through movement or change or alternation [...], but through the providential emergence (*proodos*) and work (energy) of all existences" [8, p. 161].)

Dionysius the Areopagite repeatedly insists that Godhead remains outside any limits on speech, being unknown, ineffable and incommunicable. At the same time, he says that the only access to the 'divine darkness' is the creature's ecstasy: "For by the clean emergence of you and of all, absolute and not to the relationship with them, you will be lifted to the radiance of the divine darkness, removing all and protruding from all" [8, p. 247]. There is an emergence of the creature, a lift to the limits of the created nature, an appropriation to the unspoken and unknown things, "by its union with our powerful, rational and understanding work" [8, p. 135].

In this presentation Dionysius is at the convergence between Christianity and Neo-Platonism [16, 17], since both doctrines require an emergence, an ecstasy of being, in view of getting closer to divinity and uniting with It. In Dionysius' case we can talk about a correlation and therefore a Christianization of the Neoplatonic doctrine with the fundamental Christian truth. (There is every reason to believe, with Andre von Ivanka, that Dionysius wished to Provide a Christian alternative to Neo-Platonism [6, p. 263, 285-286].)

The key insight is given precisely by the term *ekstasis*. If the created minds which are surrounding Godhead in the divine darkness are nothing but ecstatic creature, in Its relationship with them deity is nothing but manifestations ad extra, God Who comes out of Himself. In other words it can be seen that the Dionysian *ekstasis* is mutual [18]. The term appears in two passages of the Areopagite Corpus: describing the process by which divinity enters into relationship with creation, it is believed that It "comes down to what is in all, not protruding in its ecstatic power above the being" [8, p. 151]; secondly it seems to refer more to divine transcendence than to Its immanence (and here we can say there is a close connection between Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa) [19].

Finally, through the term *ekbasis* he means the action by which God creates, i.e. the “ecstasy of His Being” [8, p. 161].

The Dionysian eros appears as the principle which is moving all from God towards creation and returns them to the Creator: it “is a single simple power that moves from itself to a certain unitary combination, from Good in itself to the last of existences, and from it again through it all to the good in itself and through itself, circularly returning to itself, being continually carried out (in a circle) identical with itself” [8, p. 151-152]. If eros has its own beginning in God, its end should be sought here, too. In its movement to achieve its own logos, the Creature is forced to surpass itself, being, like Saint Paul, “in possession of the divine eros and partaker of the ecstatic power” [8, p. 150]. This love is ecstatic in Dionysius’ writings: he who loves is taken out of himself and focuses his being on the object of his love. It is an ecstatic love because it unites. He who loves is united to his beloved who is for him a manifestation of beauty. But it also appears as a proniatory (*erōspronoetikos*) love is an overflow of divine goodness as the source of all [20-22].

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the central image of the Dionysian thinking is that of a dynamic universe. Movement, a notion that embraces change and progress is the vivid expression of the created being, for there is no creature without it, existence itself is movement, change in accordance with logos/analogy, this a continual process to achieve their own perfection. Deviation from this movement is considered failure, sin, a violation of the divine order and harmony (Dionysius understands sin as a “movement of desire” and the origin of evil is caused by “an erratic and false movement”) [8, p. 155-156; 23; 24]. On the contrary, the fulfilment of this plan is a true ‘coming out of itself’ (*ekstasis*) by which the soul is torn and lifted to union with God “through the clean coming out of yourself and of all, insubordinate to the relationships with them, and absolute, you will be lifted to the radiance of the divine darkness, removing and coming out of all” [8, p. 247]. It is about an ecstasy of love, union and deification. (Dionysius makes no distinction between eros and agape. Though he sometimes thinks that eros is more divine than agape, he defines them both as “a power that unites, binds together and produces an indissoluble fusion in beautiful and good” [8, p. 150].)

All those created aim to unite with their Creator, Who possesses the attribute of eternity (being not only without a beginning but also without an end) and can be called ‘eternal’ from a temporal perspective. This unity is achieved within time, the one which offers the possibility of participation to the divine attributes, including eternity, not being about a pantheistic conception, it can therefore be said that they ‘unite in them time and eternity’ which makes time to contain eternity; the significance of this comes from participating to the eternal reasons (energies) of God, every human being is called to continue along the path of union with the Creator, a path which is (re)opened through the Incarnation of God’s eternal Son, the only Mediator of the natural dialogue between creator and creation [25]. Unlike the human world, the angelic one ‘is

more eternal' because angels do not grow up within/with time or in time, but this does not detract from the dignity of man, since he can ascend to the dimension of eternity through resurrection. Possessing the 'memory of time' in that he lived as a man, God – through Jesus Christ – will establish His kingdom forever and ever, and this age will contain in itself all the virtues accumulated by the human generations over time, transfiguring and amplifying them by including them in the life of Trinitarian love [26, 27]. Simultaneously, however, those who have stubbornly refused dialogue with God over time will live eternity in the darkness of their enmity and selfishness.

This process, Dionysius shows us, is partially made here and now and it will be complete, after the angels' model in the age to come, "and when we are incorruptible and immortal and we get to a condition which is similar to Christ's Blessed condition, by the Scripture, we will always be with the Lord (I Thessalonians 4.17), filled with the holy sight, by the divine revelation that will surround us with the shining of His rays like disciples in the divine Transfiguration. [...] Then we will be equal with the angels, as the truth of the Scripture says, and we will be sons of God, being sons of the resurrection (Luke 20.36)." [8, p. 137] It is therefore the result of a deification progress started in this world and perfected in the world to come, a likeness to God according to the ability given by God to everyone and perfected by working with Him [28].

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