

Hierarchy in the Divine Names : “Dionysius the Areopagite” (Iakovos Menelaou, MTh & MPhil)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



The Dionysian corpus dates to the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries and it comprises of the following four works: the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology*[1]. The identity of the author remains an enigma and all we have is his pseudonym. He became known as Pseudo-Dionysius or Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite[2].



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Hierarchy constitutes a prominent place in the whole work of Dionysius. He mentions it several times and gives the following meaning: “Hierarchy is a sacred order, knowledge and activity, which is being assimilated to likeness with God as much as possible...” And that is the purpose of his hierarchy; the assimilation and union with God[3].

Hierarchy is supposed to enable beings to be as alike as possible to God and to be at one with him. It makes all members to be images of God in all aspects and make them imitate God, in order to receive purification, light and understanding from those above them in the hierarchy[4].

In Dionysius’ hierarchy, union with God is fully realized in all stages of the ladder, and this completeness is personal. There is a double movement which dominates hierarchically through the relation of God with creatures. The former reveals his power to all beings and the latter rises toward deification, by exceeding the

manifestations of God in creation[5]. The Godhead remains hidden after this manifestation. As a result, the image of God-man is not the central point in Dionysius' hierarchy. The hierarchical system of Dionysius is sharp and harshly coloured[6].

The hierarchies stand as intercessors for the union with God and contribute to deification by their existence. They are demonstrators of the divine glory and a brilliant theophany[7]. Hierarchies are the creation, the cosmos, and intelligent creatures who are granted with free choice[8].

In the *Divine Names*, Dionysius deals with the fact that God remains unknown, but He made himself known to us with his names which are revealed in the Bible. Although Dionysius uses a Platonic ontology, he presents it in the way of biblical theonyms. 'Procession', 'abiding' and 'return' are the three main principles of the whole work[9].

Dionysius describes the hierarchy of divine activities in the *Divine Names*, based on degrees of inclusion. Thus, Being is higher than Life, because it includes all beings and 'extends farther'[10]. On the contrary, Life extends only to living things. Also, Life is superior to Wisdom, since in the latter we have only logical living beings. This could be characterized as uncreated hierarchy, in which all the divine activities are nothing more than specifications of being. In addition, this being incorporates all the specific activities in itself[11]. But as we will see in the next paragraphs, the name Good is on the highest level of this scale system.

Consequently, the law of inclusion and manifestation is the one which organizes the created hierarchies. If there is any element which maintains a more specific activity, it includes all the other activities which are more general. So, every higher level not only exceeds but it also includes all the lower levels; and this makes it superior to any other[12].

[To be continued]

[1]Bernard McGinn (ed. and intr.), *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York, 2006), p. 283.

[2]Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: a Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (Oxford, 1993), p. 3.

[3]Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London, 2001), p. 38.

[4]Arthur, A., R., *Pseudo-Dionysius: the Development and Purpose of the Angelic Hierarchy in Sixth Century Syria* (Ashgate, 1988), p. 64.

[5]Vladimir Lossky, 'Darkness and Light in the Knowledge of God', *In the Image and Likeness of God* (New York, 1974), p. 42.

[6]Golitzin, A., "'A Contemplative and a Liturgist": Father George Florovsky on the Corpus Dionysiacum', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, p. 138.

[7]Louth, *Denys*, p. 106.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 108.

[9]Chr. Schafer, 'The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite. An Introduction to the Structure and the Content of the Treatise "On the Divine Names"', *Reviews/Vigiliae Christinae* 61 (2007), p. 116.

[10]Eric Justin Perl, 'Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39/3-4, 1994, p. 348.

[11]*Ibid.*, p. 349.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 349.