

**FROM THE *CHALDEAN ORACLES* TO THE *CORPUS DIONYSIACUM*:
THEURGY BETWEEN THE THIRD AND SIXTH CENTURIES**

Charles M. Stang, Harvard Divinity School (stang@hds.harvard.edu)

Abstract: This essay traces the journey of “theurgy” from its original, pagan associations with The Chaldean Oracles in the second century, to the Christian mystical theology of “Pseudo”- Dionysius the Areopagite in the early sixth century. The essay begins by inquiring into the theory and practice of theurgy as expressed in the fragmentary Oracles, and argues that the surviving sources do not permit us to draw firm conclusions. The essay then moves quickly over the Neoplatonic reception of theurgy, from Plotinus to Porphyry to Iamblichus. Iamblichus’ theory of theurgy is especially significant for the subsequent Christian reception. The essay ends by examining the use of the term “theurgy” in the Corpus Dionysiaca, and argues that while the author inherits the form of Iamblichean theurgy, he freights it with new content by figuring the Incarnation of Christ as the preeminent theurgy or “work of God.”

Between the second and sixth centuries, “theurgy” or “god-work” (*θεουργία*) made a remarkable journey from its original, pagan associations with *The Chaldean Oracles* and their purported author(s), the so-called *Juliani*, to the Christian mystical theology of “Pseudo”-Dionysius the Areopagite. In between, theurgy was hindered by at least one skeptic (Porphyry) and helped by at least one enthusiast (Iamblichus). But partly due to the fragmentary remains of both the original (con)texts and transmission and partly due to the opacity of all of the relevant sources, fragmentary or whole, it has proven difficult to retrace this remarkable journey with any degree of precision. Often what militates against precision is the tendency to use one stage along the way as the lens through which to view other stages. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to fill in the many *lacunae* in the record and deliver a relatively intelligible, continuous narrative. The disadvantage of such an approach is that it tends to gloss over such *lacunae* and the questions they inevitably raise, specifically whether there are important *discontinuities* in the theory and practice of theurgy over these centuries.

In what follows, I will attempt to chart a middle course between these two approaches in order to explain how an early sixth-century Christian author inherited and innovated on the tradition of pagan theurgy. In the early part of this essay, I will attempt to infer

the theory and practice of theurgy from what remains of *The Chaldean Oracles*—and more or less only from that. Here I will inflect *discontinuity* ever so slightly, as I argue that the surviving fragments do not permit us to draw firm conclusions about theurgy in its original context. I resist the temptation to use later, philosophical sources (e. g. Iamblichus) as mortar to fill in the cracks of our limited understanding. The middle of this essay will quickly survey the early Neoplatonic reception of theurgy, covering the period from Plotinus to Iamblichus. Finally, in the last part of this essay, I consider the case of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, a sixth-century collection of pseudonymous texts, in which the vocabulary of theurgy is woven into a Christian mystical theology that would come to exert a tremendous influence in both the East and the West. Here I will inflect *continuity*, as I argue that Dionysius inherits and leaves largely intact the *theory* but not the *practice* of theurgy as articulated by Iamblichus. Although he thoroughly Christianizes the *content*, making “theurgy” equivalent to Christ and good Christians “theurgists” of a sort, Dionysius inherits from Iamblichus the *form* of theurgy, wherein we are called to become conduits of a divine energy always on offer, and finds it an especially apt description of the Christian life.

The Chaldean Oracles

The tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda* (nos. 433 and 434), introduces a second-century father and son team who have come to be known as the *Juliani*: Julian *pater*, “the Chaldean,” wrote four books about demons; Julian *filius*, “the Theurgist,” wrote oracles in verse (λόγια δ’ἐπῶν) as well as “theurgical” and “ritual” treatises (*theourgika* and *telestika*). The *logia* or “oracles” here attributed to Julian *filius* are thought to be none other than *The Chaldean Oracles* that came to be regarded by the later Neoplatonists as authoritative revelation on a par with Plato’s *Timaeus*. Franz Cumont famously dubs the *Oracles* the “Bible of the last neo-Platonists.”¹ These hexameter verse *Oracles* have unfortunately been largely lost; what remains of them are fragmentary quotes in the works of later admiring Neoplatonists.² One such admirer is Proclus (412-485), who thrice remarks that the *Oracles* were “handed down by the gods” (θεοπαράδοτος).³ This has led some scholars to wonder whether the *Oracles* were transmitted through some sort of medium, with *pater* perhaps summoning the soul of Plato to speak through *filius*.⁴ In any case, such speculation aside, we cannot be certain of the authorship—who or how—of the *Oracles*.

But what account of the theory and/or practice of theurgy can be gleaned from the *Oracles* themselves? Unfortunately, the term “theurgy” (θεουργία) never appears in the

¹ F. Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago, 1911), p. 279.

² For an *en face* edition, Greek and English, see R. Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden, 1989). Hereafter fragments are cited by number from this edition.

³ Majercik, fragments 146, 150, and 169.

⁴ See H.-D. Saffrey, “Les Néoplatoniciens et les Oracles Chaldaïques,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 26 (1981), pp. 209-225 at 225; E.R. Dodds, “Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947), pp. 55-69 at 56.

hexameter verses, and “theurgist” (*θεουργός*) only once. In those framing passages that introduce the direct oracular quotations, “theurgist” appears often, but never “theurgy.” The single most solid testimony for the word “theurgist” from the *Oracles* themselves, then, is fragment 153: “For the theurgists do not fall into the herd which is subject to Destiny.”⁵ Cosmic corroboration of this bipartite anthropology (theurgists vs. herd) can be found in the quotation reported by Olympiodorus in fragment 138: “But he (Plato) holds that the souls of the theurgists do not remain forever in the intelligible order, but that they, too, descend into generation, concerning whom the oracle says: ‘... in the angelic order.’”⁶ Olympiodorus is commenting on Plato’s *Phaedo* 72b1-3 and suggesting that the post-mortem souls of theurgists, whose proper home is “in the angelic order,” are not *compelled* to reincarnate, but *choose* to do so in order to lead others up and out of material imprisonment (*anagôgê*).⁷ Still, this tells us very little about the theory or practice of theurgy, other than that the practitioners thereof—theurgists, *bodhisattvas* of the Mediterranean world—were very special indeed. If we follow the scholarly consensus that Julian *filius* actually coined and then laid claim to the title “theurgist,” we can conclude from whence he thought his own soul had come and whither it was going.

But what of the practice of theurgy in the *Oracles*, even if it is not named as such? The challenge is simply that “no systematic presentation of Chaldean theurgic ritual is preserved in any of the relevant sources.”⁸ In fragment 133, Proclus equates the theurgist with the priest (*ἱερεὺς*). If Proclus is right that the theurgist is a priest, over what sort of rites does he preside? Ruth Majercik gives us a plausible list, although each of them has scant attestation in the surviving fragments: “conjunction” (*σύστασις*), in which the theurgist established contact (but not union) with a particular god or spirit by means of the invocation of *nomina barbara* or *voces mysticae*; conjuring a particular god or spirit to deliver a prophecy, either by animating a statue (*τελεστική*) or “binding” a god to a human medium and then “releasing” that god once the prophecy had been secured; using special objects and instruments, often for apotropaic use, including amulets, sacred stones, and even animal sacrifices.⁹ As Majercik admits, this list would not seem to distinguish theurgy from magic, and indeed scholars often appeal to the magical papyri to flesh out the practice of theurgy—but at the risk of collapsing any distinction between the two.

Some scholars attempt to maintain a distinction between theurgy and magic by appeal to its theory rather than its practice. Even if theurgists *look* like they are doing magic, this argument goes, they have a different *goal* in mind:

⁵ Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, 106, 107, 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, fragment 138.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 193.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 25-30. For another helpful reconstruction of theurgic practices, see G. Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism,” in J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs and P.V. McCracken (eds), *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and In Conflict* (New York, 1989), pp. 185-225.

Is theurgy simply a form of “white” or “good” magic, in contrast to the “black” or “evil” magic associated with the name *goêteia*, as some scholars have suggested? Yes and no. Theurgy certainly appropriates many of the techniques familiar to the magician, but its purpose is quite different: whereas “common” magic has a “profane” goal (e.g. in its “white” form, influencing a lover or affecting the weather), theurgy has a specific religious or salvific end, namely, the purification and salvation of the soul (see, e.g. Iamblichus, *De myst.*, I.12: τῆς ψυχῆς σωτήριον).¹⁰

Following Majercik, let us take up the question of the purpose or goal of theurgy. In fragment 48, Proclus quotes from the *Oracles* proper and then adds that “the gods counsel the theurgists to unite (*συνάπτειν*) themselves with God by means of this triad.” On the basis of this fragment, it is often said that the goal of theurgy is union with the god(s). The problem, of course, is that this “union” is not attested in the fragments themselves, but only in Proclus’ explanatory glosses, here and also in fragments 4, 122, and 126 (*συνάπτω*). The same goes for another common term for union, *ἔνωσις*: the *Oracles* do not use it and while Proclus uses it twice in introducing an oracular quotation, in neither case does it refer to what happens between a theurgist and the god(s).¹¹ In short, the surviving *Oracles* themselves provide scant evidence for the claim that the goal of theurgy is union with the god(s). *Suda* 434, however, tells us that Julian *filius* accompanied Marcus Aurelius on a campaign and that when the Romans were suffering from thirst Julian “suddenly created and summoned up dark-colored clouds and let loose heavy rain along with thunder and lightning bolts one after another. And this (they say) Julian worked through by means of some wisdom [*καὶ τοῦτο σοφία τινὲ ἐργάσασθαι Ἰουλιανόν*].” Are miracles such as this the goal of theurgy for the *Juliani*? If so, this is something more mercenary, something closer to Majercik’s “white” magic. My point is not to settle the matter, but only to note that the *Oracles* themselves do not offer up an obvious account of the goal of theurgy. What we have, on the one hand, is a fifth-century philosopher’s gloss on the goal of theurgy—namely union with the god(s)—and a tenth-century Byzantine legend about Julian’s wonder-working in the service of the Roman army. No doubt the intervening Neoplatonic reception is influencing Proclus here, just as Christian suspicion of pagan miracle-men is influencing the *Suda*.

Much of the impasse stems from the fundamental ambiguity in the word “theurgy” itself. If “theurgy” (*θεουργία*) is a conjunction of the phrase “the work of God” (*ἔργον θεοῦ*), then there are two obvious interpretations. If *θεοῦ* is understood as an objective genitive, then theurgy is the “work” that the theurgist does “on the gods”, that is, he influences or even compels them to do whatever he wishes. If *θεοῦ* is understood as a subjective genitive, then theurgy is the work that the gods themselves do, presumably in and through the theurgist, in which case he becomes a sort of vessel for divine action. The problem is that the *Oracles* do not clearly settle the issue, as we have seen. In the absence of a clear answer from the *Oracles* themselves, scholars have

¹⁰ Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, pp. 22-23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, fragments 167, 168.

looked to adjacent traditions. Those who are suspicious of theurgy tend to assimilate it to overtly manipulative magical traditions and figure it along the objective axis. Those who are more generous to theurgy tend to assimilate it to the later Neoplatonists' theories of theurgy and figure it along the subjective axis. Some prefer to see two threads within the larger theurgic tradition, one focused on magical manipulation and the other on deifying union with the gods. The history of scholarship on theurgy can be plotted along this objective *vs.* subjective genitive spectrum.

The Neoplatonic Reception

One thing is certain: whatever the theory and practice of theurgy was for the *Juliani* and the *Oracles*, the theurgy that Christianity inherited through Pseudo-Dionysius depended in large part on the Neoplatonists' interpretations of this tradition. The standard version of the narrative figures Plotinus (205-270) as disinterested in theurgy as in all forms of magic, Porphyry as remaining loyal to Plotinus by rebuking theurgy, and Iamblichus bucking the trend and thereby establishing a new one, after which Neoplatonists are all theurgists of one stripe or another. This narrative is, in its broad brush strokes, correct. Porphyry reports a now-famous episode in which a friend of Plotinus invites him to join him on his sacrificial rounds at the local temples, to which invitation Plotinus responds, "[The gods] ought to come to me, not I to them."¹²

Although even Porphyry admits that he does not know how to understand this line from his teacher—perhaps it was meant in good humor—it has come to represent the prevailing view that Plotinus was at the very least disinterested in, and perhaps even hostile to, cultic practices, magic, and, so it is inferred, theurgy. Plotinus never mentions theurgy as such, but he does acknowledge and give credence to magic, if only as a technique that can influence the lower, irrational self.¹³ Whatever we make of the mid-twentieth-century debates as to whether Plotinus was more or less amenable to magic, we cannot glean much about theurgy proper from the *Enneads* or Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*.¹⁴

The proper Neoplatonic reception of theurgy begins with Porphyry (c.234-c.305) and runs through Damascius (480-c.550), the last *diadochus* of the Academy in Athens. Space precludes a detailed account of this reception, so I will confine myself to the early period, up to and including Iamblichus. Porphyry is widely regarded as the great

¹² Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 10.

¹³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.43

¹⁴ In "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," E.R. Dodds claimed that Plotinus was neither a magician nor a theurgist. Philip Merlan took issue with Dodds in "Plotinus and Magic," *Isis* 44 (1953), pp. 341-48. A.H. Armstrong, however, supported Dodds in "Was Plotinus a Magician?" *Phronesis* 1 (1955), pp. 73-9. Luck sides with Armstrong and considers the debate "closed"—see Luck, "Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism," p. 205. And yet there is evidence that the debate is still open. See the recent work of Zeke Mazur, "Unio Magica, Part 1: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus' Mysticism," *Dionysius* 21 (2003), pp. 23-52, and "Unio Magica, Part 2: Plotinus, Theurgy and the Question of Ritual," *Dionysius* 22 (2004), pp. 29-56.

skeptic of theurgy, who, following Plotinus, figures it as no better or worse than magic. Plotinus insists that the human *nous* is in unbroken, if slumbering, union with the divine *Nous*, the second hypostasis of his so-called ‘Trinity’: *One-Mind-Soul*. As a result of this union, the *nous* is not ultimately conditioned by its embodiment, and can ascend to its divine counterpart through such concentrated internal efforts as Porphyry attributes to Plotinus in his *Vita*. Whereas the standard narrative would put Porphyry clearly on the side of Plotinus, and label the both of them ‘rationalists,’ Georg Luck argues that the record testifies, on the contrary, that Porphyry equivocates on the matter of theurgy, never rejecting it outright but consistently “wondering whether it is really essential and whether it achieves what its supporters claim.”¹⁵ In his *City of God*, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) calls Porphyry to task for precisely this, “maintaining two contradictory positions, and wavering between a superstition . . . and a philosophical standpoint.”¹⁶ While Augustine faults Porphyry’s general vacillation on the matter of theurgy, he praises him for his *Letter to Anebo*, where the philosopher exposes theurgy as a means of compelling the gods—who are of course not gods, for Augustine, but merely fallen angels or demons—to accomplish some mercenary end.¹⁷ Unfortunately the *Letter to Anebo* survives only in fragments, but from what remains it is clear that Porphyry does find it astonishing that at least some theurgists feel that they can compel the gods to do their bidding.¹⁸ Apart from this affront to divine impassibility, Porphyry is also disgusted with the fact that certain theurgists put their art to petty purposes, including one theurgist who thwarted a rival’s efforts to ply his trade.¹⁹ Porphyry’s complaints would seem to give some credence to the notion that theurgy was, at least in the third century, a rather broad tradition, including mercenary and mystical threads.

Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo* roused his student and fellow Syrian Iamblichus of Chalcis (c.250-c.330) to pen what is regarded as the masterpiece of theurgical theory, *On the Mysteries*.²⁰ Iamblichus offers an unabashedly mystical account of theurgy. Recall that Majercik cites *On the Mysteries* I.12 as evidence for the fact that theurgy has, as opposed to profane magic, “a specific religious or salvific end.” Whether or not citing Iamblichus helps to explain the end(s) of theurgy according to *The Chaldean Oracles* and the *Juliani*, I.12 does make clear that for Iamblichus theurgy is “a method of salvation for the soul.” Earlier in that same section, he is keen to rebut Porphyry’s charges that theurgists presume to compel the gods in any way:

For the illumination that comes about as a result of invocations is self-revelatory (*αὐτοφανής*) and self-willed (*αὐτοθελής*), and is far removed from being drawn down by force, but rather proceeds to manifestation by reason of its own divine energy and perfection (*διὰ τῆς θείας τε ἐνεργείας καὶ τελειότητος*), and is as far superior to

¹⁵ Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism,” p. 209.

¹⁶ Augustine, *De civitate dei*, X.9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, X.11.

¹⁸ A.R. Sodano (ed. and trans.), *Porfirio: Lettera ad Anebo* (Naples, 1958).

¹⁹ Augustine, *De civitate dei*, X.11.

²⁰ E.C. Clarke, J. Dillon, and J.P. Hershbell (eds. and trans.), *Iamblichus: De mysteriis* (Leiden, 2004).

(human) voluntary motion as the divine will of the Good is to the life of ordinary deliberation and choice. It is by virtue of such will, then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon theurgists, summoning up their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, even while still in the body, to detach themselves from their bodies, and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.²¹

The agency in all the work of theurgy is, according to Iamblichus, always divine. In scholarly terms, then, Iamblichus insists that the *theo-* in “theurgy” be understood as a *subjective* genitive, that the gods are always at work “disposing the human mind to participation in the gods.”²² No one has argued more eloquently for this reading of Iamblichus than Gregory Shaw, who is understandably astonished that modern scholars are still keen to paint Iamblichean theurgy as manipulative and mercenary magic.²³

Despite the disinterest of Plotinus and the intermittent suspicions of Porphyry, Iamblichus seems to have won the day. After him, Neoplatonists are consistently enthusiastic about theurgy and come to regard *The Chaldean Oracles* as divine revelation—in Cumont’s words, a “bible” of sorts along with Plato’s *Timaeus*. Furthermore, at least in the realm of theurgic theory, Iamblichus’ successors follow his lead and regard “god-work” as the channeling of a divine energy always on offer, and not as a means to compel the gods to do our bidding. He is, in short, the great theoretical reformer of theurgy and renders it in such a way that it can be easily adapted to a Christian mystical theology.

Dionysius the Areopagite

Given this Chaldean and Neoplatonic lineage, it is at first rather surprising that the early sixth-century pseudonymous author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* places theurgy at the very center of his theological enterprise. This collection of texts appears rather suddenly on the Syrian scene in the early sixth century and, despite some early suspicions, is soon regarded as the authentic literary corpus of Dionysius the Areopagite, the first-century Athenian judge who converts to Christianity upon hearing Paul’s speech to the court of the Areopagus, as recorded in Acts 17. The *Corpus Dionysiacum* (hereafter *CD*) is comprised of four “treatises” and ten “letters,” although the distinction between these two sets is hard to maintain since all of them are framed as letters to other first-century Christian principals. Although the order of the *CD* is a contested issue, I will follow a predominant Greek manuscript tradition, in which the two hierarchical treatises, *The Celestial Hierarchy* [*CH*] and *The*

²¹ Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, I.12.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ G. Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7.4 (1999), pp. 573-99. I am indebted to Shaw for my earlier discussion of the subjective vs. objective genitive framing of theurgy. He has also authored what is in my mind the best book on Iamblichus in English, *Theurgy and the Soul* (University Park, PA, 1995).

Ecclesiastical Hierarchy [EH] lead, followed by *The Divine Names* [DN] and *The Mystical Theology* [MT], concluding with the *Epistles*.²⁴ ‘Theurgy’ and its cognate ‘theurgical’ appear more than ten times in the *CH*, more than thirty times in the *EH*, five times in the *DN*, and once in *Epistle 9*.²⁵ Despite these many appeals to the vocabulary of theurgy, there is no evidence of the creep of theurgical practices into the descriptions of the sacraments performed in the Christian liturgy, as recorded in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In other words, none of the rites themselves recorded in that treatise would raise any eyebrows among his contemporary Christian readers (“illumination” = baptism; “synaxis” = Eucharist; “myron” = anointment). Having said that, his *description* of these rites might indeed raise eyebrows, especially if not primarily because of his appeal to the vocabulary of pagan theurgy. But if we inquire further into this vocabulary, we see that it is not the practice but the *theory* of theurgy that has so significantly influenced Dionysius.

Before we turn our attention to these instances and infer from them how Dionysius is inheriting and innovating on the pagan theurgical tradition, I wish to pause and survey some important scholarly contributions. In 1895, two German scholars demonstrated beyond a doubt that the author of the *CD* borrowed widely from Proclus and so was no first-century Athenian disciple of Paul but a sixth-century pseudepigrapher *au courant* with late Neoplatonism.²⁶ The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of studies devoted to assessing the nature and extent of Dionysius’—now *Pseudo-Dionysius*’—debt to late Neoplatonism, especially Proclus. His debt to Iamblichus was comparatively marginalized until Paul Rorem’s groundbreaking study of biblical and liturgical symbolism in the *CD*.²⁷ Although Rorem is rightly credited with acknowledging the full scope of Iamblichus’s influence on the *CD*, especially as regards theurgy, Rorem also applies the objective *vs.* subjective genitive distinction in order to distinguish sharply between Iamblichean (pagan) and Dionysian (Christian) theurgy: “The Pseudo-Areopagite transformed the term ‘theurgy’ from the objective genitive of *The Chaldean Oracles* and Iamblichus, i.e. ‘the work of God’ as a work addressed toward the gods, to a subjective genitive suggesting God’s own work.”²⁸

In this way, Rorem takes what had been a longstanding rule by which to distinguish between magic and theurgy, or between mercenary and mystical forms of theurgy,

²⁴ B.R. Suchla (ed. and trans.), *Corpus Dionysiacaum I* (Berlin, 1990); G. Heil and A.M. Ritter (eds and trans), *Corpus Dionysiacaum II* (Berlin, 1991). English translations of the *CD* are my own.

²⁵ Based on the Index in *Corpus Dionysiacaum II* for *θεουργία*, *θεουργικός*, and *θεουργός*. In the four instances in which Dionysius uses the term *θεουργός*, he uses it as an adjective, following Iamblichus, and not as a noun meaning “theurgist.” See LSJ “*θεουργός*” III.

²⁶ H. Koch, “Proklos als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen,” *Philologus* 54 (1895), pp. 438-54; J. Stiglmayr, “Der Neuplatoniker Proklos als Vorlage des sog. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre von Übel,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895), pp. 253-73 and 721-48.

²⁷ P. Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto, 1984).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14. This critical reading of Rorem owes much to Gregory Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite.”

and uses it to distinguish between pagan and Christian theurgies. Andrew Louth takes up Rorem's rule so as to guard readers of the *CD* from being "so hasty as to suppose that [Dionysius] means by [theurgy] just what the Neoplatonists did."²⁹ Here is a case, however, in which haste might have proven helpful, at least more helpful than a preemptive distinction of genitives that serves to inoculate Dionysius from, to borrow Harold Bloom's phrase, the anxiety of influence. As we have already seen, whatever theurgy may have meant to the *Juliani*, for Iamblichus theurgy is undoubtedly the work the gods are doing and have always been doing, and which we can access and channel through the proper rituals. In other words, if ever theurgy *was* mercenary rather than mystical, an objective rather than a subjective genitive—and it is by no means certain that it ever was—Iamblichus reformed its theory such that Dionysius could plausibly place it at the centre of his theological enterprise. To see how he does so, and whether he departs from Iamblichus in any significant sense, we should now return to the *CD*.

The first mention of theurgy comes in *CH* 4.4, where Dionysius remarks that John the Baptist was to serve as a prophet of "the human theurgy of Jesus" (τῆς ... ἀνδρικήσ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ θεουργίας).³⁰ This phrase makes clear that for Dionysius the preeminent "work of God" is none other than the Incarnation. John of Scythopolis, who wrote the first *scholia* on the *CD* in the middle of the sixth century, appreciates this fact when he comments on this phrase:

The Incarnation of Christ is a human theurgy, in which God while in the flesh did divine things. Observe how he here speaks of the 'human theurgy' of Jesus. Through the word 'human' he shows that he became a complete human; and through the word 'theurgy', that he is both God and human, the same [person] effecting the divine signs.³¹

While John, a Chalcedonian loyalist if ever there was one, may be inclined to discern an orthodox Christological formulation latent in Dionysius' words, he also confirms that the primary sense of theurgy for Dionysius, the preeminent work of God, is none other than Christ's Incarnation. In *EH* 3.3.4 Dionysius uses the same phrase in the plural, "the human theurgies of Jesus," as a description of the gospels.³² Several lines later, he says that the purpose of the Psalms or "divine odes" is "to sing all the words and works of God" (τὰς θεολογίας τε και θεουργίας ἀπάσας ὑμνήσαι).³³ In the next section, speaking of how the New follows on the Old Testament, he writes that "... the one [Old Testament] affirmed the theurgies of Jesus, as to come; but the other [New Testament], as accomplished; and as that [OT] described the truth in figures, this [NT] showed it present. For the accomplishment, within this [NT], of the prediction of that [OT], established the truth, and theurgy is the consummation of

²⁹ A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London, 1989), pp. 73-4.

³⁰ *CH* 4.4 181B (*CD II* 23,3).

³¹ *SchCH* 57.2, in P. Rorem and J.C. Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford, 1998), p. 156.

³² *EH* 3.3.4 429C (*CD II* 83,20).

³³ *EH* 3.3.4 429D (*CD II* 84,2-3).

theology” (καὶ ἔστι τῆς θεολογίας ἡ θεουργία συγκεφαλαίωσις).³⁴ All this would lead us to conclude that, for Dionysius, theurgy or “the work of God” is Christ Incarnate, the event the Old Testament foretold and the New Testament celebrates as accomplished.

While this is certainly true and an important orientation for understanding the Dionysian inheritance of theurgy, it is also important to acknowledge that, apart from these and a few other references, Dionysius does not devote a great deal of attention to the life and ministry of Jesus, and, much to the annoyance of Martin Luther, gives remarkably little attention to the crucifixion. Due to the relative silence on the life and ministry of Jesus, the crucifixion, and a theology of atonement in the *CD*, many scholars, following Luther’s famous dismissal, “Dionysius Platonizes more than he Christianizes,” fault Dionysius for having an insufficient Christology.³⁵ This is not to say that his Christology is heterodox (although many have suggested that the *CD* betrays a Monophysite milieu), but that it is nearly absent, that Christ serves no discernable function in the Dionysian universe. The unquestioned assumption of most twentieth-century scholarship is that whatever Christology the *CD* exhibits is largely “cosmetic.”³⁶

Nothing, in my mind, could be further from the truth. In fact, in order to appreciate his inheritance of theurgy it is necessary to understand his Christology. *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* present a very robust Christology, albeit one that does not center on the life, ministry, or atoning death of Christ. Instead, Dionysius seems primarily interested in a resurrected Christ who appears to us now as light. In order to appreciate the Christological dimension of the Dionysian universe, we must recall his definition of hierarchy, a word he coins to characterize the seamless order that obtains in the heavens and their earthly counterpart, the church. In *CH* 3.1, Dionysius defines hierarchy as “a sacred order, an understanding, and an energy, [the whole of which] is being approximated as closely as possible to the divine.”³⁷ “The goal of a hierarchy, then,” he continues in *CH* 3.2, “is the assimilation and union, as far as is possible, with God.”³⁸

Hierarchy, celestial or ecclesiastical, is God’s providential ordering of the world, such that creatures are arrayed in such a way that they are different and distant from one another. This distance between different creatures is the space that allows for something to move through the creatures, and this something is the “energy” of the hierarchies. The energy that moves through the hierarchies is most often described as light (*φῶς*). Assimilation and union—which together constitute deification—consist in creatures consenting to be ciphers or conduits of this energy, agreeing to receive and pass on the light that flows through the hierarchies in both directions. The energy flows through the hierarchies, proceeding from (*πρόοδος*) and returning to (*ἐπιστροφή*)

³⁴ *EH* 3.3.5 432B (*CD II* 84,17-21).

³⁵ “Babylonian Captivity” (1520), WA 6, 562; cited in P. Rorem and C. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York, 1987), p. 44.

³⁶ P. Rorem, “The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius,” in B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. Leclercq (eds), *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York, 1985), p. 144.

³⁷ *CH* 3.1 164D (*CD II* 17,3-4).

³⁸ *CH* 3.2 165A (*CD II* 17,10-11).

the divine source or “thearchy”; creatures imitate the divine source by allowing the energy to move through them from superior to inferior along the great chain of being, and vice versa. Access to this energy, however, is available only within the hierarchy, that is, for humans at least, only in church.

If “theurgy” refers *generally* to God’s salvific work in the world, and *specifically* to his pre-eminent work, the Incarnation, then “energy” would also seem to refer *generally* to God’s work *in* (ἐν-ἐργεῖα) the world, that is, in the hierarchies, and *specifically* to the light of Christ that flows through them. In this regard, “theurgy” and “energy” are nearly interchangeable: they both refer to Christ, whom we are called to channel as conduits. I have argued elsewhere that Dionysius’s account of Christ as light derives from Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, as thrice narrated in Acts (9:3-9, 22:6-11, 26:13-18).³⁹ Putting the Pauline pedigree to one side, however, we can see how both of the hierarchical treatises open by soliciting this luminous Christ. In *CH* 1.2, Dionysius exhorts us to call on “Jesus, the paternal light, that which is, ‘the truth that enlightens every human coming into the world,’ [Jn 1:9] ‘through whom we have access to the Father,’ [Rom 5:2; cf. Eph 2:18, 3:12] the source of light.”⁴⁰ In *EH* 1.1, Dionysius explains how

Jesus himself, the most supremely divine mind beyond being, the source and essence and most supremely divine power of every hierarchy and sanctification and work of God [θεουργίας], illuminates the blessed beings who are greater than we are ... and thus by looking upwards to the blessed and supremely divine ray of Jesus, reverently gazing upon whatever it is permitted us to see, illuminated with the knowledge of the visions, *we will be able to become*, with respect to mystical understanding, purified and purifiers, images of light and *theurgical* [θεουργικοί], perfected and perfecting (my emphasis).⁴¹

By beholding the light of Christ, the “divine ray of Jesus,” we become “theurgical,” that is, we become “images” of Christ’s light, purified and perfected because Christ-like.

Nowhere is this clearer than in *CH* 3.2, where, just after he has announced that the goal of hierarchy is the deification of its members, he explains that,

[f]or each member who has been called into the hierarchy, perfection consists in being uplifted to the imitation of God according to proper analogy and, what is even more divine than all, as the scriptures say, to become “a co-worker with God” (θεοῦ συνεργόν) and to show the divine energy (τὴν θείαν ἐνέργειαν) in himself as far as is possible.⁴²

³⁹ C.M. Stang, *No Longer I: Dionysius the Areopagite, Paul and the Apophysis of the Self* (ThD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2008), especially pp. 111-14.

⁴⁰ *CH* 1.2 121A (*CD II* 7,9-11).

⁴¹ *EH* 1.1 372A-B (*CD II* 63,12-64,2; 64,10-14).

⁴² *CH* 3.2 165B (*CD II* 18,14-17).

Dionysius borrows the phrase “co-worker with God” from Paul, who in 1 Cor 3:9 announces, “we are co-workers of God” (θεοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν συνεργοί). He understands the Pauline phrase as a description of Christians who have agreed to channel and show forth “the divine energy,” the light of Christ. Although he uses cognates freely, Dionysius refrains from using the title “theurgist” or “god-worker” (θεουργός).⁴³ This Pauline phrase, however, which could be translated literally “co-god-worker,” is very close to “theurgist” indeed. At the root of all of these terms, of course, is ἔργον or “work.” Although it is difficult to convey the lexical integrity in English translation, in Greek it shows forth quite easily: cooperation (συνεργία) with the work of God (θεουργία) or the divine energy (ἡ θεία ἐνέργεια), which is available only through the liturgy (λειτουργία), renders us co-workers with God (θεοῦ συνεργοί), theurgical (θεουργικοί)—in effect, theurgists.

We are in a position now to see how Dionysius inherits and innovates on the tradition of pagan theurgy. As was clear from the outset, Dionysius did not inherit the characteristic practices of theurgy: the animation of statues, the conjuring of gods through a medium, the use of apotropaic stones and amulets, etc. The liturgical context Dionysius describes in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is a familiarly Christian one. His account of what is *at work* in this Christian liturgy and *how* is perhaps less familiar, although, I would insist, no less Christian. Like Iamblichus, Dionysius insists that a divine energy is always on offer to us, wishing to work in and through us, and to which we must but consent. Like Iamblichus, Dionysius believes that if we do but consent to channel this divine energy, we will be uplifted, assimilated, and united to that energy, in other words, deified. Like Iamblichus, Dionysius specifies the contexts in which we can access this divine energy, and that is where they seem to part ways. Dionysius seems unambiguous that our only access to the divine energy is through the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that is, through the orders and sacraments of the church. In this regard, Dionysius has narrowed the scope of Iamblichean theurgy, which while certainly ritualistic, allows for a plurality of deifying hierarchies corresponding to the religious pluralism of the ancient world. So too with the divine energy or “work of God”: for Iamblichus the “work of God,” while ultimately one, is refracted through the many gods who reveal its different aspects; for Dionysius the “work of God” is Christ himself and none other, Christ who processes into plurality in order to gather it up into unity. Here then is the impasse: while Iamblichean theurgy might be willing to cede the Christian ecclesiastical hierarchy a place within the plurality of deifying hierarchies, Dionysian theurgy cannot. For Dionysius, the deifying “work of God” is, at least for now, on offer in only one hierarchy: as he puts it, “ours.”

⁴³ That is, he uses θεουργός only as an adjective, functionally equivalent to θεουργικός.

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