

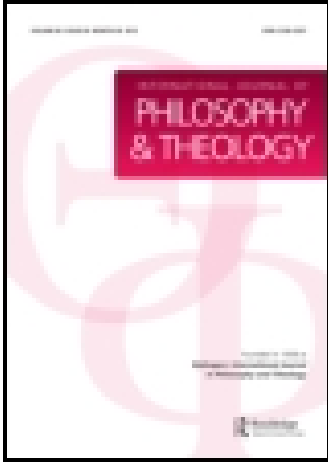
This article was downloaded by: [MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI]

On: 03 August 2015, At: 14:06

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



## Bijdragen: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology

Publication details, including instructions for authors  
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjpt19>

### STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF ST. DENYS' FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS

MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI PhD degree in Philosophy <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

<sup>b</sup> Philosophy and Religious Studies , Károli Gáspár  
University of the Reformed Church in Hungary  
(Budapest)

Published online: 25 Apr 2012.

To cite this article: MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI PhD degree in Philosophy (2012) STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF ST. DENYS' FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS , Bijdragen: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology, 73:4, 404-415

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2143/BIJ.73.4.2959714>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or

indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF ST. DENYS' FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY IN *DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS*

## A COMPARISON WITH PROCLUS' THEORY OF THE ONE IN *INSTITUTIO THEOLOGICA*

MIKLÓS VASSÁNYI

### 1. Proposition

While Denys' personal identity, his Christology and the sources of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* have been investigated extensively in recent years, it seems that the structure and meaning of his fundamental theology, especially in *De divinis nominibus*, have been less incisively analysed than they deserve.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, in the region of the deep structure of fundamental theology that there is hope to see whether the merger Denys carries out between Christian and Neo-Platonic theology is successful and harmonious. The structure or articulation of his concept of God must be analysed evidently with respect to his most relevant Neo-Platonic sources, especially, in the view of many including myself, to Proclus. It is the objective of the present analysis to shed some light on the deeper philosophical pattern of the concept of God in *De divinis nominibus* and to compare it with that of Denys' apparently most immediate Neo-Platonic source for fundamental theology, Proclus' *Institutio theologica*. Further, towards the end of this paper we shall try to systematically analyse what seems perhaps the most fundamental of all Proclean and Dionysian theological premises, the identification of the One with the Good. Finally, we are going

---

<sup>1</sup> The following editions of primary texts have been used for the preparation of this paper: B.R. Suchla (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum I: Pseudo-Dionysios Areopagita: De divinis nominibus*, Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1990 (Patristische Texte und Studien, Bd. 33); E.R. Dodds (ed.), *Proclus, The Elements of Theology*, A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1963; L.G. Westerink (ed.), *Damascius, Traité des premiers principes I*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1986; and É Des Places (ed.), *Jamblique, Les mystères d'Égypte*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1989.

to consider the ideology Denys was probably following as he grafted Neo-Platonism into Christian theology.

As is known, Denys demands (in e.g. I:1-4, I:8, II:2) that Christian theology must rely exclusively on Scripture, yet he abundantly utilizes Neo-Platonic philosophical theological materials as well. In my analysis, the majority of these 'hidden' Neo-Platonic references in *De divinis nominibus* apparently belong to three source texts: Proclus' *Institutio theologica*, Iamblichus' *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* and Damascius' *De primis principiis*. (That Denys relies exhaustively on Proclus' *De malorum subsistentia* in part IV is perhaps too evident to be mentioned.) The philosophical character of these sources is very different. First, Iamblichus' text is not a systematic philosophical theological treatise, and some of its chapters, although philosophically quite intuitive, regard areas topologically distant from fundamental theology (e.g. Chapter IX. on theurgy). Also, sometimes it displays a tendency to employ an amount of imagery to accompany strictly discursive reasoning (e.g. Chapter VIII. on Egyptian theology). This is not characteristic of Denys whose language is highly conceptual. On the other hand, Damascius' entire philosophical attitude in fundamental theology, from the very beginning, is much less assertive and more dubitative than that of Denys – there is a metaphysical difference between them concerning the knowability of the One, even though many of the problems raised by Denys reflect or echo Damascius' questions.<sup>2</sup> So it seems to me that for a philosophical theological comparison, the most promising source region is Proclus' *Institutio*.

## 2. Denys: Centre and Periphery in God

For Denys, God is not a reality but the condition of reality; essentially a ground or a cause, the supreme or first cause, infinitely remote from the world, hyperbolically transcendent. But it is even more appropriate to say that for Denys, there are gradations of transcendence in God. Only the kernel is *absolutum*, removed from all, *exēirēmenon*. The entire infinity of the Godhead is not equally transcendent. The divine 'hyper-substance' is in this sense not homogenous, not seamless. The absolutely transcendent kernel is somehow

---

<sup>2</sup> I am saying this in spite of C.M. Mazzucchi's study 'Damascio, autore del Corpus Dionysiacum, e il dialogo *Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*' (*Aevum* 80 [2006], 299-334). This paper, excellent in many aspects, relies mostly on historical, biographical and philological evidence and barely turns to philosophical analysis in arguing for its thesis, the identification of Denys with the last *diadochos* of the Academia, Damascius. The summary of Denys' theology on p. 308 is, for instance, very far from being exhaustive or even representative. Hence the thesis of the article remains unproven.

more introvert or self-reflexive, not oriented towards the exterior – it resembles more the Aristotelian God in its extramundane self-reflection than the creating and caring Father of the Book of *Genesis*.

At the same time, however, Denys will not give up the fundamental theological conviction that despite this, God is the *radex mundi unicus*, the one and only ground or fundament on which the world stands. But how you can be *radex* and *absolutus* at the same time is a philosophical problem because this seems to be a contradiction in terms: Either you are a cause and then you entertain a real relation (*relatio realis*) with your effect, or you are removed and you do not entertain any real relation with anything. But Denys' God is both at the same time, is a *radex absolutus*. This *coincidentia oppositorum* makes one already think of the unthinkability of God, so much emphasized by Denys. This fundamental theological tension demands that the statement concerning the existence of God be proposed in the form of a postulate like 'God must be like this' instead of a thesis in the indicative: 'God is like this'. In other words, Denys' concept of God is a borderline concept, a philosophical boundary marker. It marks the end of discursive reasoning insofar as it consists, as it were, of a positive and a negative pole, which, coupled up in a subject-predicate type of compound, hurt the principle of contradiction, and undermine the divine attributes of unity and homogeneity.

### 3. The Divine Persons

Dialectically, Denys will resolve this dilemma by saying that God's periphery, the immediate halo around the innermost, really transcendent part is more extrovert and oriented toward lower Being. For if God is to be fertile and productive then a mediating zone, a region of transition is necessary to account for divine (efficient and final) causality. Besides, the supremely removed kernel does not have a 'face' in the sense that it is not describable and is not person-like: It is an impersonal ground. Denys' Supreme God is more an 'It' than a He. But the mediating interfaces do have 'personal' characteristics. So the concept of the supra-essential God, again, does not appear homogenous. In II:4 Denys suggests that the 'unified' attributes of God (the 'more-than-divine' kernel) are in a relation of antecedent-consequent to the more individual divine 'faces', *prosōpa*, the trinitological persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The specific difference of the absolutely transcendent kernel is that it lacks all difference within itself – it is pervasively unified. Its essence, like that of the Platonic ideas, is pure identity (*tautotēs*). It is absolutely One, whereas the divine persons represent a first appearance, or better,

a pre-conception of the Many. Although they are still in a region beyond Being (they have *hyperousios hyparxis*), they rank lower on the ontological scale as they depend on a fundament. They seem representative auto-manifestations of the absolutely transcendent One; they are, as Denys puts it with a Neo-Platonic technical term, emanations, *prohodoi*, from it. They are a first periphery around the centre. Their ontological mission is mediation: the canalization of the Good towards Being.

#### 4. God and the World

The divine persons already constitute a transition between the removed One and Being. Their dialectical function is to ease the paradox that is formed by God's unreachability *and* immediacy for human experience. The distance between God and Being is, on the one hand, infinite; on the other, a series of mediations (the hierarchical mechanism, the 'sacred direction' or 'sacred control')<sup>3</sup> constantly elevates the lower essences towards the top. Hence, the entire halo around the Absolute is in movement back into the centre. This is not a stabile universe: every finite thing will go dynamically out of its inborn nature, to enable itself to be united with God. This cross-over, again, creates a metaphysical problem. If we think this return into God consistently, then it implies that on their way back into their origin, created things (especially the souls) will have to cross the border that separates God from the world. In principle, they will have to transcend the boundary of transcendence itself and overcome (or acquire) the *differentia realis* that determines the divine 'hyper-substance.' This crossing of the metaphysical dividing line is parallel to and is in correlation with the cross-over of God from Its absolute transcendence as It emits the representative emanations. God also comes out of Its nature. In fact, the metaphysical differences in this system are represented as absolute, but in reality, they are not rigidly so. They are flexible down to questioning the validity of (Aristotelian) logic. The true ontological relations here seem a net of complex connexions and references between Supra-Being and Being, antecedent and consequent, ground and superstructure, which appear, in fact, not divided by a real difference, but interconnected, oriented towards each other, and interpreting (or attributing meaning to) each other. The *differentia realis*, despite Denys' many explicit statements to the contrary, occasionally tends to have the appearance of a *differentia idealis*.

---

<sup>3</sup> See the definition of *hierarchia*, a term coined by Denys, in *De caelesti hierarchia* III:1-2 (CD II, 17).

All considered, Denys' differentiation between centre and periphery in the supra-essential God is a postulation of the possibility of an impossible transcendent causality. The dialectical resolution of this impossibility demands a system of delegations of power, mediations and revelations whereby the originally hyperbolically removed God will become, paradoxically, accessible to human effort for union. Yet even the thesis that there *are* outflows from the transcendent kernel entails that God, insofar as It is a cause, is not *simpliciter absolutus*. That would mean a complete isolation from effects. So our initial interpretation of Denys' fundamental theology has to be modified in that a thoroughly absolute God could not become the object of positive theology (as Damascius does not fail to point this out already in the opening pages of *De primis principiis*) in the vein of *De divinis nominibus*. That this fundamental theological pattern is, being a theology of transcendent efficient causality, really harmonizable with (Plotinian and) Proclean metaphysics will be, I hope, demonstrated further down in this paper.

## 5. The Indivisible Division of God

Another fundamental qualification of Denys' concept of God, logically connected to the previous ones, is the indivisible division of God as the One. This is a corollary to our second point insofar as it presupposes that God is not an exhaustively or *simpliciter* transcendent cause but is in a way present in Its effects (as, we may anticipate, is proposed by Proclus too in §§12, 30, 35 of the *Institutio*). At this point, expounded in II:5-6 and 10-11 of *De divinis nominibus*, Denys self-admittedly depends on his master, Hierotheus, who allegedly authored the treatise *Theologikai stoikheiōseis*, the title of which so tellingly resembles that of Proclus' *Stoikheiōsis theologikē (Institutio theologica)*.

After several assertions that God is in an ontologically higher position (*hyperhidrysis*) than all else and 'beyond all' (*epekeina pantōn*), it sounds, again, as a breach of the principle of contradiction that it is possible to participate (*metekhein*) in Him. But this is not a participation in the strict sense of the term: the participating thing receives only an imprint or impression of the archetype. So when Denys calls this a 'participation without participation' (*amethektōs metekhesthai*), he is equivocal – an offprint is only metaphorically part of the archetype. Yet even an act of printing off, being a particular kind of causality, is an entering into a real relation with the *ectypon*. The *prōtotypon* exerts real influence (*influxus realis*) on what it informs (this act is called *eidopoia*), even if this brings about iconic (formal) similitude only. So the

problem of God's indivisible division is really reducible to the problem of transcendent efficient causality in general.

It is not difficult to see that perhaps the entire problematique of Denys' fundamental theology, as sketched out above, is (Neo-)Platonic in character. The point I would like to propose in more detail is that it is, more precisely, Proclean rather than of any other Platonic kind.

## 6. Proclus: Ontology and Causality as Principles of Theology

On the basis of the *Institutio theologica*, it is perhaps appropriate to say that for Proclus, fundamental theology is essentially a combination of a theory of (supra-essential and essential) Being with a theory of efficient causality (by emanation and participation). This combined theory – like that of Denys – makes the Good and the One coincide in the Supreme God, and identifies the latter as the First Efficient Cause, or better, as the Cause of Causes, *causa causarum*.

For Proclus, the principle and ground of Being is causality, insofar as whatever is part of Being is an effect of 'Supra-Being'. Causality is linear (i.e., not circular), and not infinite, so by its operation, a natural hierarchy (system of dependences) of Being is constructed. By the mediation of a complex hierarchical system of Imparticipables, Participables and participating things, all Being will be ultimately reducible to one single cause, also because all multitude logically follows the unit, the One (as the One is a condition of the Many but the Many, at least in the order of existence, are not a condition of the One). By virtue of these metaphysical principles concerning the nature of causality, a real difference will appear between the Ground of Being and Being itself. In Proclus' eyes, the Good is perhaps the more eminently causal aspect of the One. Or perhaps we may say that the Good is more like a supreme final cause while the One is more like a supreme efficient cause. But as he considers the One and the Good to be the same (§13), it will be convenient for us to term them, together, the 'One-and-Good'. The fact that Being as an effect depends on its cause, the One-and-Good, is logically formulated by Proclus in the thesis that Being participates in the Good (§8). Participation (more properly, 'being participated') here seems a kind of efficient causality. Since hereby the First Efficient (and Final) Cause of all existing things will be a supra-essential One-and-Good, Being itself will necessarily have only a lower axiological status. By this first sketch it already appears that the conception of Proclus' fundamental theology is by and large the same as that of the Areopagite. But there are more exact correspondences.



## 7. Peculiarities of the Proclean Conception of Causation

For Proclus, causality implies that there must remain something of the cause in the effects (§12).<sup>4</sup> This is, hence, a double-faced causality: it is partially exient (outgoing), partially immanent, which entails that the things thus produced will not have a principle of identity in the strict Aristotelian sense of the word. Their source is, in a way, also their material cause. This thesis is recognizable, in turn, in Denys' idea that there is always an essential connection between the (allegedly) transcendent God and Creation (cf. also §§30, 35 of *Institutio theologica*).

Proclus also speaks about the Indivisible Division of the One as he says that everything participates in the One (τοῦ μὲν ἑνὸς πάντα μετέχει τὰ ὀπωσοῦν ὄντα, § 20, though it is impossible to participate in the Imparticipables (τὰ ἀμέθεκτα), which include, first and foremost, the One, and which engender the participable things from themselves (§23). These dialectically difficult theses, later implicitly criticised by Damascius, both recur, in a partially different terminology, in the fundamental theology of *De divinis nominibus*.

## 8. Context and Intentions of Proclus' Fundamental Theology: A Rationale for the Peculiarities

Proclus' peculiar, causation-based theology is as it were embedded in a broader set of fundamental philosophical presuppositions about the nature of the universe and about the character of Being in general. A consideration of this platform for Proclus' theology will also help us better understand the philosophical relation between him and Denys.

The Proclean universe is one of dynamic productivity: It is precisely by the example of the generative operation of the One-and-Good that all perfect things generate (in the measure of their perfection). The One-and-Good is seen here as indicating the route for the lower essences to take; as an exemplary prototype precisely in respect of generation. (Cf. §25: Everything that is perfect imitates the only source of all Being [=the One-and-Good] insofar as it produces effects.) Hence, Proclus' dialectic does not demand a justification for the generative operation of the One-and-Good, even if the One-and-Good is transcendent: it is the *lack* of generation that would demand an explanation. The Proclean God of gods: the One-and-Good is in this sense (not surprisingly) more Platonic than Aristotelian: though Proclus vindicates Aristotelian

<sup>4</sup> δέον πανταχοῦ παρεῖναι τι τοῖς αἰτιατοῖς ἐκ τῆς αἰτίας.

perfection and transcendence for it, he also attributes essential generative operation to it (like Plato does, to the ideas, in *Timaeus*).

Hence in *Institutio theologica*, a fundamental theological presupposition of Proclus' is that efficient causation is a perfection, i.e., that improductiveness or the lack of effectivity is an imperfection (cf. §7: Fertility or engendering is a perfection; see also §23).<sup>5</sup> Precisely this axiological preference is perceivable in Denys' tendency philosophically not to endorse a concept of God that is strictly transcendent (even if he does so verbally). For Proclus and Denys alike, it is a conceptual incoherence or discrepancy, a contradiction in terms to posit a God that is effectless. This would be like positing a father without a child – it would mean the lack of potency, of creative power. The lack of creative power is a deficiency or imperfection, even if the Proclean rule of causality is that causes do not produce effects ontologically equal to themselves (there is an invariable degradation of the quality of essence in the causal process). It is, on the contrary, by the superabundance of potency (excess of power) that efficient causes produce effects (cf. §27). Only the most remote thing from the First Cause is improductive – whereby productivity will be viewed also as a principle of universal order.

## 9. Ranking the Divine Perfections

From this perspective, the ultimate organizing principle for Denys' as well as Proclus' respective fundamental theologies is the *ranking* of the divine perfections. Our authors will rank productivity (fertility) above transcendence. So within God, the tendency of self-revelation (of 'giving') is seen as more perfect and thereby overriding that of self-hiding (of 'keeping'). It is the characteristic nature of the Good that from its original 'singularity' it will unfold into the Many. The One is a transcendent bud (the Plotinian *dynamis pantōn*) which erupts because of the Good. Hence the Good as it were blows up the splendid isolation of the One. The One is pure self-identity in a region beyond Being, and the Good is like a First Mover acting on it in the concept of the 'One-and-Good,' which is thus itself a problematic concept. The One-and-Good is Janus-faced insofar as it seems the unification of a static principle and of a dynamic principle; better, it is *one* principle, which is static and dynamic at the same time and to the same (perfect) degree. Although they thus do rank productivity above transcendence, Proclus and Denys will not let go of the latter either, which causes serious logical and dialectical tension within the system. This is

<sup>5</sup> ἢ γὰρ ἄγονον ἐστῆξεται καθ' αὐτό, καὶ οὐδὲν ἂν ἔχοι τίμιον· ἢ δώσει τι ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ τὸ μὲν λαβὸν μετέσχε, τὸ δὲ δοθὲν ὑπέστη μετεχομένως.

in fact an aporetic situation, as Damascius will show. But it may reflect the natural relation of human thought to God.

### 10. The Problematic Identity of the One with the Good

At this point, one may have the impression that the most important metaphysical question within this system is why the One must be also essentially Good, if the two display contradictory natures, inasmuch as the One is a 'keeper' while the Good is a 'giver.' This question is all the more important if we consider that the entire metaphysics of both our authors revolves around the Platonic principle of *homoiōsis theōi* as the universal rule of Being. The One-and-Good, a static and dynamic supra-essential thing is hereby conceived as a structural archetype or pre-figuration of all Being.

In search of a philosophical explanation for the problematic identification of the One with the Good, we may remind ourselves that the One is viewed here as a principle of Being insofar as it is the principle of individuality, without which there is no identifiable entity. Hence oneness via individuality is one necessary (though perhaps not sufficient) condition of Being. Being in itself is considered good insofar as non-being is a lack and therefore an imperfection – this seems a major implicit axiom in the reasoning. So by the principle of sufficient reason ('*nihil dat quod non habet*') it results that in the cause of Being there must be oneness (self-sameness) and goodness together (in a region that precedes and founds all Being). So the One and the Good are the same thing.

Though this is a *prima facie* flawless and simple enough deduction, a deeper dialectical analysis may point out the following problem in it: Since ultimately the Good (or a good objective) is realized in this way, the One will appear as a subordinate instrument of the Good. There is a teleology in this process in which the Good is a final cause, and this entails that the One as a means is subservient to the Good as an end in itself. This will disturb the identity of the two, in that it presupposes a kind of meta-ontological hierarchy between them. So the One and the Good are not the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The thesis that the One is a principle of Being further means that it is impossible for a thing to exist if it is not a defined (determined) existent. 'Definition' in this sense is ultimately the subsumption of the characteristic attributes under one unified subject or in one substrate. In this view, it is ultimately the *coherence* (the numerical oneness) of a substance that gives it Being: whatever is, is defined as a numerical unity. Hence in broader terms, it is the *structure* of a thing that renders it existent. This can perhaps be interpreted as the (onto)logical precedence of *essence* over existence. The quality or specific *perfection* of essence entails existence. The One is in this case a *regio idearum*, a repository of ideas which tend to exist in the measure of the unity they receive from the primordial unit, the One.

## 11. Conclusion

The concept of the One-and-Good is thus a problematic concept insofar as the perfect identity or coincidence of its two 'poles' is hardly thinkable consistently, without hurting in some way the principle of contradiction or at least without becoming paradoxical. Clearly, Proclus and in his wake Denys have constructed an idea – for 'idea' may be a better term to designate this kind of mental representation – which tries to give the best possible representation of a thing which escapes representation, as they themselves admit. God is elusive – the idea of the One-and-Good is a stumbling stone for systems. Hence Proclus' and Denys' dialectical effort may perhaps be labelled as an endeavour of a causality-based theology to surpass the principle of causality itself.

In a final analysis, the many-sidedness of the idea of God as the One-and-Good reveals a twofold or duality in its deep structure. It is by this fundamental twofold that the One can be productive and hereby also Good. But Proclus and Denys alike try to ask behind that basic twofold and intuit pure unity as an absolute divine source. This ultimate striving consists in throwing away the instrument – the logic of causality – which has brought them to this metaphysical break point; and Proclus' and Denys' intention alike is to bring their readers to this point from where, in their conviction, that unity is really intuitable. At this point, then, it is no wonder that there is a qualitative difference between what has been done so far (essentially, rational theology) and what must follow now (a kind of intellectual vision). The conceptual blurring, the gradual fade-out of logic which is perceivable in the deep structure of the theology of the One-and-Good is thus the mystical cloud of a *visio beatifica*.

While this consideration may offer a rationale for the dialectic problems inherent in this theology, a last systematic doubt emerges as to the logical categorization of the concept of the One itself. To me at least, it remains a moot question whether the One – especially in Proclus' presentation – is not ultimately a simple concept of relation, instead of being the autonomous and self-explanatory concept (*idea distincta*) Proclus makes it appear. For in purely systematic terms, we do not seem entitled to speak about the One if we do not contrast it to the Many. Viewed from this perspective, the One does not logically precede the Many but depends on the Many in the same measure as the Many depend on it. This observation could suggest that the relation between the One-and-Good and the world is one of interdependence in the order of *cognition* and may be one of dependence in the order of *existence* only.

In a historical respect, the conclusion of this short analysis concerns the philosophical theological relationship between Proclus and Denys. It goes without

saying that Denys does not reproduce Proclus' system crudely. In Proclus, following the One, there is a plurality of lower gods, a systematic theory of the Imparticipables, the Participables and the Participating etc., whereas in Denys, needless to say, you will find trinitology and Christology, plenty of Biblical and synodical references etc. Also, Denys (and this may be Damascius' influence) goes one degree further than Proclus in emphasizing the transcendence of God (cf. ch. XIII of *De divinis nominibus*). But the entire problematic of transcendent efficient causality is there in Proclus already, even though not so dramatically exposed because the One-and-Good is not so hyperbolically removed. The question of indivisible division is, as we have seen, also part and parcel of Proclean fundamental theology. So is the problem of divine productivity (together with the possible rationale we have outlined above). Hence the philosophical theological topics entailing 'breaches' of the principle of contradiction are all present in the *Institutio*. Therefore we seem entitled to draw the conclusion that *De divinis nominibus* is a fundamental theological reflection and elaboration on Proclus which metaphysically points in the direction of Damascius, whose philosophy of the One Denys certainly knew; and that the structure as well as the meaning of Denys' fundamental theology is to a large extent the same as that of Proclus', so that in this domain too he conserved a great part of Neo-Platonic philosophy.

Finally, is the merger Denys carries out between Christian and Neo-Platonic theology successful and harmonious? Beyond doubt, Denys created an intuitive, productive and original theological synthesis, which is open-ended in the sense that it will bring the fellow believer to a point where reasoning may cross over into an *actus fidei*, the mystical union. So in this sense, it is a successful merger. Whether it is also philosophically 'harmonious' may be a different question. On the one hand, you would not call a text like *De divinis nominibus* a simple conflation or *assemblage* of heterogenous pieces, since it is inspired by the same unitary theological spirit, and its philosophical tenor is characteristically unique in its kind. On the other hand, it is constructed in a way that Christian and Neo-Platonic source materials and terminology are intertwined, often in a manner that a Christian thesis is explained in Neo-Platonic terms. *De divinis nominibus* has not only a theological but also a textological deep structure. On the level of the construction of the text, the way Denys combines and intertwines his sources is often clearly identifiable and you can directly go back to the Neo-Platonic passage where a particular term or idea was appropriated from. So in a textological sense, the merger is not flawless. In a theological sense, a complete harmonization of the fully developed Christian theological system of the late fifth century with, say, Proclean philosophical

theology is theoretically impossible from the very beginning. But Denys' move seems one of reconciliation rather than full harmonization. Here I would side with Beate Suchla<sup>7</sup> in proposing the overall interpretation that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* takes an essentially Christian theological stance, put forward in Neo-Platonic terms in order to show that such a merger (i.e., the partial incorporation of Platonism into Christian thought) is at least not impossible; in fact, it can enrich and empower Christian theology, as *De divinis nominibus* proves it. To write such a qualitatively outstanding philosophical apology for Platonism, and to carry out, *eo ipso*, an act of appropriation of Platonism, was a reasonable intellectual effort at a time when, around 500, this ancient and most prestigious school was going to face a kind of spiritual extirpation in Justinian's Byzantium.

M. Vassányi was born in 1966. He earned his PhD degree in Philosophy from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2007. He is Associate Professor in Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary (Budapest). His monograph entitled *Anima mundi – The Rise of the World Soul Theory in Modern German Philosophy* was published by Springer Verlag in 2010. Together with P. Losonczy and A. Szigeti, he co-edited the volume *Religio Academici. Essays On Scepticism, Religion and the Pursuit of Knowledge* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 2009), and has published several articles especially on Locke and Diderot.

Address: Károli University, 1088 Budapest, Reviczky utca 4, Hungary; Email: vassanyi.miklos@gmail.com

---

<sup>7</sup> See B.R. Suchla, 'Verteidigung eines platonischen Denkmodells einer christlichen Welt', *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* 1, Philologisch-historische Klasse, 1995/1, 1-28.