

An Exploration of Hierarchy as Fractal in the Theology of Dionysios the Areopagite

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Eric Perl, in his provocatively titled book, *Theophany: The Neo-Platonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, argues not only that Dionysios' thought is thoroughly Neo-Platonic and fully compatible with Christianity, but that "the Dionysian doctrine of cosmic and ecclesiastical hierarchy is not only consistent with but essential to holy tradition" and that "Dionysius represents precisely those doctrines which are most typical of [Eastern] Orthodoxy in distinction from the west."¹

Like it or not, it is not that easy to ignore hierarchy in the sense the Areopagite had in mind in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (CD).² It is Dionysios who is credited with the first use of the word "hierarchy" as an abstract noun and the influence of this abstract notion of hierarchy has been far-reaching and is ubiquitous within society, not only within the Christian churches.

Two related ideas continue to trouble me in the aftermath of reading Perl on Dionysios. The first is the thought that in our natural suspicion of hierarchy we may be sowing the very seeds that will keep us from ever being able to tap the wisdom of the CD. The second, is that if Perl – whose arguments are thorough, persuasive, and beautiful – is correct in both his understanding of neo-Platonic hierarchy and in his assertion that this is the thoroughgoing philosophical backdrop for the Areopagite, then hierarchy isn't just a convenient construct dreamed up by churchmen that helps us get closer to God if we follow the rules of order, nor is it just a description of the functional workings of the

¹ Eric Perl, "Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no. 3-4 (1994): 355-56. Perl goes on to list those doctrines which he believes are most typical of Orthodoxy in distinction from the west: "creation as theophany, grace as continuous with nature; knowledge as union of knower and known; Incarnation and sacrament as fulfillment, not exception or addition; liturgy as the realization of the cosmos; mysticism as ontological union rather than psychological condition; sin as corruption and loss of being, not legalistic transgression; atonement as physical-ontological assumption, not justification or juridical satisfaction; hierarchy as service and love, not oppression and envy."

² Abbreviations of Dionysian works used in this paper include: DN- *The Divine Names*; CH- *The Celestial Hierarchy (Heavenly Hierarchy)*; EH- *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*; MT- *The Mystic Theology*.

mystical and sacramental life as understood within the Eastern ascetic tradition; though neither of those understandings would be wrong per se, both would be deficient. If Perl is right, Dionysios understood all creation to be Theophany, and hierarchy as the very structure of the entire created order, which reflects the life of God in existence.³ This hierarchy is not an “optional extra,” and opting out of participation – in so far as this is even possible – is, quite literally, to use the words of St. Paul (Rom 1:25), “exchanging the truth for a lie” and straightforwardly spells physical and spiritual death.

For those of us with anarchist (or at least rebellious) tendencies – for those who have a developed sense of justice and despise hierarchical abuses – the news seems bad. If Perl is right, running away from Church structures won’t solve this problem because you can’t run away from the structure of existence itself. What exactly are we supposed to do? St. Symeon the New Theologian’s solution was to argue that the true bishop is the person with a pure heart (he had monastics in mind)⁴; but Dionysios’s fiery 8th Epistle to the monk Demophilos makes it more than clear that he does *not* see this as a possible solution for the very reason that hierarchical order is violated. Abolish the structure of reality we cannot. Nihilism doesn’t seem a very attractive option, so what are we left with?

As the title of this paper suggests, I believe (with Perl) that despite hierarchy’s bad reputation, a close look at the Dionysian version proves that it is anything but rigid. It appears that both Perl and Yannaras associate rigid, power-abusive hierarchy with a God who is conceptualized as Supreme Being, for in the wake of such a conception we will also always assign higher values to higher ranks within a hierarchy.⁵ The alternative, which both Perl and Yannaras are insisting is found in Dionysios, is a conceptual position that God “does not *exist*” in the sense that the category of existence is not at all applicable to God.⁶

³ Perl more or less states just this on p.65 of his book: “the concept of hierarchy is at work throughout [Dionysios’s] understanding of reality.”

⁴ H.A. Golitzin, “Hierarchy Versus Anarchy? Dionysius Areopagite, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, and their Common Roots in Ascetical Tradition,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (1994): 131-179.

⁵ C. Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 56. The observation is pervasive throughout Perl’s book *Theophany* each time he discusses incorrect understandings of Platonic emanation.

⁶ Is this just fancy wording behind which an even more powerful Supreme Being is actually hiding, as Derrida famously thought? Perl’s detailed description of the Neo-Platonic philosophy underlying Dionysios’s thought shows over and over how important it is to be sure that God does not *exist*. One succinct example which helps us neatly

In the rest of this paper I want to do two main things. First, I want to lead a whirlwind tour of Perl's philosophical outline of Dionysios, which is necessary for further discussion of his hierarchy. Second, I want to look at the building blocks of the Dionysian hierarchy, that is – what we are letting ourselves in for by participation, to the degree that we choose to accept the mission. I hope to show that Dionysian hierarchy, although challenging and risky, is also radically dynamic and, therefore, may be constitutive of personal freedom and personal empowerment. As Perl says, “hierarchy as service and love, not oppression and envy.”⁷ I'd like also to suggest that embracing *this particular* understanding – arguably the *original* understanding of hierarchy – we may be as well positioned as we possibly could be to escape the grammar of repetitious power abuse in a fallen world.

The Neo-Platonic Philosophy of Dionysios as a Background to Understanding his Hierarchy

Perl spends more than one hundred pages developing a nuanced argument which thoroughly supports much conceptual consistency between Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysios; for the fine details that prove that picture his book is the place to go. Here my concern is to succinctly highlight elements of that picture which are vital for a discussion of hierarchy.

We have already seen Dionysios's God cannot be considered to be a being of any sort; in the first section of the first chapter of *Divine Names*, he tells us that God is “Cause of being to all, but Itself not being, and beyond every essence” (*DN* 1.1). God is “Nameless” (*DN* 1.7), and “super-unknown” (*DN* 1.4). Like Plotinus, Dionysios considers God to

answer Derrida comes in the form of Perl's observation that for classic neo-Platonism (including Dionysios) non-being is said to participate in the Good and that this is another way of saying that the very receptivity of beings, which constitutes them *as beings rather than as God*, is *itself* a pure gift of God (Perl, *Theophany*, 68). This statement would be nonsensical if God were a Supreme Being (equivalent to saying that Being causes non-beings). For Dionysios the Good is a procession of God and the causal determination of all beings as well as non-beings (*DN* V.1). Without maintaining that God does not *exist*, we have no way of speaking of God as gift, as overflowing self-sufficient love and therefore no way of talking about him as creator. Far from “beyond being” meaning some sort of super-being, the assertion that “God does not *exist*” is of foundational importance to Dionysios and the very assertion which makes any meaningful theology possible.

⁷ E. Perl, “Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no.3-4 (1994): 355-56.

be beyond being and intelligibility and beyond non-being.⁸ It is key, that having posited a God who does not *exist*, Dionysios is now free *not* to reject Platonic emanation in favor of a Supreme Being whose goodness lights up his creation. Perl seems to think that emanation (or procession), at least in its neo-Platonic version, has been very often misunderstood, and that it is various inaccurate understandings of Platonic emanation/procession that would create the need for a Christian to reject Platonic procession out of hand.

Contrast the following pictures:

Incorrect Understandings of Procession	Correct Neo-Platonic Understanding of Procession⁹
“Horizontal causation” = cause producing effect within same ontological order (one being producing another being)	“Vertical causation” = eminent cause or determination which is itself the productive activity of the thing it determines ¹⁰
The lower level comes to be in the sense of having an origin.	The lower level is dependent upon the higher level for its identity and therefore for its existence.
The production of the lower level by the higher level is an event or process.	The higher level <i>itself</i> is the productive activity of the lower level.
The demiurge shapes matter into things we can know and sense.	The lower level is an appearance of the higher level (like a man standing before a mirror, provided we understand that in this analogy the mirror image is <i>not</i> an illusion).
Different levels are understood only as objects of one and the same mode of a subject’s cognition.	Different levels are understood as different modes in which the same content may be given to cognition.

⁸ “For if all knowledges are beings and have their limits in beings, that which is beyond all being also transcends all knowledge.” (*DN* 1.4). To *be* is to be derivative. That which *is*, is that which can be apprehended by the intellect (Parmenides’s insight). As eminent cause or determination, Good is prior to being and intelligibility (which taken together are *ousia*); relative non-being (or difference), therefore, is included in the altogether real. Perl discusses these things in detail in chapter 1 of his book *Theophany*.

⁹ As found not only in Dionysius, but also in Plotinus and Proclus (according to Perl, *Theophany*, Chap.2).

¹⁰ If, here, there is an accusation of creation by necessity, then it might easily be countered that this necessity could just as easily be called freedom since it is by reason of the One himself that there is no possible alternative. The conventional antithesis between “Neoplatonic necessary procession” and “Christian free creation” makes God himself subject to the categories of Aristotelian logic (so Lossky) (so also Perl, *Theophany*, 51). God transcends both choice and necessitation and the opposition between them. Perl writes that God himself is the principle of non-contradiction (50).

Image is something that only reminds of us of the archetype.	Image participates in archetype and presents it to a lesser form of cognition. ¹¹
Effects are produced by the cause. The cause first exists as itself and then unfolds itself to produce effects.	Effects are contained in the cause. The cause is the enfolded effects and the effects are the unfolded cause. ¹² Effects are the differentiated appearance of the unitary determination.
The higher level is a dominant power.	The higher level is eminent and <i>inclusive</i> of the lower level.
The lower level is submissive and passive.	The lower level is a manifestation and is possessive of the higher level.

From this presentation it becomes clear why Perl titles his book *Theophany*, even as we are able to understand the way in which Dionysios insists that God is both subject to no names and to all names. Throughout the CD and especially in the *Divine Names* we find statements like these: “the being of all things is in the divinity beyond being” (CH 1.4); God is “all things in all things and nothing in any” (DN 7.3); God is “the Different” in that he distributes all distinction (DN 9.5). For Dionysius, it is the unparticipated God himself in whom all things participate. Dionysios describes the divine processions as “unparticipatedly participated” (in DN 2.5, the Greek is *amethektos metexomena*). So the whole of reality is a manifestation of God, or, Theophany, so that at the same time as he maintains that God is beyond being, he also maintains that of God, there is sense perception! In short, as Perl writes, Dionysios negotiates a way between monism (pantheism) and dualism (God over against his cosmos) which is participatory and personal. Yannaras stresses this, too, claiming that true apophaticism engenders this personal and participatory knowledge by making use of both affirmations and negations “in most sweet conjunction” in order to transform conceptual opposition into depiction in images (which are available for participation).¹³

¹¹ Stated another way using Procline language, “the participated term is the differentiated presence of the unparticipated”, where the unparticipated is the universal determination considered as one and the same and the participated terms are the same universal determination considered as differentiated.

¹² In the sense that: cause = *complicatio* of the effects or “all effects without distinction,” effects = *explicatio* of cause.

¹³ Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability*. This particular statement appears on p.69, though this argument is developed for several pages. For Yannaras, it is the infinite depth of the person, and thus of personal relationship that provokes the silence of apophaticism. He contrasts this with the scholastic *via negativa*, which Yannaras sees as part of the analogical way of knowing God (61). This scholastic *via negativa*, when compared with what Yannaras calls apophaticism, seems to be the engendering, by means

The table also begins to show how differing understandings of procession radically change the meaning, purpose, functioning, and effect of hierarchy. If we understand procession after the manner of the right hand column of our table, the levels do not make much sense other than with reference to each other. Objectification of any one level is impossible since the levels are defined – quite literally *created* – by each other. We would also have to say both that God stands outside the hierarchy and that the whole hierarchy of being participates in God. God’s immanence and transcendence are both maintained and even coincide in that God is “not any thing but the power in all things.”¹⁴

We need also to mention remaining and reversion, as well as procession. The three go together for Dionysios, as for Plotinus and Proclus. While procession is the differentiation or unfolding of effects as different from each other and from their cause, reversion is the relation of an effect to its goal or end (*telos*).¹⁵ Remaining is undifferentiated containment of effects by a cause. On Perl’s reading, reversion is “not temporally or ontologically subsequent to procession.” “Both [procession and reversion] at once and equally are the establishment of effect as a being.”¹⁶ Essentially, any thing’s way of being itself is reversion to its cause. This picture, too, emphasizes that beings are not passive recipients, and Perl goes so far as to say that “God cannot make beings without their active cooperation...there is something analogous to freedom and personhood at every level of being.”¹⁷ Incidentally, with regard to passivity, for Dionysios evil¹⁸ appears to be equivalent to passivity which again, is a thing’s failure to revert to God or failure to “be” itself. In his discussion of demons Dionysios writes, “in what...do we say they are evil, except in the cessation of the possession and activity of divine good things?” (*DN* 4.23) And in his discussion of the fall in *EH* 3.3.11, which is very reminiscent of the final section of Romans 1, man falls “thoughtlessly,” “pitiably exchanges the eternal for the mortal,” and is generally portrayed as being *moved by the passions* due to his failure to actively participate in his “life-giving yoke.”

of abstractions and denials, of a certain psychological state in which the subject revels in awe of God’s Complete Otherness.

¹⁴ Perl, *Theophany*, 45.

¹⁵ Being directed toward its *arche* (which also makes that *arche* the thing’s *telos*!) is what gives a thing its unity, identity, and intelligibility. The beginning of Perl’s chapter 3 handles this point in detail.

¹⁶ Perl, *Theophany*, 38-9.

¹⁷ Perl, *Theophany*, 42.

¹⁸ Perl’s *Theophany* chapter 4 deals with the question of evil in the CD.

Perl believes that the “cycle” of procession, remaining and reversion particularly underlies chapter 4 of the *Divine Names*, which deals with the names Good, Light, Beauty, and Love (Eros). Here we learn that eminent levels proceed providentially (doing what is good for their consequents) and that manifesting levels’ reversion is their reverential desire and possession of this good. Beauty is “the participation of the beautifying Cause” by beautiful things but “the beautiful and Beauty are not to be divided,” says Dionysios (*DN* 4.7). This is significant because, as Yannaras notes, beauty is “a presence of personal otherness that cannot be objectified”¹⁹ – beauty in each being is God in that being.

Finally the divine name Love (Eros) is where we see most vividly the unity of procession and reversion. Perl says, a “single metaphysical motion, by which all things are, is the full meaning of the divine name Love.”²⁰ Fascinatingly, Perl also maintains here that the reason that Dionysios has no use for any distinction between Agape and Eros (*DN* 4.11-12) is that such a distinction depends upon a dualistic vision of God as a being set over against creation, so that there is an opposition between selfish desire *for* the other and selfless giving *to* the other. Such an opposition is not possible given the true and creative union between procession and reversion, neither of which (again) can actually exist or be conceived of independently of one another.

It is this particular picture of neo-Platonic procession, as well as remaining and reversion, that forms the backdrop for my thought that Dionysian hierarchy may actually be nothing more than a fractal.

*Hierarchy as Fractal*²¹

So what do I mean by “fractal?” I am not a mathematician, so please forgive this rather poetic definition: I mean a shape that we see repeated in many different instances – a shape that seems to occur over and over and which itself appears to be infinitely irreducible, recurring at each successive level of its existence. These fractal levels, therefore, are

¹⁹ Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability*, 74.

²⁰ Perl, *Theophany*, 47.

²¹ Benoît B. Mandelbrot, who coined the term “fractal,” defines a fractal in the following way: A geometric figure or natural object is said to be fractal if it combines the following characteristics: (a) its parts have the same form or structure as the whole, except that they are at a different scale and may be slightly deformed; (b) its form is extremely irregular, or extremely interrupted or fragmented, and remains so, whatever the scale of examination; (c) it contains “distinct elements” whose scales are very varied and cover a large range.” (*Les Objets Fractales*, 1989, 154).

obviously interrelated and participate in the same sort of “grammar” vis-à-vis each other in such a sense as to literally be in some way *constitutive* of each other, both downwards and upwards within the fractal – the latter could be described as feedback, and truly does affect the fractal as a whole. The algorithm that explains the interrelation between different levels is complex and non-linear with a certain degree of freedom built in; therefore growth and development are not entirely predictable – it seems scientists actually think of fractals as sort of a mid-point between randomness and predictability. So there are obvious affinities with our right-hand-column hierarchy, above. In fact, you could precisely say that higher fractal levels are eminent and inclusive of lower fractal levels and lower fractal levels are manifesting and possessive of higher fractal levels, which is the language Perl uses to describe Dionysian hierarchy.

Now because fractals are mid-points between randomness and predictability, because they incorporate a degree of freedom, and because of the intense and dynamic interrelationships between fractal levels, fractal becomes an appealing word to use to refer to Dionysian hierarchy, which seems to have all these elements and to be “built” of moments of relationship that constitute instances of creative power being released. There is a recurring image used by Dionysius, that of the mirror.²² Creatures assimilated to the life of God – who are living according the shape of the life of God – are “spotless mirrors.” Light reflected in one mirror is immediately magnified in a host of other mirrors throughout the multi-dimensional, vital organism that is reality, and in this way we truly create and are truly co-workers (*synergoi*) with God himself.

By this description it begins to look as if participation in hierarchy is the beginning of empowerment for anything and everything, independent of level. I am struck by the fashion in which such a picture could explain the effectiveness of prayer, or the effect of *mitzvah* – of doing the commandment of God.²³ Perl says, for instance, that in

²² E.g. at CH 3.2, CH 9.3, DN 4.22.

²³ For this latter insight on doing the command of God I am indebted to the brilliant Jewish scholar, Dr. Jon Levenson, who writes in his book *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988), 46, “...divine and human integrity are neither identical nor separable. Both are ultimately real, but proximately frustrated. It is in moments of obedience to God’s commandments that the ultimately real becomes available in the present order. It is in those elusive but ever available moments that the deeply flawed present is forced to yield to the perfect future. And it is in this idea of a multileveled act of unification – unification in God, in creation, and in the human self – that we find the deep root of the profound theology of the mitzvah as a theurgic act...it is the mitzvah that effects integrity throughout all tiers of reality and enables the life-enhancing divine energy to flow freely and without inhibition.”

hierarchy as conceived of by Dionysius “every being has an active role not only in its own production, but in the production of all things.”²⁴

Fr. Alexander Golitzin, who has written eloquently and extensively on the Areopagite, agrees with Fr. Georges Florovsky’s assessment that Dionysios is “a contemplative and a liturgist.”²⁵ I believe that the shapes which are recurrent as the “building blocks” of Dionysian fractal-hierarchy support the assumption that he was a “liturgist.” I say this after reflecting on a recent and brilliant doctoral dissertation²⁶ which analyzes Great Week and Bright Week – the heart of Orthodox liturgy. In his dissertation, Timothy Patitsas, now the professor of Ethics at Hellenic College Holy Cross, uses the tools of complexity theory to analyse the heart of Eastern Orthodox liturgy. This groundbreaking approach allows him to capture much “relational truth” inherent in liturgy that usually goes entirely unnoticed by us moderns and post-moderns. Patitsas discerns a small number of recurring shapes that underpin Orthodox liturgy – all of them resident within one simplex shape – the anointing of Christ in dual aspect as king and sacrifice.²⁷ It seems to me that these are the same shapes we find in the Dionysian structure of reality – his hierarchy, his fractal – which must also have been liturgically discerned. As Patitsas says when referencing the origin of these shapes in basic Trinitarian theology, the presence of these shapes “needn’t have been planned, but is the work of the Holy Spirit...if Great Week looks the way I surmise it does, it must be because the God it glorifies looks the same way and wills the Week to reveal him.”²⁸ The same argument could be made of the entire created order.

Christ’s Anointing, and Christ’s Anointing Shared with Us

I think it is ironic that Luther (and more recently others, like Rorem and Wesche) have maintained that the cross is not very visible in Dionysios, because the basic “shape” that is his hierarchical building block – the power of the hierarchy (which is, in fact, identical with the

²⁴ Perl, *Theophany*, 78-9.

²⁵ H.A. Golitzin, “A Contemplative and a Liturgist’: Father Georges Florovsky on the Corpus Dionysiacum.’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, vol. 43, no 2 (1999): 131-161.

²⁶ The full title of the dissertation, which is available from UMI, is *The King Returns to His City: An Interpretation of the Great Week and Bright Week Cycles of the Orthodox Church*.

²⁷ Much more detailed evidence for the shapes is available, especially in chapters 1 and 6 of Patitsas’s dissertation, *The King Returns to his City*.

²⁸ Patitsas, *The King Returns to his City*, 81.

hierarchy itself) – is *what Christ does*, given that, as Dionysios says, he is the “source and perfecting of all hierarchies.” (EH 1.2) And the way Dionysios describes *what Christ does* is to depict Christ sharing his own power or energy – his own anointing – with creation, through the Church.

First we need to look at what Dionysios himself says about hierarchy. He calls it “a sacred order and science and operation, assimilated, as far as attainable, to the likeness of God...with a view to the Divine imitation.” (CH 3.1) He tells us its purpose is “the assimilation and union with God” and that Divine hierarchy “perfects its own followers as Divine images, mirrors most luminous and without flaw...devoutly filled with entrusted radiance.” (CH 3.2) The hierarchical vocation, he says is “what is more Divine than all, [to become] a fellow-worker with God.” (CH 3.2) We know there are multiple hierarchies, for “every Hierarchy is an unswerving devotion to the divine imitation of the Divine Likeness” (CH 7.2) and that the head of all hierarchies (or one might say the enfolding of all these hierarchies into one) is Christ whom Dionysios calls “the source and perfecting of all hierarchies,” (EH 1.2) as we have already said.

Interestingly, in the explicit definitions of hierarchy given by Dionysios there is actually *no mention of rank at all*. Hierarchy *does* appear to be a “power structure” of sorts, but much more a living organism that we tap into rather than a system of ranks.

(Simplex) Shape No.1 – Christ’s Unique Anointing in the Holy Spirit

There is another incredibly curious thing about “our Hierarchy”²⁹ as Dionysios calls it. Just as in the case of the celestial hierarchy, our hierarchy is made up of three groups of three – three triads. The curious thing is that while roles/vocations/people do in fact make up the elements of the two lower triads of our hierarchy, the three elements in the top triad are liturgical rites: the rite of illumination (baptism and chrismation), our direct participation in Christ’s anointed life (Eucharist/synaxis), and the rite of preparation of Myron for all sorts of anointing.

I think the surprise appearance of an entire chapter (chapter 4) of *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* dedicated to the preparation, properties and use of Myron/chrism can be explained quite simply. Especially in chapters 9-11 of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysios indicates that often the third element is the “revealing” element within a triad and the one that

²⁹ “Our hierarchy” is the subject of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

corresponds to processional energy that passes on in a revealed way what is possessed and manifested within that triad, to whatever is subsequent. I would argue, then, that the positioning of Myron as the third element of the first triad of our hierarchy *directly associates us with Christ's own anointing* in the sacrificial as well as the victorious aspects. This last point is driven home by the positioning of a large section about the consecration of the altar with Myron at the end of chapter 4.

Quite aside from this, there is no doubt that anointing plays a crucial role in the contents and structure of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Dionysios explicitly says that a man's life is bracketed by the oil of chrism after baptism at the beginning of life and the anointing of the body after death with chrism at the end. (EH 7.2.8) Major excurses within the structure focus on ordinations using chrism, monastic consecration (no chrism here but multiple mentions of the sign of the cross as well as the Eucharist). Dionysios repeatedly stresses that one anointed with Myron is "of good odour," a clear allusion to a well ordered life as "the sweet savoured and hidden beauty will confer the unerring and most Godlike appearance." (EH 4.3.1)

There are also a couple of passages in which Dionysios writes explicitly about *what Christ does*. In one of these passages, in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* chapter 3 on the Eucharist, he suddenly retells the whole of salvation history beginning with the fall, describing the incarnation as Christ "having truly participated sinlessly in all things belonging to us and having been made one with our lowliness" and then – just as we would expect the story to reach climax with the crucifixion and resurrection – Dionysios writes that Christ as the presence of the whole Godhead "bequeaths to us...communion with Itself (the Godhead) and proclaims us partakers of Its own beautiful things; having...loosed the power of the rebellious multiplicity, which was against us; not by force as having the upper hand, but *according to the Logion*, mystically transmitted to us, 'in judgment and in righteousness.'"

This little phrase, "according to the Logion," only appears five times in the CD, and clearly has very specific significance and meaning.^{30 31} In every case it is clearly the theme of anointing, or the

³⁰ Here are the other four instances: 1) at EH 3.3.12: "Wherefore the Divine Hierarchy, standing before the Divine Altar, extols the aforesaid holy works of God, which proceed from the most divine forethought of Jesus on our behalf, which He accomplished for preservation of our race, by the good pleasure of the most Holy Father in the Holy Spirit, according to the Logion." 2) at EH 4.3.10: "Thus the most Divine Order of supercelestial Beings did not fail to recognize the most supremely Divine Jesus, when He descended for the purpose of being sanctified; but recognizes, reverently, Him lowering Himself in our belongings, through Divine and inexpressible goodness; and when viewing Him

character and aspects of Christ's anointing in dual aspect as both king/victor and sacrifice which is at stake, and which in turn unites the five instances of the phrase. In the first instance, just quoted, we have the straight-forward assertion that salvation (victory) is accomplished (and mystically transmitted to us) not by force but by self-sacrifice. In the second instance (at *EH* 3.3.12) we have the bishop standing at the altar (stressing sacrifice) and proclaiming Christ's victory for us by the action of the whole Trinity. In the third instance (at *EH* 4.3.10) we see that when Christ "descended for the purpose of being sanctified" the order of angels "recognized its own Supreme Head as being essentially unchanged in whatever He may do as supreme God." Here it is quite clear that Christ acts eternally "according to the Logion" and, as such, is called "Sanctified Sanctifying." In this sense, the victory of the cross is even eternal and pre-existent! It appears that Luther was wrong about the cross having little place in Dionysios. It isn't that the cross plays no part in the CD. It is that the cross is so big and so inclusive of all of reality that one might easily miss it while searching for familiar expressions on a smaller scale.

Having noted the eternal element of Christ's anointing, we are now in a position to describe the simplex fractal unit as the *unique* procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father to rest and remain in the Son, anointing him eternally as son of the Living God and in time as

sanctified, in a manner befitting man, by the Father and Himself and the Holy Spirit, recognized its own supreme Head as being essentially unchanged, in whatever He may do as supreme God. Hence the tradition of the sacred symbols places the Seraphim near the Divine Myron, when it is being consecrated, recognizing and describing the Christ as unchanged, in our complete manhood in very truth. And what is still more divine is, that it uses the Divine Myron for the consecration of everything sacred, distinctly shewing, according to the Logion, the Sanctified Sanctifying, as always being the same with Himself throughout the whole supremely Divine sanctification." 3) at *EH* 4.3.12: "For if our most Divine Altar is Jesus--the supremely Divine sanctifying of the Godly Minds --in Whom, according to the Logion, "being sanctified and mystically offered as a whole burnt-offering, we have the access," let us gaze with supermundane eyes upon the most Divine Altar itself (in which things being perfected, are perfected and sanctified), being perfected from the most Divine Myron itself; for the altogether most holy Jesus sanctifies Himself on our behalf, and fills us full of every sanctification, since the things consecrated upon them pass fraternally afterwards in their beneficent effects to us, as children of God." 4) at 5.1.2 "...the Godhead gave the Hierarchy under the Law, imparting its most holy gifts, for the benefit of our race, to them (as being children according to the Logion..."

³¹ Even the word "logion" ("to logion") is not one found elsewhere in the CD; it is used only on two other occasions in the entire CD, in both of these clearly meaning a quote from the Bible.

Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, and through her, of all creation.³² And getting back to our neo-Platonic, philosophical language, Dionysian “procession,” broadly speaking, lines up with Christ’s anointing.

The fourth instance of “according to the logion” (*EH* 5.1.2) states simply that we are also sons of God, “according to the Logion.” And here we move to the second iteration and complication of the first simplex shape – what happens when Christ shares his anointing with us.

Shape No.2 – Christ’s Anointing Shared with Us

As is manifestly evident in that the oil of Christ’s anointing drips down from the top of our hierarchy, Christ has every intention of sharing his anointing with us. Therefore Dionysios writes of God “imparting himself with an unbending power for deification of those turned to Him” (*DN* 9.5), that “although his essential nature is similar to none; he bequeaths a Divine similarity to those who turn to Him” (*DN* 9.6), and that Christ “stamped those who live [God-imitating lives] with the cruciform image of His own sinlessness.” (*EH* 5.3.4)

It is only natural, that as the more eminent fractal level, Christ’s anointing would include within itself the shape that describes his sharing of this anointing with us. Patitsas calls this second shape a chiasm, and we can also find much direct evidence for this same chiasm within the CD. Mapping Patitsas’s description of the chiasmic shape into the language of this paper we might define the chiasm as a relationship between two beings in which each being accepts its (priestly/sonly) anointing in relation to God by means of sacrificially embracing its relative hierarchical position to the other in a specific relational instance. This mutual embrace causes the release of a wave of God’s creative power which has effects both external to and internal to the beings in the pair. With many specific examples from the center of Orthodox liturgy and dogma, Patitsas has shown that what happens through this wave of creativity – again translating into the language of this paper – is that the being functioning on the eminent fractal level becomes inclusive of the manifesting level and the being functioning on the manifesting fractal level becomes possessed of the eminent level. In this sense, it can be said

³² This is a slight adaptation (to match Dionysian themes and theology) of a Patitsas’s suggested alternate creedal statement. In his suggested reformulation, Patitsas uses the Palamite understanding of Trinitarian dogma (Father as unique Source or Spirit, Son as destination and Spirit as the person in whom the Son turns and offers himself to the Father) to attempt a statement which would be acceptable both to those who include and to those who don’t include the Filioque in their recitation of the creed. Patitsas, T. *The King Returns to his City*, p.88.

that each level becomes the truest symbol of the other level. This external “chiastic reversal” between the beings also simultaneously effects an internal reversal within each of the beings, which mirrors the external reversal and constitutes the transformation of the being itself.

A specific example of this chiastic reversal affecting the theology of hierarchy in the CD is when Dionysius says that the Divine rank of Bishops is “at the same time the highest and the lowest [rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy] in as much as every order of our hierarchy is summed up and fulfilled in it” and that one and the same power of the bishop “permeates the whole sacred body.”³³ (EH 5.1.5)

It is the *Divine Names*, however, which is positively permeated with the chiastic shape. Recall that neo-Platonic procession and reversion don’t actually make sense except in relation to each other, and the discussion above of *Divine Names*, chapter 4. The chiasm is present ubiquitously in *Divine Names*, even at the cognitive fractal level. Recall Yannaras’s assertion that true apophaticism engenders personal and participatory knowledge by making use of both affirmations and negations “in most sweet conjunction” in order to transform conceptual opposition into depiction in images (which are available for participation). This is the very method of the *Divine Names*. In addition, we have some Dionysian descriptions of the actions proper to eminent and manifesting fractal levels involved in chiastic relationship, and these also echo Patitsas’s. Dionysius writes that the activity proper to a being functioning on an eminent fractal level is providential “vigorous assimilation and elevation of the subordinate” through “ungrudging communication to those next to them by the stream of given wisdom” (CH 7.1). By contrast, the activity proper to beings functioning on the manifesting/possessive level is reverential *agnosia* or unwillingness to objectify the relational partner, as seen specifically in the section on Beauty and Eros in *Divine Names* chapter 4 and in the *Mystic Theology*, and poignantly in the fact that even the very *receptivity* of beings – their capacity for reversion which constitutes them as beings rather than as God – is itself a gift!

³³ This explains, for instance, why a priest does all he does by the power/authority of the bishop. It is in this same sense that Perl says that for Dionysius every level of being has cognition “in manner proper to itself”: cognitive beings intellectually, living beings vitally, and mere beings ontically. Perl, *Theophany*, 71.

Conclusion

Perl has a term he uses for the sort of theophany via fractal-hierarchy that we see in Dionysios. He calls it “immediate mediation”³⁴. This term covers the common objection that hierarchy necessarily entails ranks of beings standing between me and God – another relic of onto-theological thought. Fractal-hierarchy necessarily implies that there is “no contradiction between a hierarchical structure of reality and the immediate constitutive presence of God to all things”³⁵ and is therefore more able to accurately describe the complex, organic, personal, relational structure of reality. As we have just seen in examples using more traditional theological language, it is only inside the simplex fractal shape of Christ’s *unique* anointing by the Holy Spirit that we, too, can be polished and reflective mirrors and therefore take part in the divine, creative life.

So can we say anything meaningful about power and freedom for participants of fractal-hierarchy? I think we can. First of all, as Perl notes, it is precisely egalitarian leveling which closes off access to power if the structure of reality is hierarchical. Secondly, power is certainly available for all within this sort of hierarchy; though, on the other hand, on this account of the fractal building blocks, power is only accessible if we exhibit priestly – or cruciform, as Dionysios puts it – behavior. It appears that this entails selfless, sacrificial providential giving of the very contents of oneself for any being functioning on an eminent fractal level, and sacrificial willingness to forego objective knowledge in favor of unifying personal knowledge for any being functioning on a manifesting, possessive level. And, of course, the fractal nature of reality will mean that all beings will always be functioning on both these levels in different aspects of their infinitely complex internal and external relationships with other beings. Only Christ, who in his anointing shows us the revealed simplex version of our fractal, manifests the *pure gift* of the entire Trinitarian life which is “intrinsically ecstatic”, which is to say that fully being *in* himself consists of fully being *out* of himself and that his pure interiority corresponds with his pure exteriority, as in the 4th chapter of *Divine Names*.³⁶

There is certainly freedom within a fractal-hierarchy, if freedom is understood as freedom to participate in God’s creative activity. One freedom we do not have, however, is the freedom to obtain real creative

³⁴ Perl, *Theophany*, 79.

³⁵ Perl, *Theophany*, 72.

³⁶ See Perl, *Theophany*, 46.

power by some means other than participation in the fractal-hierarchy itself, the grammar of which is the grammar of God himself.

Ultimately, then, our struggle is much less a matter of getting the perfect understanding or definition of hierarchy and much more a matter of being perfect as Christ is perfect. We may – and probably do – feel that this is a very risky business due to the perceived dangers of pursuing self-sacrifice if those around us do not do the same. On the other hand, even when those around us do not do the same, within a fractal-hierarchy *the energies of God themselves* are actually accessible to us, particularly through our power to initiate “feedback loops” by refusing to objectify (all sorts of beings from people to mental objects) and by relentlessly pursuing sacrificial personal relationship with other creatures. This final point may be a sort of proof that, somewhat unsurprisingly, risky sacrificial action is the only true key to escaping the irrational, even non-sensical, non-grammar of repeated power abuse.³⁷

³⁷ Risky sacrificial action stands in sharp contrast to passivity, which, as non-reversion, or lack of response to God’s call to fulfill one’s vocation, actually constitutes evil for Dionysius.