

## **Saint Dionysius**

**The prevailing academic view on Proclus's doctrine on evil as expressed, for example, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is: "Dionysius the Areopagite adopted Proclus' views on evil in his work On the Divine Names. Thanks to this adaptation Proclus' doctrine of evil had an enormous influence on the later medieval discussions on evil both in Byzantium and in the Latin West and dominated the philosophical debates on evil up to the 19th century.**

**In fact Proclus' and Dionysius' articulation of the doctrine of evil is so similar that it seems most likely one copied from the other: Dionysius copied from Proclus or Proclus copied from Dionysius. It is then, without reason, or rather against reason, assumed that Dionysius copied from Proclus even though according to history Dionysius lived in the first century and Proclus in the fifth century. Indeed for centuries, writers assumed that Proclus did copy.**

**In The Sacred Writings of Pseudo-Clementine, which was quoted by Origen, and therefore must be dated not later than the first half of the third century, we read: the belief "You say that all confess the existence of evil, is very false, or, first of all, the whole Hebrew nation deny its existence." and again "we say absolutely that there is no evil in substance". This belief can be understood because according to their Scriptures after God created everything He "saw that it was good." Likewise in Christian belief because God, who is all good, created he everything "ex nihilo" there is no room for evil.**

**As we can see the the original error of ascribing the non-substantial existence of evil to Proclus (instead of being an idea that he copied from earlier sources}, resulted in the belief that Dionysius who held, in the same terms, that belief, must have existed after Proclus whom they mistakenly accused Dionysius of copying.**

**Born in Constantinople a few years after the death of Saint John Crisostomo, Proclus spent most of his life in Athens where Dionysius of Corinth, as reported by the historian Eusebius, affirms that Dionysius had been Bishop. It wouldn't seem improbable that a manuscript of Dionysius' writings might still have survived in Athens. In any case Proclus was a highly prolific writer and judging by this writings, had an extensive library at his disposition as one of the last heads (Diadochi) of the New Academy chosen because he did not hesitate to publicly act out his pagan rituals even amidst the growing Christian society. He would for example turn on a public corner to offer his prayers to the sun god.**

**Following, without much originality, along the Neoplatonist lines of Plotinus, Proclus succeeded only in multiplying the stages of emanations, writing a lot, often quoting others, such as Porphyry, without giving his source. There is a lack of originality such that his work could be considered an anthology. Philoponus attacking his work "On the Eternity of the World" even accuses him of knowingly falsifying the words of Plato.**

**Having been converted by Saint Paul, Dionysius writings have always had a place of honor just after the canonical writings. In 827 the legate of the Emperor, Michael Balbi, brought to King Louis the Pious the works of Dionysius the Aeropagite. The king handed the manuscript over to the monastery of Saint Dionysius on the vigil of his feast day, the**

next night 19 miracles of healing occurred.

Much weight has been given to the opposition of Bishop Hypathius, but he was the Bishop of Ephesus which guarded the tradition of the Blessed Mothers death in that city, and Dionysius relates how he viewed her body after her death in Jerusalem.

The renaissance humanist Laurensius Valla attacked the writings challenging that Dionysius was too far away to see the eclipse at the time of the Crucifixion even though the Gospel affirm that it was seen around the world.

Most of the modern attacks have center around supposed anachronisms in the writings, even though they are theological common places, or liturgical practices current here and there before they became universally normative.

The fact that the work seems to be unknown for a few centuries after Dionysius would have died, while interesting, is not probative of anything and is far from unique among famous works. In the last century, for example, about 100 new letters or sermons of Saint Augustine have turned up. Saint Louis de Montfort's "True Devotion" was discovered almost 150 years after he wrote it.

Among the lost works of Proclus is one called: **AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS** or his treatise **ON THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD** which, as providence would have it, was preserved in Philoponus' work: **AGAINST PROCLUS**. Proclus' treatise was written to disprove the Christian doctrine of creation. He presents 18 arguments for why the world is eternal to which Philoponus responds maintaining that "Anything that depended on an infinite number of prior steps would never arrive". H. D. Saffrey points out its antichristian, tone. "(F)or Proclus Christians are strangers to the Greek world, ignorant people desirous of power, persons with whom it is useless to discuss philosophy."

With the spread of Christianity there was an ever shrinking population of pagans. Proclus was not just an average practicing pagan, but someone intent on showing the superiority of the Greek culture. There were still those who made themselves a bulwark of the old pagan order. Proclus could be considered one of the principle examples. A prolific writer he began composing what became a copious multi-volume summary of many branches of the Greek heritage.

A good part of his work however was collected from prior authors. Besides plagiarizing, without acknowledgment, from Porphyry and probably also from Iamblichus and, no doubt, from many others, there was very little in his opus that was original, as even contemporary authors recognized. Olympidorus outright suspected that he published a work of Syrianus, his teacher and master, as if it were his own book.

Proclus' **SUBSISTENCE OF EVIL** contains a number of sentences very closely resembling those from Dionysius' **DIVINE NAMES**. The fact seems to be that either Proclus copied from Dionysius or Dionysius copied from Proclus. The widespread belief that the author of **DIVINE NAMES** copied from Proclus is just a theory. From that time, however, there is no evidence, eyewitness account or contemporary report or even suspicion that that happened.

To bolster this theory, it is often said that **DIVINE NAMES** contains second-century Neo-platonic ideas such as emanationism. It is necessary to distinguish the Biblical understanding of emanation from the Neo-platonic or Plotinian understanding of that

word. In the Book of Wisdom we read: "For she (wisdom) is a vapour of the power of God, and a certain pure emanation of the glory of the almighty God...." In the system of which Plotinus is characteristic, all reality proceeds ultimately from a single source or principle but in a succession whereby each reality proceeds from the prior reality. Because, on the other hand, we believe that each genus or species proceeds from the first principle, the Deity, emanation does not refer to the passing on of being but of spiritual gifts such as wisdom or, as in the case of the choirs of angels, sharing knowledge one to another by a process that can be called emanation.

Dionysius, then, does not refer to emanation in the Neo-platonic sense, but follows, rather, the Biblical understanding of emanate. In this he follows Philo Judeus. It should not surprise us that Dionysius would follow Philo. They were both attempting to reconcile Philosophical truths with the Scriptures. Philo therefore would have provided Dionysius with a model or forerunner, we could say, in that endeavor.

In fact, except for his Christian beliefs, Dionysius follows directly or indirectly Philo very closely. Both affirm that God is invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, inconceivable, outright unknowable and even unnamable. Both affirm that Revelation is the only sure source of truth concerning God. Both adopt the negative way for knowledge of God. Both affirm that the Good is above Being. Both aim to establish transcendence. Both have a predilection for contemplation. Both believe providence to be general and particular. Both acknowledge allegoric and symbolic value. Both affirm the creation of the world. Both have virtue as the goal in life. Both adopt the little used term of "therapeutae" when referring to certain ascetics. Both Philo and Dionysius lacked any usual Philosophical affiliation.

Dionysius came to many of the same conclusions as Philo. Although Dionysius does not explicitly refer to Philo, he repeatedly disclaims credit for himself and affirms that he is following his teacher Hierotheus, "the Tradition of our inspired teachers", the Ecclesiastical Tradition, the elders or the ancients.

In summary, we conclude, that the author of the Dionysian Corpus builds on ideas that were already in circulation in the 2nd or even the 1st century and has no need of copying from Neo-platonism of the 3rd century, or Proclus of the 5th century and that the snippets of his writings found in a work of Proclus were more likely to have been incorporated there by Proclus himself, a known "anthologist" of other authors.

## Part II

Among the lost works of Proclus is one called: AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS or his treatise ON THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD which, as providence would have it, was preserved in Philoponus' work: AGAINST PROCLUS. Proclus' treatise was written to disprove the Christian doctrine of creation. He presents 18 arguments for why the world is eternal to which Philoponus responds maintaining that "Anything that depended on an infinite number of prior steps would never arrive". H. D. Saffrey points out its antichristian, tone. "(F)or Proclus Christians are strangers to the Greek world, ignorant people desirous of power, persons with whom it is useless to discuss philosophy."

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**Saint Dionysius and the other 13 Holy Helpers: Pray for us.**

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