A Hymn to God Assigned to Gregory of Nazianzus and Its Neoplatonic Context

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Abstract

The paper deals with an anonymous Hymn to God, which is attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus by some authors, but was most probably composed by a Christian Neoplatonist such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The paper explores the hymn's relation to Neoplatonic theories of prayer and shows that these affinities are broader in scope than has previously been recognised. Some Pagan and Christian Neoplatonists, including the author of the Hymn to God, seem to have shared the idea of a cosmic prayer by which all beings tend towards God, a prayer founded on the knowledge of the 'signatures' (synthemata) that God rooted in our souls.

Keywords

hymn – prayer – Neoplatonism – Gregory of Nazianzus – Theodorus of Asine – Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

The Hymn to God ascribed to Gregory of Nazianzus has troubled more than one scholarly reader of the Church Fathers: the hymn does not mention Jesus Christ, and it glorifies instead the inaccessibility of God, his unknowable and unspeakable nature in a vocabulary whose Neoplatonic mark has not escaped its commentators. Since the hymn was included among the manuscripts of Gregory of Nazianzus, it was long thought that Gregory was
its author. It was included in the collection of Gregory of Nazianzus’ works published by J. P. Migne in 19th century, \(^1\) which still remains the standard edition of Gregory’s works. A contemporary specialist of Gregory, Jean Bernardi, still believes, as he stated in his monograph published twenty years ago, that Gregory is the author of the hymn. \(^2\)

However, there have been doubts about the authenticity of the *Hymn to God* for long time. The first scholar who doubted its authorship seems to have been the 19th century French philosopher Victor Cousin, editor of Proclus and Descartes and translator of Plato. \(^3\) He concluded that its language and content are rather Neoplatonic and supposed that its author was Proclus since the hymn contains numerous parallels with Proclus, especially with his commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides*. This idea of Proclus’ authorship was revived later in the 19th century by Friedrich Creuzer \(^4\) and his student Albert Jahn, \(^5\) and in the last century by Laurence J. Rosán, in his well-received *Philosophy of Proclus*. \(^6\) However, since the middle of the 20th century this view has found only few defenders. Symptomatically, the two editors of Proclus’ hymns (D. Giordano and E. Vogt) did not retain the hymn in their editions.

The latest study in this respect belongs to Martin Sicherl, who showed, analysing the manuscript tradition, that the author of the hymn is certainly not Gregory. \(^7\) He also showed that its Neoplatonic ideas and language are not restricted to those of Proclus and may also be found in other authors like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Since the hymn is present in some manuscripts that contain the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Sicherl concludes that Dionysius is as likely a candidate for its authorship; a conclusion with which Henri Dominique Saffrey and Robbert van den Berg also agree. \(^8\)

I think Sicherl is right, but I shall not discuss here whether the hymn was composed or not by Pseudo-Dionysius. I take for granted the commonly admitted fact that it comes from a Neoplatonic milieu, and I shall try to show, by exploring its relation with the Neoplatonic theories of prayer, that these affinities are broader than has previously been recognised.

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1. PG 37, 597–598.
3. Cousin 1832, 752.
First, I propose a tentative translation of the hymn and I shall examine further some of its aspects which deserve, in my opinion, to be related to Neoplatonic theology.

_Hymn to God_

O, You who are beyond all, is it allowed to celebrate You differently?

Ὦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα τί γὰρ θέμις ἄλλο σε μέλπειν;

How can a speech praise You? Because you cannot be spoken by any speech.

Πῶς λόγος ὑμνήσει σε; σὺ γὰρ λόγῳ οὐδενὶ ῥητόν.

How can an intellect perceive You? Because you cannot be grasped by any intellect.

Πῶς νόος ἀθρήσει σε; σὺ γὰρ νόῳ οὐδενὶ ληπτός.

You alone are unutterable. Since You are the cause of all that is spoken.

Μοῦνος ἐὼν ἄφραστος. ἐπεὶ τέκες ὅσσα λαλεῖται.

You alone are unknowable. Since You are the cause of all that is thought.

Μοῦνος ἐὼν ἄγνωστος. ἐπεὶ τέκες ὅσσα νοεῖται.

Everything that speaks and does not speak proclaims You with a clear voice.

Πάντα σε καὶ λαλέοντα καὶ οὐ λαλέοντα λιγαίνει.

Everything that thinks and does not think honours You.

Πάντα σε καὶ νοέοντα καὶ οὐ νοέοντα γεραίρει.

For all the desires and all the pains (of everything)

Ξυνοὶ γάρ τε πόθοι, ξυναὶ δ’ ὠδῖνες ἁπάντων

embrace You. To You all things pray

Ἀμφὶ σέ. σοὶ δὲ τὰ πάντα προσεύχεται.

And everything which knows your signature addresses You a silent hymn.

eἰς σὲ δὲ πάντα σύνθεμα σὸν νοέοντα λαλεῖ σιγώμενον ὕμνον.

In You alone all things remain. To You all things rush together.

Σοὶ ενὶ πάντα μένει. σοὶ δ’ ἀθρόα πάντα θοάζει.
You are the end of all things, you are the One, the All, and the Nothing,
Καὶ πάντων τέλος ἐσσὶ, καὶ εἷς, καὶ πάντα, καὶ οὐδεὶς,

You are not one, not all. You who have all the names, how shall I call You,
Οὐχ ἓν ἐὼν, οὐ πάντα. Πανώνυμε, πῶς σε καλέσσω,

The only unspeakable? The veils above the clouds,
Τὸν μόνον ἀκλήϊστον; Ὑπερνεφέας δὲ καλύπτρας

What heavenly intellect will penetrate (them)? Be favourable.
Τίς νόος οὐρανίδης εἰσδύσεται; Ἐλαος εἶης

O, You who are beyond all, is it allowed to celebrate You differently?
Ὅ πάνων ἐπέκεινα τί γὰρ θέμις ἄλλο σε μέλπειν;

I would like to start by analysing the following verses and the manner in which they could be related to Proclus’ theory of prayer:

All that speaks and does not speak proclaims You with a clear voice.
Πάντα σε καὶ λαλέοντα καὶ οὐ λαλέοντα λιγαίνει.
All that thinks and does not think honours You.
Πάντα σε καὶ νοέοντα καὶ οὐ νοέοντα γεραίρει.
[...] To You all things pray
σοὶ δὲ τὰ πάντα προσεύχεται.

In late Neoplatonism (at least since Iamblichus), prayer is no longer defined as a request addressed to God and as a peculiar kind of speech, but rather, as a process of return (an ἐπιστροφή) of the human soul to its principle, the One.9

In his reply to Porphyry (better known as De mysteriis), Iamblichus explains at length the role of prayer in the ascent of souls to the gods within the frame of his theory of the three degrees of prayer.10 Proclus proposed a peculiar version of this theory, by expanding the epistrophic function of prayer from the level of the human soul to the entire universe,11 a theory which seems to have been

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10 On Iamblichus’ theory of prayer, see Timotin 2014.
advanced for the first time by a less known 4th century Neoplatonist, a pupil of Porphyry, Theodorus of Asine.\textsuperscript{12}

In his \textit{Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus}, Proclus defines the nature of prayer in this manner: “Its essence is to bring together and bind together the souls to the gods, or rather, it unifies all the secondary beings with those that are prior. For, as the great Theodorus says, ‘all things pray except the First’” (tr. Runia and Share).\textsuperscript{13} We could remark that the formula of the \textit{Hymn to God} (σοὶ δὲ τὰ πάντα προσεύχεται) is nothing but a paraphrase of Theodorus’ statement.

According to this view, prayer defines the inner structure of the universe; that all things pray continuously means that all things are able to revert to the superior levels of reality and, ultimately, to the One, according to their nature and their place in the cosmic hierarchy. According to Proclus, this universal movement, metaphorically designated as prayer, is made possible by the two signatures of the One and of the Intellect that all beings possess in their nature: the μένειν (remaining in the One) and ἐπιστρέφειν (reverting to the One).\textsuperscript{14} It is quite obvious that this theory is present in the background of the following two verses of the \textit{Hymn to God}: “In You alone all things remain. To You all things rush together” (Σοὶ ἑνὶ πάντα μένει. σοὶ δ’ ἀθρόα πάντα θοάζε). The two signatures (μένειν and ἐπιστρέφειν) explain the universal trend towards the One, which Theodorus of Asine and Proclus define as a universal and continuous prayer.

This theory is clearly explained by Proclus also in his treatise \textit{On the hieratic art} (Περὶ τῆς ἱερατικῆς τέχνης), in relation to the heliotrope, the plant whose movements, led by the sun, are characterised as a hymn performed by the plant to honour the Sun, the god presiding over its chain:

Or why do heliotropes move together with the sun and the moonplants with the moon, accompanying the lights of the cosmos in as far as possible? Because, since everything prays according to its own order and celebrates in hymns the leaders of the whole series noerically or with words or physically or perceptibly, the heliotrope too moves to the extent that it is flexible. And if someone would be capable of hearing it hitting the

\textsuperscript{12} Deuse 1973, 35 = Theodorus of Asine, fr. 7.
\textsuperscript{13} Proclus, \textit{in Ti.} I, p. 212.30-213.3 Diehl: οὐσία μὲν αὐτής ἡ συναγωγάς καὶ συνιδετική τῶν ψυχῶν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ πάντων τῶν δευτέρων ἐνοποιίς πρὸς τὰ πρότερα· πάντα γάρ εὐχέται πλὴν τοῦ πρῶτου, φησίν ὁ μέγας Θεόδωρος [= Theodorus of Asine, fr. 7 Deuse].
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., I, 210.11-14.
air as it turns around, he would observe that by means of this sound it renders to the King a kind of hymn, that a plant is capable of singing.\textsuperscript{15}  

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The kind of hymn sung by the heliotrope is precisely the “silent hymn” mentioned in the \textit{Hymn to God}, performed both by animate and inanimate beings: “To You all things pray. And everything which knows your signature addresses You a silent hymn (\textit{eἰς σὲ δὲ πάντα σύνθεμα σὸν νοεόντα λαλεῖ σιγώμενον ὕμνον}).” The idea of the “silent prayer” certainly had an important career in both pagan and Christian milieus in Late Antiquity,\textsuperscript{16} but I think the “silent hymn” in the \textit{Hymn to God} has to be related precisely to this doctrine.

I am also inclined to think that the theory according to which all things pray in their own manner was rather a commonplace in late Pagan and Christian Neoplatonism, since we find it not only in Theodorus of Asine, Proclus, and in the \textit{Hymn to God}, but also in the hymns of Synesius, the Neoplatonist bishop of Cyrene in the early 5th century. In his first hymn (in the Lacombrade edition) one could find this verse: \textit{σοὶ πάντα φέρει αἶνον ἀγήρων}. “All things bring You endless praise”,\textsuperscript{17} which is another paraphrase of the \textit{Hymn to God} formula. One could say that the idea of a cosmic litany that all things address to God is shared by more than one Pagan and Christian Neoplatonist; the \textit{Hymn to God} is part of an intellectual history which goes back to Iamblichus’ theory of prayer.

I would like to return now to this key verse of the \textit{Hymn to God}: “And everything which knows your signature addresses You a silent hymn”. Two different ideas are present in this verse which echo different aspects of the Neoplatonic theory of prayer: the former is that the universal hymn or prayer is conditioned by a basic theological knowledge; the latter, related to the first, is that this specific knowledge concerns the \textit{synthemata}, the signatures or the symbols of God in the universe. I shall refer to each of the two aspects successively:

1) Let’s start with the problem of knowledge as a precondition of prayer. In his polemics with Porphyry, Iamblichus, in the first book of \textit{De mysteriis}, tries

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\item Bidez 1928, 148.10-18: “Ἡ πόθεν ἡλιοτρόπια μὲν ἡλίῳ, σεληνοτρόπια δὲ σελήνῃ συγκινεῖται συμπεριπολούντα ἐξ δύναμιν τοῦ κόσμου φωστήρας; Εὐχεται γὰρ πάντα κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν τάξιν καὶ ὑμνεῖ τοὺς ἡγεμόνας τῶν σειρῶν ἢ νοερῶς ἢ λογικῶς ἢ φυσικῶς ἢ αἰσθητῶς ἢ πολλάκις ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ ἡλιοτρόπιον ᾧ ἔστιν εὔλυτον, τοῦτον κινεῖται καὶ, εἰ δὴ τὶς αὐτοῦ κατὰ τὴν περιστροφὴν ἀκούειν τὸν άερα πλήσσοντος οὗτος τὸ θεόν, ὕμνον ἐν τινα διὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τούτου συνήκερτο τῷ Βασιλεῖ προσάγοντος, ὃν δύναται φυτὴν ὑμνεῖν.
\item See Versnel 1981, 26-37; Van der Horst 1994; Bitton-Ashkelony 2012.
\item Synesius, \textit{Hymns} I, 343-344 Lacombrade.
\end{enumerate}
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to demonstrate that specific kinds of ritual prayer, like the λιτανεῖαι (the ‘supplications’), characterised by an attitude of abasement and humiliation before the gods, are fully appropriate inasmuch as they represent an expression both of the infinite distance, in all respects, between the gods and human nature, and of the consciousness (συναισθήσις) of our own insignificance and nothingness (οὐδενεία) before the gods, which leads us naturally to implore them:

But prayers of petition, you say, are not suitable for presentation to the purity of the Intellect. Not so: for by reason of this very circumstance, i.e. that we are inferior to the gods in power and in purity and all other respects, it is eminently suitable that we entreat them to the greatest degree possible. The consciousness of our own nothingness, if one judges it in comparison with the gods, makes us naturally turn to supplications; and by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the level of the object of our supplication, and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it, and, starting from our own imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine.18

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According to this quite remarkable passage, the supplications are an expression of the οὐδενεία of the man in comparison to the gods and of the absolute superiority (ὑπεροχή) of gods.19 The awareness of the distance between the human and the divine natures turns us (τρέπεσθαι) naturally to supplicate the gods, it awakens the desire to implore them. The existence of this inborn desire is explained by the idea that man has an “innate knowledge” (ἔμφυτος γνώσις) of the divinity.20 This theory allows Iamblichus to say that the soul has within itself the capacity to return to gods, and that this capacity is realised

18 Iamblichus, Myst. 1 15, 36.5-17 Saffrey—Segonds: Ἀλλ' αἱ λιτανεῖαι, ὡς φής, ἀλλότριαι εἰς προσφέρεσθαι πρὸς τὴν τοῦ νοὸς καθαρότητα. Οὐδέναμως δὲ αὐτὸ γὰρ τοιούτο, διδύτης τῇ δυνάμει καὶ καθαρότητι καὶ τοῖς πάσι τῶν θεῶν ἀπολειπόμεθα, ἐγκαιρότατον ἐστι πάντων ἱκετεύειν αὐτοὺς εἰς ὑπερβολὴν. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ συναισθήσις τῆς παρὰ ἑαυτούς οὐδενείας, εἰ τις ἡμᾶς παραβάλλων τοῖς θεοῖς κρίνει, ποιεῖ τρέπεσθαι πρὸς τὰς λιτὰς αὐτοφυῶς· ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς ἱκετείας κατὰ βραχὺ πρὸς τὸ ἱκετεύμενον ἰσογέμεθα, καὶ τὴν πρὸς αὐτὸ ὁμοιότητα ἀπὸ τοῦ συνεχῶς αὐτῷ προσομιλείν κτώμεθα, τελειώτητα τε τε βείαν ἥρεμα προσλαμβάνομεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀτελοῦς.

19 See Feichtinger 2003, especially 136-138.

20 See Iamblichus, Myst. 1 3, 5.15-20 Saffrey—Segonds: Συνυπάρχει γὰρ ἡμῶν αὐτῇ τῇ οὐσίᾳ ἢ πρὸς τό θεῖον ἐμφύτου γνώσις, κρίσεως τε πάσης ἐστὶ κρείττων καὶ προαιρέσεως, λόγου τε καὶ ἀποδείξεως προϋπάρχει· συνήνωσις τε τῇ ἄρχῃ πρὸς τὴν οἰκεῖαν αἰτίαν, καὶ τῇ πρὸς τὰ γαθόν οὐσίαν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐφέσε εὐφανέστηκεν. 'For an innate knowledge about the gods is coexistent with our nature, and is superior to all judgement and choice, reasoning and proof.
inasmuch as the soul becomes aware of its place in the universe, that is, more precisely, of its inferior position compared to the gods. So, the supplication appears as an expression of the awareness of the place of the soul in the universe; this awareness is based on an ἔμφυτος γνῶσις, an “innate knowledge”, which makes the prayer possible.

In Iamblichus’ theory of prayer, exposed in the fifth book of De mysteriis, the first degree of prayer, which raises the soul of the priest, is defined precisely as a preliminary awareness (γνώρισις) of the presence of the gods. According to Proclus, who extended Iamblichus’ classification from three to five levels of prayer, its first degree is also represented by the initial knowledge (γνῶσις) of the classes of gods. This γνῶσις is a theological knowledge whose purpose is to make the one who prays familiar with the gods by the knowledge of their properties (ἰδιότηται). The prayer is conditioned by this knowledge. In Iamblichus’ and Proclus’ theology, the prayer and, more generally, the piety are inseparable from the knowledge of the divine classes and of their properties.

2) The knowledge of the divine classes and of their distinct properties is made possible by the existence in the universe and, especially, in the human souls of the συνθήματα of the gods. The knowledge of the gods is basically the knowledge of their symbols, and with this problem we touch the second aspect I want to discuss.

According to a theory which goes back ultimately to the Chaldaean Oracles, these signatures (marks or symbols) of the gods are widespread in the material world (they could be inanimate objects, effigies or amulets associated with a specific god, but also secret names of the gods, ἄρρητα ὀνόματα); they allow those who know them to go up to the gods and to enter into contact with them. According to Proclus, two συνθήματα are universal and fundamental: μένειν and ἂν γὰρ ἂν ἀσκείσαι ἁγίας ὤψις ἐγνώσεις τῶν θείων τάξεων πασῶν, αἷς πρόσεισιν ὁ εὐχόμενος...
The first one allows all things to remain in contact with the One after being partially separated from it; the second one allows all things, inasmuch as they are separated from the One, to return to it: “All things, therefore, both remain in and revert to the gods, receiving this ability from them and obtaining in their very being a double signature (συνθήματα), the one in order to remain there, the other so that what proceeds forth can return”.

The demiurge sets in the souls, according to the One (κατὰ τὸ ἓν), the “character” of μένειν and according to the Intellect (κατὰ τὸν νοῦν) the “character” of ἐπιστρέφειν, through which all beings are able to revert to their principle. These two συνθήματα, which are found at all the levels of the universe, make prayer possible. The presence of these two συνθήματα in inanimate objects explains, according to Proclus, the sympathy that can be observed between a special object and a specific god or, more precisely, a chain (σειρά) of gods. As we already saw in the case of the heliotrope, some objects have affinities with the sun, others with the moon, and so on.

In my opinion, the verse “And everything which knows your signature addresses You a silent hymn” alludes specifically to the theory of two συνθήματα, since the following verse mentions precisely the two preconditions which allow us to return to God: all things are partially not separate from God and, inasmuch as they are separate, they go back to Him: “In You alone all things

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24 Proclus, in Ti. I, 210.11-14 Diehl: πάντ’ οὖν καὶ μένει καὶ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς, ταύτην λαβόντα παρ’ αὐτῶν τὴν δύναμιν καὶ διὰ τὰ συνθήματα κατ’ οὕσιν ὑποδεξάμενα, τὰ μὲν ὅπως ἐν ἔκει μένη, τὰ δὲ ὅπως ἐν ἐπιστρέφει προελθόντα. See also Inst. 39 (and the commentary of Dodds 1933, 222-223).

25 Proclus, in Ti. I, 210.16-26 Diehl: τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἐστὶ τὸ καὶ τούτοις τὴν συμπάθειαν πρὸς ἄλλας καὶ ἄλλας δυνάμεις ἐναπεργαζόμενου, ἢ τὸ σώμβολα παρὰ τῆς φύσεως εἰληχέναι, τὰ μὲν πρὸς ἄλλην, τὰ δὲ πρὸς ἄλλην οἰκειοῦντα σειρὰν θεῶν; ἀνωθέν γὰρ καὶ ἀπ’ αὐτῶν ἐξηρτημένη τῶν θεῶν ἡ φύσις καὶ διανενεμημένη περὶ τὰς τῶν θεῶν τάξεις ἐντίθησι καὶ τοῖς σώμασι τῆς πρὸς θεοὺς αὐτῶν οἰκειότητος συνθήματα, τοῖς μὲν Ἡλιακά, τοῖς δὲ Σεληνιακά, τοῖς δὲ ἄλλου τινός θεῶν, καὶ ἐπιστρέφει καὶ ταῦτα πρὸς θεοὺς, τὰ μὲν ὡς πρὸς θεοὺς ἀπλῶς, τὰ δὲ ὡς πρὸς τούσδε τοὺς θεοὺς, τελεσάσατα τὰ ἑαυτῆς γεννήματα κατ’ ἄλλην καὶ ἄλλην ἰδιότητα θεῶν. ‘For what else is it that produces the sympathy that they have towards the diverse powers than the fact that they have obtained symbols from nature, which causes them to correspond to the various classes of the gods? Nature is in fact suspended from the world above and the gods themselves, and she is distributed through the ranks of the gods. She thus also instils in the bodies the signatures of affinity to their gods, in the one case solar signatures, in another lunar, in others those of other gods, and she causes these things to revert to the gods as well, some to the gods in general, others to specific gods, bringing her products to completion in accordance with the various characteristics of the gods.’ (tr. Runia—Share) Cf. Plat. Theol. vi 4, 23.27-24.12; Iv 34, 101.4-7 Saffrey—Westerink.
remain. To You all things rush together” (Σοὶ ἑνὶ πάντα μένει. σοὶ δ’ ἀθρόα πάντα θοάζει).

Other aspects of the Hymn to God could be related to Neoplatonic theology, but, for this paper, I choose to restrict my comments to its relation with the Neoplatonic theories of prayer. This relation was, as far as I know, never underlined by those who studied the hymn. To summarize: the theory of a cosmic prayer by which all beings head towards God in their own manner, a prayer founded on the knowledge of the συνθήματα, of the signatures that God rooted in our souls, is a theory shared by more than one Pagan and Christian Neoplatonist in Late Antiquity. The author of the Hymn to God, Dionysius or someone else, shared these ideas and was a member of the same spiritual family.

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