
The phrase ‘often cited, seldom read’ could be applied to many philosophers in the Western canon, but it seems particularly apt for the writer known, among other things, as Pseudo-Dionysius. And the impact of this Christian Neoplatonist on thinkers as differently situated (historically and philosophically) as St Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Derrida, is one of the main channels for his fragmentary reception among modern readers. In Dionysius the Areopagite Between Orthodoxy and Heresy, Filip Ivanović has assembled a collection of eight essays by an international cast of scholars who are fully cognisant with the reception of Pseudo-Dionysius, but who have also immersed themselves in the writings of the philosopher himself. They offer a multifaceted picture of a writer with a substantial legacy in Christian thought, in both Eastern and Western traditions of the Church.

The author of the Corpus Dionysiacum adopted the literary persona of Dionysius the Areopagite, a first century Athenian who converted to Christianity following a personal encounter with St Paul, as documented in Acts of the Apostles (17:34): this member of the Areopagus is said to have become a ἐπίστευσαν (believer) having heard Paul proclaim the Resurrection of Christ. The Apostolic credentials claimed by the writer did no harm to his reputation in the medieval period, when such historical associations carried enormous theological authority within Christendom. The historical veracity of this connection to the Apostolic Age has long been rejected, however, and a significant body of opinion has gathered around a mysterious Syrian monk whose body of work was produced somewhere between the late fifth and early sixth century CE. Given the centuries of intrigue surrounding the identity of the so called ‘Areopagite’, it is appropriate that the first essay deals with this very matter.

In a self-consciously provocative but playful essay, Gorazd Kocijančič introduces his ‘philosophical approach’ to the ‘identity of Dionysus’ with the ambitious aim of helping to ‘rid him of the prefix Pseudo’ (p. 3). The argument which unfolds is less radical than one might think given such a bold introduction, and this counts in its favour: I confess to fearing the worst when a ‘challenge’ was proposed to ‘the fundamental presuppositions of the scientific approach to history’, by way of a philosophical hermeneutic which ‘demands the power of the abstraction of everything that is self-evident’ (p. 4). I should perhaps declare an interest here: as a historian of biblical scholarship as well as philosophy, the authority of Geschichtswissenschaft (historical science) is something of a default position, and, for all its limitations, it should not be taken lightly. It serves as our
most able guide in determining the provenance of texts signed in the name of historically situated persons. The characteristic principles of textual discrimination in *Geschichtswissenschaft* do not necessarily apply to the enduring meaning and significance of texts themselves, however, and through some penetrating reflections on the ‘ontological dimension’ of identity (p. 5) Kocijančič shows the limitations that a historical-critical approach places on our imaginative and philosophical relationship to ideas and writers of the past. Writers such as St Augustine, Martin Luther and Karl Barth can all be said to have written, authentically, ‘as the disciple of Paul’ (p. 7). Kocijančič seems justified in making this claim for (Pseudo-) Dionysius.

According to the publicity notice, this book is ‘intended for both specialists and non-specialists’. Overall, the collection can stake a claim to having fulfilled its aim, but some essays are rather more hospitable than others to the two audiences. For example, while the editor has produced a clear translation of Pietro Podolak’s essay, on positive and negative theology, from the original Italian (Chapter Two), there remain substantial quotations in untranslated classical and koine Greek, Latin, Italian, French and German. Engagement with the great languages of learning is essential in many fields of intellectual history, but the manner in which we report our findings can make the fruit of such researches more or less forbidding for the non-specialist (not to mention the non-polyglot) reader. Nevertheless, those readers with the requisite expertise (or patience) will find a rich and detailed discussion of the relationship between middle Platonic and patristic themes and Pseudo-Dionysius’s apophatic / cataphatic discourse on God. Podolak judges the aforementioned philosophical and theological traditions to be more likely channels of influence for Pseudo-Dionysius’s theological approach than any supposed reliance on Proclus Lycaeus or, indeed, his own innovation. Ivanović’s essay (Chapter Four) mercifully avoids blocks of untranslated foreign language text until, oddly, the very last page in his argument, but this does not spoil an otherwise fine piece on one of the most intriguing and controversial of Christian doctrines: θέωσις (deification). Ivanović provides a welcome corrective to an overemphasis on the importance of knowledge in Pseudo-Dionysus’s account of θέωσις, insisting that ‘one’s assent to God… has to be accompanied by a perfection in life and love in the hierarchical structure’ of divinity (p. 55).

The apophatic dimension of Pseudo-Dionysius’s thought is a reoccurring theme in this collection, and it takes centre stage in Stalle J Krisiansen’s essay (Chapter Six), which identifies the ‘awareness of God’s radical transcendence and alterity’ as ‘arguably the foremost characteristic of the Dionysian theology’ (p. 93). What follows is a clear but multi-layered discussion of the ‘aesthetic and iconic language’ of Pseudo-Dionysius’s theological reflections, advanced as they were as
an alternative to a ‘conceptual theology’ (p. 101) which threatens to ‘make God an object’ (p. 96). Krisiansen further illuminates the philosopher’s manner of coping with this ‘radical transcendence’ through brief excursions into modern readings by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion. Aesthetic considerations also feature in José Maria Nieva’s compact essay on ‘the semantics of eikon and participation’ in Pseudo-Dionysius (Chapter Five), where we learn how the semantics ‘expressed in the biblical and liturgical symbols’ demonstrate ‘that for Dionysius everything comes from God and returns to Him’ (p. 90). This scholarly, and at times technical, account of a theology of procession and return is distinguished by an economy of expression and clear English translations of quotations from primary sources, with the original Greek following immediately afterwards to facilitate quick comparisons.

Apophaticism returns as one of the themes in an unlikely gem of an essay by Jelena Bogdanović on the legacy of Pseudo-Dionysius in medieval architecture (Chapter Seven). In her remarkably lucid piece, Bogdanović is candid enough to admit that we may be ‘unable to isolate direct influences… on specific architectural accomplishments’ (p. 133). But given that Pseudo-Dionysius was such a significant contributor to the intellectual culture which produced such accomplishments, characterised by their blend of classical and Judeo-Christian motifs, he is a good point of departure for reflecting on the meaning of religious architecture in the medieval period. I found it equally rewarding, however, to read Bogdanović’s reflections on material culture as a powerful heuristic device to illuminate key themes in the Corpus Dionysiacum, not least those of hierarchy and symbolism. Apophaticism makes way for ‘predeterminations and providence’ as the central preoccupation in the final essay of the collection (p. 135), where Vladimir Cvetković argues convincingly and in detail for the dependence of Maximus the Confessor on the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius. The essay also intersects with other Pseudo-Dionysian themes treated in this collection, not least in its account of how, in both Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus, God’s providence ‘bestows well-being in the process of deification’ (p. 152).

Although this book does not claim a unified perspective on its subject, if the subtitle is indicative of the collection’s sense of where Pseudo-Dionysius sits with respect to the Christian theological tradition, it would have been helpful to have a clearly defined account of the concept of orthodoxy that is being proposed by the authors (neither ‘orthodoxy’ nor ‘heresy’ even appear in the index, although ‘orthopraxy’ does). Contrary to some popular assumptions, the boundaries of orthodoxy are not fixed but contextually variable, even though the orthodox stance inevitably lacks something of the fluidity and invention of heresy. There is evidence in the collection that some of the authors are thinking in terms of a commitment to the New Testament canon and the classic Christian creeds, which
is not a bad rule of thumb when discussing orthodoxy, although this could have been made more explicit from the outset. Seemingly working against the background of such presumptions, in Chapter Four Graciela Ritacco shows how Pseudo-Dionysius skilfully negotiates his philosophical ‘affinity with the Athenian Academy without distorting the Evangelical creed’ (p. 57); more specifically, without disrupting the Trinitarian concept of God. On the balance of this essay, and the others in this valuable collection, Pseudo-Dionysius can be said to have worked within the boundaries of orthodoxy as defined by the fourth-century councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. But things get more complicated when one considers his theology in relation to the grand compromise delivered at the Council of Chalcedon (p. 451), which is not explored in this collection. For historians of Christian thought who read Pseudo-Dionysius through the prism of his Misaphysite theology (one of the positions rejected at Chalcedon, in favour of the doctrine of the two natures), this philosopher surely worked outside the margins of orthodoxy as defined by the imperial Church during his own time. This ‘heretical’ position was overlooked for centuries by his many Christian admirers, in no small part because he was assumed to have walked alongside Paul in the Apostolic Age of faith, prior to the formalisation of such doctrines. ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’ is undoubtedly one of the most successful sobriquets in the history of the Eastern or Western Church, although as this collection shows, it is the philosophical-theology of this writer which should command our attention today.

Jonathan C. P. Birch
University of Glasgow
jonathan.birch@glasgow.ac.uk