"For even if it is true that Agape had at this time largely lost its force, yet that was not the reason why Dionysius preferred to speak of Eros. Eros was the reality he knew, so he naturally preferred to speak of the thing by its right name." — Anders Nygren

Let us start with Nygren's premiss that Eros was the reality Dionysius knew. How does Nygren mean us to take this statement? He means that Dionysius was familiar with the Eros of Neoplatonism and that he did not know (or understand) the opposite Christian motif of Agape. Assuming that Dionysius is familiar with Neoplatonism, particularly with the Neoplatonism of Proclus, what would he have found there? I have observed elsewhere that in the tradition of Platonism from the time of Plato himself Eros is seen not only as an appetitive, self-centred power, but as expansive and generous. Even Nygren admits that such an Eros is present in Proclus when he writes that Eros "is no longer merely an ascending love, but also and primarily a love that descends". He thinks that the influence of Christianity can be detected in Proclus; but there is no evidence whatever for that. The other influence he mentions, the ancient belief in Providence, is certainly present. It had always affected the character of Platonism from the time of Plato's Phaedrus, where a text dearly beloved of the Neoplatonists reads that "the higher cares for the lower and adorns it" (246B).

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4 Nygren, op. cit. 570.
The Eros that Dionysius finds in Proclus, in particular in his commentary on the *Alcibiades*, but also in general throughout his writings, is a descending Eros. It is also primarily a cosmic Eros, an Eros that is manifested in Providence. Naturally it has nothing to do with the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. It need not, however, be in opposition to that doctrine. To see whether it is in fact in opposition to that doctrine we should look at Dionysius himself. Dionysius is well aware, as Origen had been before him, that the term "Eros" is excluded from the New Testament. He feels obliged to defend his use of it. "Let no-one think we value this term contrary to Scriptural authority", he observes (708B); and again "so that we may not appear to be speaking in a spirit that involves tinkering with the divine Scriptures, let those who slander the name of Eros listen to the Scriptures themselves" (709A). But the Scriptures he produces are two passages only, the same two as Origen had employed; neither is from the New Testament.

But a justification for Dionysius' use of Eros does not depend on odd Scriptural references, nor on the problem of the true sense of the famous Ignatian phrase "My Eros is crucified", which, again following Origen, he quotes (709B). Nygren dismisses the suggestion of Horn that Dionysius uses the term Eros in preference to Agape because Agape had lost its force in the sixth century as irrelevant. Dionysius did not know what Agape means, is Nygren's view. Hence Dionysius found it merely an embarrassment in the Christian tradition and tried to expel it. But what if Dionysius' Eros is in fact equivalent or somewhere near equivalent to Agape? Then, since terms are less important than ideas, it will be hard to accuse Dionysius of introducing alien doctrines when he merely describes the proper doctrines by another name.

Let us first see what Dionysius thinks of the term Agape. Nygren's interpretation is inconsistent. He first of all asserts, and demonstrates from the *Divine Names* (708D), that Dionysius says that Eros and Agape are synonymous. He continues, again correctly, by observing that Dionysius thinks that the term Eros may have greater pedagogical value because everyone knows what it is (708D). He then asserts that according to Dionysius Eros is more divine than Agape. If this were true, Dionysius might be not only unscriptural but also inconsistent, for if the

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5 Prov. 4,6,8; Wisdom 8,2 (DN 709AB).


7 Nygren, op. cit. 592.