Theurgic Thought

The Liturgical Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite

In the rich history of the reception of Dionysius the Areopagite (approx. 500 AD), the writing “On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy” is the only treatise of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* that has not been given much philosophical attention. It is considered helpful in gaining information about time and context of Dionysius’ writings, but not as interesting and important from a philosophical point of view. In this treatise Dionysius deals with the ecclesiastical hierarchy; the order of the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and the sanctification of the myron; the rites of burial and the whole system of the church. Though these topics might appear purely ecclesiastical and only related to the liturgy, this treatise is as philosophical as Dionysius’ other works; in this text, central concepts from the Neoplatonic tradition are further developed in a creative way as Dionysius combines them with Christian ideas. The Christian transformation of these Neoplatonic ideas involves concepts in the areas of political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, anthropology, epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics.

Some authors have accused Dionysius of being a Neoplatonist in a Christian shape, while others allege that he might be a Christian using certain Neoplatonic notions to defeat Neoplatonism. A study of his writings, especially of the treatise *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, shows that Dionysius is a Neoplatonist as well as a Christian author. His ideas and concepts bring a new perspective to those already present in both traditions.

Dionysius' treatise “On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy” discusses the hierarchy of the Church and the liturgy. The practice of liturgy is a means of guiding the participants upwards (*anagogia*); it is a *materialis manuductio* (*cheiragôgia*), designed to lead them toward union with the divine (*henôsis*). It is obvious that Dionysius is well acquainted with Christian tradition and ritual (probably a Syrian liturgy). However, his way of talking about these matters – especially about *theourgia* – is deeply influenced by the philosophers of late Neoplatonism like Iamblichus and Proclus.

The notion *theourgia* in late Neoplatonism was often used to designate the religious rites themselves. Dionysius transforms the pagan use of the idea and transfers it into Christian liturgy. According to him *theourgia* is the work of god, especially the incarnation, and the liturgy appears as a continuation of this divine act, it is theurgic, though not *theourgia* itself; Dionysius refers to it as *hierourgia*. The power of the hierarchy is concentrated in the bishop whom Dionysius calls the *hierarch*; it is his responsibility to think and to do *ta theurgika*. 
The holy acts (hierourgiai) are described as “the images of the divine power that perform perfection” (EH 107, 21f (505B)). In the hierourgia, the theourgia is remembered and praised, and – what is more important – it continues to work on those who participate in the liturgy, it works ‘theurgically’, it makes the participants divine themselves.

As in Pagan Neoplatonism the liturgy is based on symbols. But these symbols are not the symbols sown into the world by the gods; they are not holy in themselves, but only in and through the liturgy; they are not based on a general sympatheia of the world.

Another important difference between Pagan theurgy and Christian hierourgy is the communal aspect of hierourgia. The pagan theurgos cannot guide someone to the union, he can only attain the union himself and help others find the way, but they cannot be unified by his actions. While the lower forms of theurgy (making rain, healing etc.) are material, the highest forms of theurgy – the ones that lead to the union -- are not, or are barely related to material rites. According to On ecclesiastical hierarchy, on the other hand, material rites – gestures, readings, chants, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the sacrament of union – can and do lead to union with the divine. Here, not only does the bishop or the priests attain the union, but so do all the participants which is an idea that would be inconceivable for a Pagan Neoplatonist.

The human being is considered to be a unity of soul and body, and this conception leads to a new concept of human understanding. Without the necessary mediation of the world of sense perception given through of the body, the human being – soul and body – cannot achieve the union. The sacramental effect of the rites is based on the corporeal participation; it is not sufficient to merely contemplate them. Understanding and contemplation are important, but Dionysius’ reflections on the baptism of children show that there are cases in which comprehension is not required. While the correct performance of old, sacred and unintelligible rites is all that is required according to Iamblichus, Dionysius considers the understanding of these rites as a higher stage though he does not separate it form the performance of liturgy itself. Everyone – a simple member of laity, a monk, a priest, a bishop – has to participate in it. However, there are different ways and different levels of participation and understanding. The liturgy is beautiful because it is, as hierourgia, part of the theourgia. Its beauty shows itself in its effect on the mind and the senses, and it can be understood on different noetic levels. Those who are deeply initiated are able to see the more divine beauty while they perform the liturgy, others gain knowledge according to their level of understanding, but they all participate in the same liturgy, there is no higher cult for the elite.

In summary it can be said that Dionysius uses both the Christian and the Neoplatonic traditions to create a new concept of theourgia in which the aesthetic value of the ritual plays an important role.