The Divine Union of God with Man at Plotinus and Saint Dionysius the Areopagite.
A Comparative Study

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Abstract
Plotinus and Saint Dionysius the Areopagite both aimed for union with the Divine, but their approaches differed. Plotinus believed in achieving this through understanding and contemplation, viewing mystical knowledge as the essential virtue. Meanwhile, Saint Dionysius put faith and humility at the core of his ascetical efforts, believing that God's grace, accompanied by faith, fasting and prayer, facilitated union with God. Saint Dionysius also introduced the concept of divine Darkness beyond eternal Light, symbolized in the Byzantine icon of Christ's Transfiguration. This idea combines Neoplatonic Mysticism of Plotinus and Christian Mysticism of Saint Dionysius, suggesting that union with the Divine requires both intellectual exploration and spiritual surrender. Starting from an apophatic knowledge, valuing silence and the negation of all intellectual categories, the mystical and contemplative experience are metaphorically and symbolically transposed into the crucible of language, generating in the East a type of hyper-noetic knowledge, and in the West a type of noetic knowledge. This study aims to highlight the convergent and divergent points between two organically related systems: the Dionysian and the Neoplatonic. The examination of these realities is structured in three different stages: the issue of the union with the Divine, the conditions under which this process takes place, and the issue of the limits of mystical language. Both systems share a common goal – union with the Divine –

but their methods differ, significantly. The research method used is comparative and takes into account the critical analysis of sources as well as the fundamental literature related to the researched theme, until today.

Keywords:
The One, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Plotinus, mystical contemplation, ἱερουργία, Θεουργία

I. From the Plotinus' Philosophy to the theology of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite

The Neoplatonic philosophy, as promoted by Plotinus (204 – 270) in the 3rd century AD, had a profound influence on Christian mysticism. Plotinus' theory of emanation is the most relevant, as it formed the basis for later concepts of divine creation in some branches of Christianity. According to Plotinus, the One is the fountain of all the human beings and He creates everything from itself. He described emanation as a gradual unfolding of creative potential; God created both physical and psychological realms through successive stages emanating from its original perfect unity. In this system, the soul also participates in some way in God's creative power and can ascend to become close to God or even become one with it. Neoplatonism is an ancient philosophy that traces its origins back to Greek philosopher Plato (428-347 BC). It was later adopted and developed by his student, Plotinus in the third century CE. Plotinus' teachings would later be popularized and expanded upon by Christian theologian Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, who flourished in the sixth century CE.

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite was the first great Christian thinker who adapted the Neoplatonism to the revelation during the 6th century[1].

Athanasios Drigas suggested that the two main types of contemplation in Plotinus are "noetic contemplation", which derives from Plato and Aristotle's concepts of noesis, and "hyper-noetic contemplation", which is

[1] I used the english translation of C.E. Rolt: DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *On the Divine name and the Theologia mistica,* transl. into English by Clarence Edwin Rolt, Kessinger Publishing Company Montana, U.S.A.,1917, p. 195. See the Romanian translation too: *Sfântul Dionisie Areopagitul,* by pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Paideia, Buc., 2016; DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, *Despre numele divine. Teologia Mistică,* translation by Marilena Vlad și Mihai Vlad, ed. Polirom, București, 2004.

a boundary phenomenon for ancient philosophy, as it is a state of blissful unknowing. While noetic contemplation is more characteristic of Western philosophy, hyper-noetic contemplation is a similar phenomenon to what Eastern mystical religions seek to achieve. Although Plotinus's philosophy seems to incorporate an experience central to Eastern thought, the author of the Enneads remains a deeply Western thinker, attempting to place the state of unknowable contemplation within the context of an intellectual, rational search for truth and happiness…[2]

Saint Dionysius described this process in two main stages: purification and illumination. In the first stage, the soul is cleansed of sins and attachments to the material world. In the second stage, the soul is illuminated by the knowledge and love of God, thus reaching a state of union with the divine. Saint Dionysius also emphasized the importance of negation, or "negative theology," in this process. He argued that God is so far beyond human understanding that we can best know Him by denying what He is not, rather than affirming what He is. This process of negation helps us overcome the limitations of our thinking and get closer to God. Additionally, Dionysius explained that this union with God is not just a passive experience, but requires active and ongoing participation from the soul. It must engage in a constant quest and continually dedicate itself to the love and knowledge of God. It's important to note that Saint Dionysius' vision of the mystical ascent significantly impacted the development of Christian theology, particularly in Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite intellectually fortified the concept of deification – θέωσις and established a firm doctrinal foundation for it, a foundation that remains significantly relevant to this day[3]. In this state, the soul, by following the upward path of apophatic theology, attains a mystical union with God. His philosophical endeavors were wholly committed to the process of Theosis of all the existence, with the paramount goal being "the cloud of unknowing". In this condition, by pursuing the ascendant

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[2] Athanasios Drigas, and Eleni Mitsea, "The Triangle of Spiritual Intelligence, Meta-cognition and Consciousness", in: *International Journal of Recent Contributions from Engineering, Science & IT (iJES)* 8 -1-(2020), pp. 4-23. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijes.v8i1.12503.

[3] Filip Ivanonic, Zbornik Radova, Vizantoloskog Instituta, *Aspect visuel de la deification selon Denys L'areopagite*, (2010), Issue 47, pp. 39-54.

journey of apophatic theology, the soul achieves a mystical oneness with the Divine.

II. θεουργία and θέωσις

For Dionysius, who had a very good knowledge of ancient philosophy, the term that best corresponds to the Hellenic term θεουργία is the Christian word ἱερουργία which pertains to the ritualistic performance of divine deeds. The sacraments, in Dionysian belief, are performed to reenact the divine act – the embodiment of Christ. When Dionysius refers to θεουργία, his specific reference is to God's work, the embodiment of Christ. For Dionysius, θεουργία primarily signifies the holy deeds of Christ, especially the embodiment, which is performed by men through sacramental ἱερουργία. Iamblichus, in particular, could have benefitted from differentiating between these two terms when he counters Porphyry's argument that θεουργία is not a human task that constrains the gods, but instead a divine task performed by humans. Consequently, Dionysian sacramental theology fundamentally aligns with Hellenic θεουργία, as both employ material symbols to divine energy. However, a nuanced shift in terminology is observed between Dionysius and his Neoplatonic forerunners[4].

This upward journey commences with tangible objects and symbols. God cannot be discerned without intermediaries, He is transcendent to the world. For Saint Dionysius these were the sacred veils that concealed the divine light. There are some sacred objects and some sacred symbols which are are necessary steps in the process of Theosis. This discussion occurs within the context of the aesthetic aspects of Christianity and the doctrine of Theosis. The roots back to the teachings of the Saint Dionysius.

In Plotinus' metaphysics, "The One" is the ultimate reality, the source of all existence. It is beyond being, without division, multiplicity, or distinction. Despite its transcendence, it is present in every being, as the

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[4] Sarah KLITENIC WEAR, John DILLON, "Hierourgia and Theourgia in Sacramental Activity", in: *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition*, Imprint Routledge Edition, 2007, p. 96.

source of all life. The journey towards union with The One, according to Plotinus, is essentially a journey of the soul returning to its source. It involves a process of purification, contemplation, and the shedding of individuality to achieve unity with this divine principle. Purification involves detaching from physical desires and attachments, allowing the soul to turn inward and upward. Contemplation, then, is the practice of focusing one's attention on The One, seeking to understand and experience its pure, undifferentiated state. The final stage, the union with The One, is described by Plotinus as a mystical and ecstatic experience. It is a state of absolute unity, where the individual soul loses its separate identity and merges with The One. In this state, there is not distinction between subject and object, no duality, only oneness[5]. This union with The One, according to Plotinus, is the ultimate goal and the highest form of happiness for the human soul. It is a return to our true nature, a realization of our divine origin and destiny[6].

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[5] John Bussanich has noted that the issue of classifying mystical union with the One consists in deciding between either theistic union or monistic identity. The proponents of theistic union argue that during the mystical union, the soul sustains its individuality and can be differentiated from the One. In contrast, advocates of monistic identity maintain that during this union, the soul forfeits its individuality and is subsumed into the One. Not with standing their differences, both factions concur that the union transcends noetic activity. However, Bussanich propose an alternative: a *mediated union*. According to this perspective within Plotinus's doctrines, the noetic component of the soul (principally its cognitive capacity) is not transcended when in union with the Divine.

[6] Plotinus, *The Six Enneades*, English transl. by Stephan Mackenna, p. 260. This translation I used for the English speakers in all the footpages of this article. Other translations reccomanded: Plotinus, *1-7 vol., Greek text with transl.* by A.H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: "Loeb Classical Library", 1966–1988. Plotinus. *The Enneads*, ed. by Lloyd P. Gerson and transl. by George Boys-Stones, John M. Dillon, Lloyd P. Gerson, R.A. King, Andrew Smith, James Wilberding, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018; Plotinus, *The Enneads*, transl. by Stephen Mac Kenna, abridged and edited by John Dillon, Penguin Books, London, 1991. *Neoplatonic Philosophy. Introductory Readings*, translations of portions of the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus by John Dillon and Lloyd P. Gerson, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2004; Plotinus, *Traites*, 9 vol, French transl. with commentaries by Luc Brisson and J.-F. Pradéau, et al., Flammarion, Paris, 2002–2010. Romanian translations: Plotin, *Opere*, Romanian transl. by Andrei Cornea, Humanitas, București, 2005. "Plotin sau Simplitatea privirii" of Pierre Hadot, transl. by Mihai-D. Grigore, Humanitas, București, 1982.; "Enneade I-II", transl. by Alexander Baumgarten, Gabriel Cercel,

For R. Arp the issue of this union is the distinction between monistic identity and theistic union with God, with all its consequences[7]. Depending on the answer of this dilemma, we can accept the dissolution of the identity of the human being into the ocean of the Divine, or we can observe how the self-identity remains distinct in this union. Robert Arp argue that it is possible in this process to have *a mediated union* which is not transcended in the One. The soul derives from the Being-Intellect in an analogous manner: through an abundance from above, a noetic energy, similar to light, springs from a superior principle and then returns to its origin to contemplate it[8].

Plotinus proposed a mystical theory concerning the union with The One. This theory is a cornerstone of his philosophy and has had a profound influence on subsequent mystical traditions. Neoplatonic mysticism, as first established by the ancient philosopher Plotinus, is a form of spiritual union with the divine. This union seeks to discover an integral link between human and divine entities which transcends physical and intellectual boundaries. Plotinus believed that human beings could ascend to this spiritual plane through contemplation and meditation, which would lead them to discover their true identity as an expression of the divine. For Plotinus, the perfect union with Good, "is representing the strongest form of knowledge, being the identity of subject and object in Intellect" [9]. In contrast, Christian mysticism, as seen in the works of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, views this spiritual union with God as One that is only achievable through grace.

Christian Tămaș, Polirom, Iași, 2004; "Enneade III-IV", transl. by Alexander Baumgarten, Gabriel Cercel, Christian Tămaș, Polirom, Iași, 2006. "Enneade V-VI", by Vasile Rus, Liliana Peculea, Polirom, Iași, 2008.

[7] Robert Arp, "Plotinus, Mysticism, and Mediation", in: *Religious Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2004, pp. 145–163.

[8] Alessandro Linguitti, "Plotinus and Porphyry on the Contemplative Life"*,* in: *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*, vol. XXXI, Philosophia Antiqua, 2012, p. 184.

[9] Dominic J. O'Meara, "Plotinus"*,* in: Lloyd P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 315.

III. The conditions of the union of the human being with The One, according Plotinus

In sharp contrast to Neoplatonism stands Saint Dionysius' vision for Christian Mysticism, in his works: *On Mystical Theology* and *The Celestial Hierarchy.* Saint Dionysius argues for a path towards union with God based on submission to his will rather than contemplation of metaphysical concepts alone. He states that it is impossible for man by himself to come close enough or be joined closely enough so as not merely to understand God, but also actually become like Him by

> "making the ascents from the lowest to the highest, we abstract everything, in order that, without veil, we may know that *Agnosia,* which is enshrouded under all the known, in all things that be, and may see that super-essential gloom, which is hidden by all the light in existing things"[10].

For Plotinus, first condition of union with the Divine is to reject all human desires and looking for contemplation. He argued that by engaging in self-reflection and concentrating on metaphysical ideas, individuals could experience a form of spiritual transformation and unite with the divine cosmic unity. This process required complete detachment from material things and instead a commitment to growth of one's soul through knowledge. Plotinus believed that the ultimate goal of life was to ascend to the higher planes of awareness, away from physical reality and into realms beyond language or intellect[11]. By slowly discarding human desires, he argued that individuals could eventually reach a level of spiritual fulfillment where they felt as though they had become one with the universe. For Plotinus, reaching spiritual unity was a matter of purifying one's soul from all material desires and attachments by engaging in rigorous self-reflection and contemplation of metaphysical concepts. Through this process, he argued that individuals could ascend to a level of understanding where

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[10] Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Works,* vol. 1 and 2*,* English transl. by John Parker, 2018, p. 108.
[11] Plotinus, *The Six Enneades,* p. 783.

they recognize their essential unity with the higher realms and ultimately unite with the cosmic unity that is beyond intellect or words[12].

Plotinus' concept of spiritual union was heavily influenced by his Platonist beliefs. He viewed reality as composed of three distinct planes: physical matter (the material realm), intellectual understanding (the intelligible realm), and spiritual transformation (the supra-sensible realm). For Plotinus, ascending from the material realm to the higher levels required individuals to reject earthly desires and recognize their connection with the higher realms. Like Plato, he considers that all souls must rise above all sensible things if they are ever to perceive what is truly real". Admitting that human souls have descended under constraint of the All-Soul, write Plotinus, are we to think the constrained the nobler? Among souls, what commands must be higher than what obey?"[13]. By focusing on contemplating metaphysical ideas and engaging in self-reflection, he argued that individuals could achieve access to these higher planes of existence and ultimately unite with the cosmic unity that is beyond intellect or words. To reach this state, Plotinus recommends that individuals focus on introspection to gain insight into personal motivations as well as contemplating abstract concepts related to philosophy, theology, and religion. Ultimately, it is through understanding these concepts and gaining clarity about one's personal motivations that Plotinus believed an individual could achieve union with the Divine; A.H. Armstrong asserts that Plotinus' main purpose as an educator and philosopher was to guide his own soul, as well as the souls of others, towards unity with the One through intellect[14].

Unlike Neoplatonism, Christian mysticism claims that individuals cannot ascend to a state of divinity simply through metaphysical contemplation; rather they must strive to align themselves with Divine Will. Thus, while both Neoplatonic and Christian Mysticism emphasize union with the Divine, they present different visions of how this can be

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[12] Gerson LLOYD, "Plotinus", in: Edward N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (Fall 2018 Edition)*, p 528.

[13] PLOTINUS, *The Six Enneads,* p. 183.

[14] John Clark SMITH, "Conversion in Origen", in: *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 32 (1979) 3, pp. 217-230. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600043799.

achieved. Both Neoplatonic and Christian Mysticism strive to answer questions about our relationship to something beyond our physical world— something which has intrigued humanity since time immemorial. Through careful exploration of these two approaches, we can gain insight into what it means to seek true union with the Divine.

IV. Saint Dyonisius and conditions to reach the goal of the Christian life – θέωσις

Saint Dionysius was born around 500 in Syria or Palestina, which was part of the Byzantine Empire. He was well-educated in both classical Greek philosophy and Christian theology, having studied under Proclus in Athens before becoming a monk at an Egyptian monastery. He wrote several works that became influential amongst early Christians. One of these works is titled "The Celestial Hierarchy", which contains descriptions of nine different levels of heavenly beings or angels. These correspond to various stages on the spiritual path towards God's unity or oneness with all things. He further elaborated on this concept in his next work: "The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy", which outlines four steps one must take to ascend closer to God. His most famous writing is called: "Mystical Theology", which combines philosophical language with religious symbolism to explain how humans can gradually reach union with God through contemplation and prayer. Prof. Andrew Louth, in his book dedicated to Dionysius the Areopagite, made an examination of the various traditions that Saint Dionysius' work is based upon: Greek theologians from the fourth century, pagan philosophy and Syrian Christian theology. The identity of their author continues to be an enigma. Professor Andrew Louth provides documentation and commentary on the captivating vision of God's world's beauty and His revelation, along with a deep understanding of the ultimate mystery of God, who is unknowable and completely transcends all existence[15]. According to Saint Dionysius the true knowledge and communion cannot be obtained without ascetic efforts. Neoplatonic and Christian Mysticism

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[15] Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite,* Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2002, pp. 102-111.

both emphasize union with the Divine, but they present different visions of how this can be achieved.

Saint Dionysius' synthesis has been referred to as "The Philosophy of Dionysius" by Catholic theologian Karl Barth. His thought has also been influential amongst philosophers such Augustine and Thomas Aquinas who have drawn on his teachings in constructing their own theological systems based on faith and reason respectively. The influence of Saint Dionysius' Christian mysticism continues up until modern times; for example, trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote about how Neoplatonism informed his own contemplative practice.

Saint Dionysius similarly emphasizes ascetic practices as essential components for a deeper understanding of God's presence. Specifically, he believes that fasting, praying and other spiritual exercises are necessary for developing humility before God, which allows for a more profound knowledge of His true nature. Furthermore, he places great emphasis on accepting grace from God as it is through such grace that one has access to His presence regardless of any sinfulness that may exist.

Both Neoplatonic and Christian Mysticism emphasize union with the Divine; however, they provide different perspectives about how this is achieved. While Plotinus believes an individual can attain union by seeking out themselves through self-contemplation; Saint Dionysius argues that it must be attained through grace provided by God when combined with humility and ascetic efforts. Both approaches offer insight into what it means to seek a deep relationship with something beyond our physical world and continue to have relevance even today.

Neoplatonism and Christian Mysticism both emphasize the concept of union with the Divine as a means for individuals to obtain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world[16]. Plotinus contends that by engaging in self-contemplation and self-reflection, one can uncover their true identity and thereby come closer to unifying with the One – the source of all existence. He outlines three conditions necessary for such unification:

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[16] A. GOLITZIN, "Dionysius Areopagita – a Christian Mysticism", in: *Pro Ecclesia*, 12(2), 2003, p.161.

- firstly, that the individual be immersed within Nature;
- secondly, that they have clarity and understanding of their motivations;
- and thirdly, that they turn away from physical desires to focus on spiritual pursuits.

This three stages are the necessary steps according to the three levels of the existence: physical, intelligible and beyond intelligible.

Similarly, Saint Dionysius the Areopagite advocates union with the Divine through ascetic efforts combined with grace from God. He believes it is only through humility, fasting, prayer, and dedication to spiritual matters that one can truly come to know God's nature[17]. Although he does not specifically outline any particular conditions needed for such an achievement as Plotinus does, Saint Dionysius does suggest it requires a great deal of effort on behalf of the individual. For example, he writes that "if anyone desires to ascend into this height through purifying himself [...] he needs no small effort"[18]. He further emphasizes contemplation as essential for attaining knowledge about God but also suggests prayer as another important element that should not be neglected.

Overall we can see there are fundamental similarities between these two approaches toward union with the Divine. Both emphasize turning away from physical desires to concentrate on spiritual matters – Plotinus through contemplation and Saint Dionysius through ascetic efforts, to achieve a more intimate relationship with something beyond our physical world. However, while Plotinus outlines three specific conditions necessary for unifying with the One, Saint Dionysius appears to suggest only two – humility and prayer – although he implies there may be other requirements

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[17] Saint Dionysius writes: " blessed Moses bidden first to undergo purification himself and then to separate himself from those who have not undergone it; and after all purification hears the many-voiced trumpets and sees many lights flash forth with pure and diverse-streaming rays, and then stands separate from the multitudes and with the chosen priests presses forward to the topmost pinnacle of the Divine Ascent*"*. In C.E. Rolt, *Saint Dionysius…* p. 194. Here we can see all the three steps of the ascension to the God: the purification, the illumination and union with God.

[18] Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine name and the Mystical Theology,* transl. into English by Clarence Edwin Rolt, Kessinger Publishing Company Montana, 1940, p. 84.

needed as well. Ultimately both philosophies offer insight into what it takes to obtain a greater depth of knowledge about ourselves and our place within Nature which has captivated people since ancient times.

V. Mystical theology of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and mystical contemplation of Plotinus. The issue of the mystical language

The mystical experience of the human being has been having an issue: the language. How we can speak about this kind of the experience, over the nature, over our senses? For Saint Dionysius is more acceptable the *via negativa,* the apophatic theology, not like an absence of the predicate in relationship with the Divine, beyond any experience, any words, any human comprehension. He wrote about ineffability of the God. After all this three levels of the mystical way, (purification, illumination and deification) we dive into the ocean of the divine silence, illuminated darkness and ineffability unknowing[19].

Thus we can see that while both Neoplatonic and Christian Mysticism emphasize union with the Divine, they present different visions of how this can be achieved. While Plotinus believes it can be attained by seeking out oneself through self-contemplation which leads them closer towards achieving a more perfect form within nature; Saint Dionysius views it as something granted solely through grace provided by God which allows one access into His presence when combined with humility.

According to Plotinus, the soul must first purify itself from physical distractions and lead a life of contemplation in order for it to be unified with the One. This self-purification requires an individual to practice moral restraint and develop greater wisdom through introspection, which allows one to understand their place within nature's grand scheme. By doing so, they can then ascend toward the higher realms and come closer to achieving union with the One. Plotinus use the Greek term of ἐποπτεία to describe his mystical experience. It stems from the word ἐποπτεύω,

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[19] Kevin CORRIGAN and L. M. HARRINGTON, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite", in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2023 Edition), pp. 566-585.

meaning "I look upon" or "I observe". The ἐποπτεία is a term that originates from Ancient Greece and is associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries. The ἐποπτεία refers to the most important mystical vision that culminates these mysteries, it's the beholding of the secret symbols of epiphanies.

The central concept of Neo-Platonism is "τὸ Ἕν" – "The One", which is seen as the source of all reality and truth. According to Plotinus, the ultimate goal of human existence is to achieve union with The One. This is accomplished through contemplation and mystical experience, in which one experiences a sense of absolute unity and illumination.

In contrast to Plotinus' approach, Saint Dionysius focused on the notion of Divine Union rather than that of The One. He argued that the goal of mystical experience is to be united with God through prayer. Saint Dionysius also emphasized the importance of obediently following divine law as a way to achieve this union, whereas Plotinus saw contemplation as the primary means of connecting with The One. The Pseudo-Dionysian writings were regarded almost as a "Summa Theologica" in the Eastern Church[20].

Both Plotinus and Saint Dionysius believed in an ecstatic type of mysticism, which was seen as the highest form of spiritual attainment. However, they differ in their views on how to achieve this ultimate union with the Divine. While Plotinus focused on contemplation and direct experience of The One, Saint Dionysius believed that prayer, fasting and obedience to divine law were more important for achieving this goal.

Both argued for an ecstatic type of mysticism as the highest spiritual attainment. Ultimately, their works were instrumental in developing an understanding of Christian mysticism as it is understood today. Plotinus's view of union with the Divine relies heavily on One's understanding of the self about the greater whole. He believes that by contemplating oneself and understanding the nature of one's soul, an individual can come closer to achieving a more perfect form within nature, which is ultimately striving towards unity with its origin, the One. To do this, Plotinus teaches us to

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[20] J. C MARLER, "Review of Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence, by P. Rorem, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. xiii+267", in: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 116 (2), (1996), pp. 305–307.

explore our innermost motivations and work towards developing a clear understanding of ourselves through contemplation of the Supreme[21].

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite views union with the Divine differently than Plotinus. He believes it requires both ascetic efforts and humility on behalf of man to gain access to God's presence. This contrasts sharply with Plotinus who emphasizes the importance of contemplation as a way of gaining knowledge about oneself. Saint Dionysius instead places greater emphasis on grace—God's offer of unmerited favor—to attain knowledge about His nature. Thus while Plotinus focuses on conditions of the soul to unify the One; Saint Dionysius contends that ascetic effort must be combined with humility for us to attain true knowledge about God's nature and become united with Him.

The words and mystical experience at Plotinus and Saint Dionysius presents us with two distinct paths to understanding the Divine. For Plotinus, this is achieved through actively seeking out oneself through introspection and understanding one's motivations to find a connection to a higher realm. Saint Dionysius offers an alternative approach; union with God may not be achievable without grace, that comes from accepting one's inherent sinfulness but combining it with contemplation provides us access into His presence and gaining insight into His divine nature. For Saint Dionysius a "theurgist" (θεουργός), a dionysiac new word, present in all his writings, is only Christ Himself, the God-Man. So, for Dionysius, the *theurgy*[22] aims at the deification of man, which is nothing other than Christ-likeness[23].

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[21] PLOTINUS, *The Six Enneades,* p. 259.

[22] The term *theurgy* was used by Neoplatonic philosophers, including Iamblichus and Proclus. They adopted theurgy as a method of achieving union with the divine. Iamblichus was a Syrian Neoplatonic philosopher who lived in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. He developed a philosophy that incorporated theurgy as an essential path to enlightenment and wrote a work called "On the Egyptian Mysteries", which is a defense of theurgy. Proclus was another Neoplatonic philosopher who lived in the 5th century AD and was one of the last great pagan philosophers of antiquity. He took the ideas of Iamblichus and developed them further, arguing that theurgy is an essential part of philosophy and spiritual life.

[23] Panagiotis G. PAVLOS, "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite", in: Panagiotis G. PAVLOS, Lars Fredrik JANBY, Eyjólfur Kjalar EMILSSON, and Torstein Theodor TOLLEFSEN (eds.), *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity,* Imprint Routledge, 2019, pp. 186-187.

The words and mystical experiences of both Plotinus and Saint Dionysius can be seen as an attempt to explain the inexpressible nature of the Divine. Dionysius often refers to this union as a "divine darkness", more exactly: "θεῖος σκότος" in Greek. Here, "darkness" doesn't symbolize evil or ignorance, but rather the unknowability of God. It's a metaphor for a state beyond human understanding or perception. This brilliant divine darkness is so pure, so transparent and so clear, so I must admit, it is for me the most radiant of all the things and, compared to that light, everything positive seems to be dark and opaque.

He also describes the experience as being enveloped in a "luminous cloud" or "radiant mist". This image conveys both the obscurity and the illumination that come with the divine encounter. Saint Dionysius frequently uses the metaphor of an ascent, drawing from biblical imagery like Moses' climb up Mount Sinai. This symbolizes the journey of the soul towards God, moving through different stages of understanding and love.

For Plotinus, this experience was closely connected with contemplation and self-reflection, as he believed that merging our individual identities into a more perfect form within nature could bring us closer to achieving union with the Divine. These contemplations should illustrate, write Plotinus, that there is nothing unusual "in this reductions of all the souls to the One"[24].

Plotinus often describes his mystical experiences as a state of unity or identification with the One. When he speaks about his mystical experience, he use this terms: "the flight of the alone to the Alone (The One)". Much like Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Plotinus also emphasizes the ineffability of the mystical experience. It's something that transcends ordinary knowledge and perception. In his work, Plotinus writes that knowledge possesses three levels: firstly, the opinion, secondly is understanding and ultimately, intuition. The first level uses the senses, the second use the dialectic reasoning, and the third, enlightenment. The instrument of the first level are the senses; the instrument of the second is dialectic; and the third instrument, intuition[25]. Plotinus often depicts the mystical journey as an inward one. The soul turns inward to discover its true self and its unity

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[24] PLOTINUS, *The Six Enneades,* p. 496.
[25] PLOTINUS, *The Six Enneades*, p. 423.

with the One. Plotinus also associates the mystical experience with the word of beauty, seeing beauty as a reflection of the divine beauty. In the presence of the beauty, the soul can be lifted up to the contemplation of the divine.

VI. Conclusions

The influence of the philosophy of Plotinus on the Mystical way of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite is undeniable. Both thinkers shared a common belief in the attainment of union with the divine using contemplation and reflection. However, while Plotinus emphasized understanding concepts and gaining clarity about one's motivations for achieving this union, Saint Dionysius' approach was more focused on faith and humility. For Plotinus the essential virtue is mystical knowledge, but for Saint Dionysius the energy and the goal of the ascension to the God is Love.

For Plotinus, attaining this ultimate communion with God could be achieved through abstract thought and meditation. He writes that, while many actions of those who serve others are performed under direction, the truly commendable servant is one whose intentions align with those of their master[26]. This idea was taken up by Saint Dionysius who argued that union with God was granted solely through grace provided by God, but only to those who developed a relationship with Him based on faith and prayer rather than mere intellectual contemplation alone: "Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light we pray that we may come, and may attain unto vision"[27].

Saint Dionysius is the first to see the God into the divine Darkness beyond the eternal Light. His model is the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai, into an allegorical interpretation. This theological truth, of the divine Darkness, can be sen in the byzantine icon of the Transfiguration of the Christ on Mount Tabor. Here, Jesus Christ is covered in divine Darkness and from the divine darkness, we see the rays of the unapproachable light bursting forth. This concept can be seen as a synthesis between Neoplatonic

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[26] Plotinus, *The Six Enneades,* p. 429.
[27] Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine name and the Mystical Theology,* p. 195.

Mysticism and Christian Mysticism – Plotinus' philosophical approach combined with Saint Dionysius' emphasis on faith being necessary for attaining union with the divine. It is evident from both thinkers' writings that if one were to gain access to this realm, it would require an effort involving both intellectual exploration as well as spiritual surrender.