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On Possible Origins of 'dissimilar similarities'
in Pseudo-Dionysius[*]

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Abstract. The concept of 'dissimilar similarities' in the treatise *The Celestial Hierarchy* is often discussed in the context of the entire theological and semiotic framework of Pseudo-Dionysius. Like many other terms, the origins of 'dissimilar similarities' are traced to Proclus Lycius and his teachers in Athens. However, at the doctrinal level, there are noticeable discrepancies between how Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus understood 'dissimilar similarities'. At the same time, in the writings of Emperor Julian the Apostate, several passages sound very similar to the Areopagitic doctrine of 'dissimilar similarities', although the term itself is not used. Moreover, one of Julian's passages is prepended by a reference to Iamblichus, thus allowing us to assume that Julian did not express his own doctrine but was citing some work of Iamblichus that is not extant. It is very unlikely that Pseudo-Dionysius was well acquainted with the writings of Julian, according to historical evidence, word usage, and basic theoretical patterns. Therefore, the textual conformity between Pseudo-Dionysius and Julian, on the one hand, and between Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus, on the other, suggests that there could exist some work of Iamblichus, rather popular in the 5–6 centuries AD, which reached us only in Julian's quotation, but could have directly influenced both Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius.

Keywords: *Corpus Areopagiticum*, the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Pseudo-Dionysius, dissimilar similarities, symbol, sign, Iamblichus, Proclus, Emperor Julian, Neoplatonism.

The second chapter of the Areopagitic treatise *De caelesti hierarchia*[1] explicates the doctrine of 'dissimilar similarities' (or 'unlike likeness'), which is mentioned in almost every comprehensive study on the *Corpus Areopagiticum*.[2] However, the origins of this doctrine in the foregoing tradition are usually limited to a few references to Proclus and some predecessors. Below, we are going to provide more details concerning the possible sources of the term 'dissimilar similarities' and the doctrine that underlies it. It appears that the term and the doctrine do have different sources.

1. Pseudo-Dionysius and 'dissimilar similarities'

The first oddity that a modern reader of the *CD* faces is related to the title of the second chapter: "That divine and heavenly things are appropriately revealed even through dissimilar symbols" (PG 3: 136c). This title appears among the titles of all other chapters as a later addition to Dionysian writings and is not present in earlier manuscripts. Added by a later hand, this title mentions 'dissimilar symbols' (ἀνομοὶα σύμβολα), but the authentic text of the *CH* never uses such wording. Moreover, the word 'symbol' (σύμβολον) and any forms of 'dissimilarity' are not placed in significant proximity anywhere in the treatise. Thus, 'dissimilar symbol' is not a Dionysian term and is never used in the *CH* or anywhere else in the *CD*. However, if some later scholiast added this term, there were probably proper reasons for that, it could have been some 'symbolic' discourse outside the pages of the *CD*, but conceptually linked to it.

At the same time, the numerous usages of the word 'symbol' in the text of the *CD* allow us to reconstruct the general framework of Areopagitic symbolism, which has been discussed in a few fundamental studies of the last decades.[3]

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[1] Below, the following abbreviations will be used: *CD* = *Corpus Dionysiacum*, *CH* = *De caelesti hierarchia*, *EH* = *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*. For brevity, the author of the *CD* is called Dionysius, without *Pseudo-*. Greek text is quoted from Heil, Ritter 2012; English translation: Luibhéid 1987, with our own minor emendations.

[2] Rorem 1984: 91–96; Rorem 1993: 53–57; Louth 2001: 45–47; Klitenic Wear, Dillon 2007: 85, n. 3; Perl 2007: 102–104.

[3] Rorem 1984; Struck 2004: 254–264; Klitenic Wear, Dillon 2007: 85–115.

What in the title is called 'dissimilar symbols' appears in the authentic text in several different ways. The most frequent forms are 'dissimilar similarities'[4] and plain 'dissimilarities'[5]. Also, Dionysius mentions 'dissimilar formations', where ἀνομοίος is connected to several derivatives from πλάσσω[6] and μορφοποιέω[7]. The most frequent epithet for all versions of 'dissimilarities' is ἀπεμφαίνος — 'incongruent', 'odd', or 'ridiculous'[8].

The main premise of the 'dissimilar similarities' may be summarized as follows: there are two ways of imagining God and angels. The first one, cataphatic in nature, is "proceeding naturally through sacred images in which like represents like" (*CH* 12.2–3), for example, when God is called 'Word', 'Mind', 'Being', 'Light' or 'Life' (12.6–9). Nevertheless, "the Deity is far beyond every manifestation of being and of life; no reference to light can characterize it; every reason or intelligence falls short of similarity to it" (12.12–14). The imagery of angels produced in the same way "could well mislead someone into thinking that the heavenly beings are golden or gleaming men, glamorous, wearing lustrous clothing, giving off flames which cause no harm, or that they have other similar beauties with which the word of God has fashioned the heavenly minds" (*CH* 13.9–13).

Although it is well known that neither angels, nor God have visible and spatially-shaped appearance, this imagery, nevertheless, can lead a human mind to a false view, either consciously or intuitively. To avoid this misconception — and first of all, to avoid anthropomorphic views on God and angels, — Dionysius prefers the other way of imaging, i.e. the apophatic one.

When speaking of God, firstly, he introduces different negative names, such as 'Invisible', 'Infinite', 'Ungraspable', etc. However, along

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[4] ἀνόμοια ὁμοιότητα, used six times in the *CH* (11.6, 14.1–2, 14.11, 15.5–6, 16.6–7, and 57.26).

[5] ἀνομοιότητα, used six times in the *CH* (10.23, 13.15–16, 17.7, 19.4, 33.1, and 57.26).

[6] *CH* 13.2: διὰ τῶν ἀνομοίων ἀναπλάσεων; *CH* 16.1: ἀνόμοιον ἱεροπλαστίαν.

[7] *CH* 12.3: διὰ τῶν ἀνομοίων μορφοποιῖῶν; *CH* 13.5: ἀνομοίοις αὐτὰς μορφοποιίαις.

[8] This word is used four times with ἀνόμοιος or ὅμοιος, and more six times with examples of particular 'incongruent' imagery.

with such negative names, there could be 'positive' names denoting some particular object or property that is ascribed to God or angels. However, they appear so odd and incongruous, that it becomes obvious that they should have some figurative meaning. The impossibility of direct understanding of such names is illustrated by the examples "of the lowliest kind, such as sweet-smelling ointment (*Song* 1:3)[9] and corner stone (*Is* 28:16, *Eph* 2:20, etc.). Sometimes the imagery is even derived from animals so that God is described as a lion (*Is* 31:4, *Hos* 5:14, etc.) or a panther, a leopard (*Hos* 13:7) or a charging bear. Add to this what seems the lowliest and most incongruous of all, for the experts in things divine gave him the form of a worm (*Ps* 21:7)" (*CH* 15.15–21).

The latter type of imagery is exactly what is associated with the 'dissimilar similarities', which due to their inadequacy provoke one's mind "to get behind the material show, to get accustomed to the idea of going beyond appearances to those upliftings which are not of this world" (*CH* 16.11–13).

To be precise, althoug the Areopagite speaks about two ways, he actually introduces the fourfold division:

	cataphatic way	apophatic way
description via notions:	Mind, Being, Life	Invisible, Infinite, Ungraspable
imaging via material objects: (ἱεροπλαστία, μορφοποίησις)	Sun of righteousness, Star of the morning which rises into the mind (νοῦς), clear and intelligible Light	panther, leopard, charging bear, worm (ἀνόμοια ὁμοιότητα)

According to the Areopagite, the 'dissimilar similarities' have three significant properties: 1) unlike other types of imagery, they protect the human mind from ascribing false material and spatial properties to God and the intelligibles, and especially from anthropomorphism; 2) due to the 'oddity' or 'incongruity', these similarities require interpretation and provoke the human mind to search their concealed, pure immaterial meaning; 3) due to this concealment, the "the sacred and hidden

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[9] Below, all Biblical quotations are numbered according to the LXX (Rahlfs 1979).

truth about the celestial intelligences" (*CH* 11.17–18) are unavailable to profanes.[10]

The extent of the 'incongruity' or 'dissimilarity' remains uncertain. Dionysius provides no certain means to distinguish 'high' images from 'low' ones, or those which are 'similar' from the 'dissimilar'. The same can be said about incongruity: for different people there will be different limits of what can be considered odd, inadequate or ridiculous. Therefore, the 'incongruity' is not about certain relationships between an image and its archetype, but is rather related to our aesthetic anticipation. What we expect to be aesthetically compatible with the image of God, would be similar, and what boldly runs counter to it, will be considered dissimilar. Therefore, while apophatic and cataphatic discourses have clear distinctive criteria in the logical domain, the difference between the 'similar' and the 'dissimilar' is arbitrary to a certain extent.

2. A Proclean background

As in many other cases, one can expect to find the origins of Areopagitic wording and whole conceptions in the writings of Proclus. The dependence of Dionysius on Proclus is proved regarding dozens of Neoplatonic terms.[11] It is also true regarding the 'dissimilar similarities'. An advanced analysis of a number of pre-Dionysian texts indicates the most frequent use of ἀνόμοια ὁμοιότητα and its cognates exactly in Proclus, with over twenty occurrences. All of them can be distributed between four major groups:

1) general dialectics of similar and dissimilar as a verbose commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* (135e5–140e7 sqq.). Here, similarity and dissimilarity are taken as individual categories, which are then scrutinized from the standpoint of their mutual relations (*in Prm.* 727.19–728.2). Firstly, Proclus emphasizes the difference between both terms: similarity does not participate in dissimilarity, nor does dissimilarity in similarity (741.12–13). At the same time, the similarity is not completely

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[10] Greek οἱ πολλοί. On this term, see Baltzly, Finamore, Miles 2018: 163.

[11] Klitenic Wear, Dillon 2007: 11–13.

similar, but has an admixture of dissimilarity and vice versa (747.20–25). Secondly, when speaking of both in relationship to other intelligible entities, they also can be taken as similar to each other (758.25–29) and as dissimilar to each other (755.30–35). Finally, there should be the third principle, which precedes both the similarity and the dissimilarity, and which embraces the causes of both in a united and indivisible way (759.11–18);

2) despite the logical symmetry between similarity and dissimilarity in the dialectics of the *Parmenides*, in the commentary on the *Timaeus*, Proclus states that there is a hierarchical difference between these two categories: "Sameness is superior to Difference and that likewise Similarity appears to be superior to Dissimilarity" (*in Ti.* 2.262.28–33). Being 'superior', similarity is also 'far more beautiful' and 'better' than dissimilarity is (*in Ti.* 2.78.27; *in Prm.* 739.14–15). In the ontological hierarchy, being is the first, sameness is the second, and difference is the third. Consequently, similarity precedes dissimilarity (*in Ti.* 2.155.3–9), and emanates from the higher level earlier (*Inst.* 28–29). The activity of gods includes the task of making dissimilar things similar, thus bringing the universe to the highest harmony (*in R.* 2.232.16–21);

3) there are several examples of the dialectics of similarity and dissimilarity applied to particular subjects. For instance, dissimilar premises may be analyzed in a similar way, thus employing 'dissimilar similarity' in discussion (*Theol. Plat.* 1.57.18–22); certain gods are simultaneously similar and dissimilar to themselves (*Theol. Plat.* 6.70.13–27); the World Soul "has the causes of the similarity and dissimilarity" of the celestial circles (*in Ti.* 2.266.9–11). An important note is given concerning an image and its archetype: each image should be similar to its archetype to some extent, or it would be impossible to discern which image corresponds to any given archetype. At the same time, an image should somehow differ from the archetype, or there will be no image but two completely identical archetypes. Therefore, the concept of 'dissimilar similarity' can be applied to every kind of imagery, including every material object as it can be considered an image of its intelligible 'prototype' (*in Prm.* 733.10–26, 805.17–26). From this standpoint, 'dissimilar similarity' is present in every material object and living being;

4) a special case of the dialectics of similar and dissimilar covers the relationship between extremities at some scale of gradation. A kind of training example is provided in the commentary on the *Alcibiades I.* A philosopher is a person who seeks wisdom; and, therefore, a wise person does not seek wisdom as far as they already possess it. But a completely ignorant person does not even know that they lack wisdom, and therefore they do not seek wisdom either. As a result, both a wiseman and an ignorant person similarly do not seek wisdom, though, they are completely dissimilar in their knowledge (*in Alc.* 189.15–17). Two extreme positions in the gradation of knowledge are dissimilar up to the complete opposition, but also they are similar as the extremes proper. Now, it is no surprise to see the One and matter represented as 'dissimilar similarities': they both are located at the opposite extreme levels of the ontological hierarchy, they both are beyond the grasp of any intelligence, and they both are out of any certain ontological predication. Expectedly, in several passages, Proclus calls matter 'dissimilarly similar' to the One (*Theol. Plat.* 3.40.20–25; *in Ti.* 1.373.7–13; 1.385.28–30; *in Prm.* 645.1–8). Here, this formula gains the full sense of oxymoron, which perfectly fits Plato's words on the 'bastard reasoning' (λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ, *Ti.* 52b2) — the only suitable way to speak about matter.

Apparently, the Areopagitic usage of 'dissimilar similarities' does not fall into any of these four groups. What Dionysius implies in his understanding of this concept is closest to the dialectics of image in the third group. However, Proclus arrives at the universal applicability of 'dissimilar similarities' to any material entities, while Dionysius retains a rather narrow sense of the term. We can try to find parallels between the 'incongruent' images of God and the relation between the One and matter. Naturally, the extent of dissimilarity makes Proclean and Dionysian discourses comparable, but the similarity is produced by different causes. In Proclus, similarity is caused by the ontological opposition, while in Dionysius, by an exegetical context: 'panther' or 'worm' are said to be similar to God not because of their 'low' nature, but because they are discovered as God's images in a due interpretative context.

It follows that at the verbal level, the Areopagite borrows 'dissimilar similarities' from the philosophical vocabulary of Proclus, but fills the term with a substantially different meaning.

At the doctrinal level, one can trace another dependency on Proclean thought. Two ways of imagining God and angels in the *CH* seem to have parallels in Essay 6 of Proclus' commentary on the *Republic*. Indeed, Proclus faces a problem that is similar to the starting point of Dionysius in the *CH*: certain descriptions of Olympic gods in Homer's epos and some descriptions of God in the Old Testament are both incompatible with the very basic idea of what a deity can be. Homeric gods are those "who transcend everything — I mean, adulteries, acts of theft, being hurled from heaven, as well as injustices committed against fathers, bindings, castrations, and all the other things that both Homer and other poets go on about"[12] (*in R.* 1.72.19–23).

Also, Dionysius resembles Proclus when the latter starts speaking about two kinds of myths. The first kind is appropriate to young people and is suitable for proper education, it gives a correct idea about gods, and conducts to virtue. The second kind is meant for adult people of mature character; such myths narrate through 'divine symbols', they lead souls to 'mysteries and initiatory rites', and "introduce visions that are complete, stable and simple for initiates to see" (1.83.18–25). All the incongruities of Homeric myths pertain exactly to the second kind, according to Proclus. He summarizes the distinction between the two kinds as follows:

> there is one kind that is educational and another kind that is related to initiations (τελεστικόν). While the former provides for ethical virtue, the latter furnishes contact with the divine, and though the one is able to benefit humanity in general, the other is adapted only to the few. The former is common and familiar to people, but the other is secret and doesn't fit well with those who are not eager to be completely settled in the divine. One is coordinate with the [psychic and moral] dispositions of young persons, while the other is revealed only with difficulty and in conjunction with religious rites and mystical traditions. (*in R.* 1.81.12–21)

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[12] English translation here and below: Baltzly, Finamore, Miles 2018.

Therefore, 'telestic' myths have concealed meaning and require interpretation. They cannot be apprehended by 'the many', but those few who can grasp their meaning are being raised to the intelligible realm with their aid. Proclus also provides a note on the incongruity and dissimilarity of mythological imagery that resembles Dionysius' language:

> So let us not [merely] say that the myths of the Greek theologians do not educate for virtue, but let us show that they are not in complete agreement with the hieratic precepts. And let us not [merely] say that, through their incongruous symbols (ἀπεμφαινόντων συμβόλων), they imitate things that are divine in a way that lacks similitude (ὡς ἀνομοίως μιμοῦνται), but let us show that they provide for us no ineffable affinity towards participation in the divine. (*in R.* 1.83.26–84.2)

Several terms crucial for the Dionysian narrative of 'dissimilar similarities' are given together here: the terms 'dissimilar', 'incongruent' (ἀπεμφαινός), and 'symbol' provide a narrative very close to the 'incongruity' of divine images in the *CH*. The principal problem here is caused by the fact that this word usage is unique in the entire corpus of extant Proclus' writings.

The term ἀπεμφαινός is used only three times in the whole Proclean corpus, and the other two instances are not related to myths, similarity, or dissimilarity. The connection between ἀπεμφαινός and σύμβολον is unique for Proclus and is never used by Dionysius. In other words, what we discover in Proclus resembling the wording of the Areopagite, is rather incidental and probably was not the subject that Proclus was concerned with in Essay 6.

If Dionysius actually was following Proclus, he should have significantly developed the doctrine that Proclus provided only in a brief sketch. However, it is also plausible that the path of doctrinal inheritance is more complex. If we try to summarize the properties of Proclean incongruous myths and symbols, the following list can be made: 1) the second type of myths uses dissimilarities that symbolize divine things; 2) due to dissimilarity and incongruity, such mythical imagery requires interpretation; when incorrectly interpreted or accepted in their literal sense, they can harm the immature or unprepared soul;

3) due to the necessity for special training, only few people can grasp the meaning of such myths, while the majority of people ('profanes', οἱ πολλοί) cannot.

Comparing this list to a similar one in the previous section, we can see the main difference: for Dionysius, the crucial function of dissimilarities is the proper idea of God, which should eliminate anthropomorphic analogies at first, and then all material images altogether. For Proclus, the central function is related to the telestic potency of myths and theurgical efficacy of symbols. In other words, the Dionysian position is epistemological, while that of Proclus is initiative and theurgical. Moreover, what is crucial for the Dionysian theology, remains a peripheral subject for Proclus.

Taking all these discrepancies together, it is hardly possible to derive the Dionysian doctrine of 'dissimilar similarities' from Proclus. It is more plausible to suppose that the Areopagite borrowed the Proclean terminology and the most basic conceptions of image, symbol, (dis)similarity, and myth. However, the integral framework of his theory of similarity in the *CH* seems to be rather independent of Proclus, despite the coincidence of certain key points.

3. Mythical incongruities in the writings of Emperor Julian

The doctrine of Dionysius can be considered an ingenious invention making a significant advance against the Proclean background. However, one can turn to other Christian and pagan Platonic sources, especially as far as the problem of mythological incongruities goes back as early as to the time of Stoics, and to thet of their Biblical counterpart — Philo. An impressive passage belongs to Emperor Julian, a prominent Neoplatonist who received a comprehensive Christian education. His oration *To Heracleios the Cynic* reads as follows:

> no longer need we call in the aid of witnesses from the remote past for all points, but we will follow in the fresh footprints of one whom next to the gods I revere and admire, yes, equally with Aristotle and Plato. He does not treat of all kinds of myths but only those connected with initiation into the mysteries (τῶν τελεστικῶν), such as Orpheus,

the founder of the most sacred mysteries (τελετάς), handed down to us. For it is the incongruous element (τὸ ἀπεμφαῖνον) in myths that guides us to the truth. I mean that the more paradoxical and prodigious (τερατῶδες) the riddle (αἴνιγμα) is the more it seems to warn us not to believe simply the bare words but rather to study diligently the hidden truth. ⟨...⟩ But as regards the thought, the incongruous (τὸ ἀπεμφαῖνον) may be admitted, so that under the guidance of the gods men may be inspired to search out and study the hidden meaning, though they must not ask for any hint of the truth from others, but must acquire their knowledge from what is said in the myth itself.[13] (Jul. *Or.* 7.12.3–16, 217bc and 14.1–5, 219a)

Whenever myths on sacred subjects are incongruous (ἀπεμφαίνοντες) in thought (κατὰ διάνοιαν), by that very fact they cry aloud, as it were, and summon us not to believe them literally but to study and track down their hidden meaning. And in such myths the incongruous element is even more valuable (τοῦ σεμνοῦ τὸ ἀπεμφαῖνον) than the serious and straightforward, the more so that when the latter is used there is risk of our regarding the gods as exceedingly great and noble and good certainly, but still as human beings (ἀνθρώπους ὅμως), whereas when the meaning is expressed incongruous (διὰ τῶν ἀπεμφαινόντων) there is some hope that men will neglect the more obvious sense of the words, and that pure intelligence may rise to the comprehension of the distinctive nature of the gods that transcends all existing things. (Jul. *Or.* 7.17.1–11, 222cd)

These passages provide much important information. Julian refers to his reverend forerunner, who is undoubtedly Iamblichus. There is nothing like the following discussion in the extant works of Iamblichus; however, there are many other subjects important for all the following Neoplatonic tradition but absent in extant texts.[14] Unfortunately, we can hardly discern which part of Julian's conceptions is owed to Iamblichus and what Julian introduced on his own. Anyway, the problem of interpretation of 'telestic' myths was of high interest for Iamblichus and probably was in the very kernel of his philosophical mysticism focused on the esoteric meaning of Plato's dialogues.

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[13] Greek text see in Rochefort 1963; English translation from Wright 1913–1923.

[14] Cf. the subjects represented in the fragments of Iamblichus' writings collected by Bent Larsen and John Dillon (Larsen 1972; Dillon 1973).

According to Plato's division of all myths into two kinds (*R.* 376e11–379a10), Julian speaks of myths with plain and obvious meaning and opposes them to the second kind, the 'paradoxical and prodigious' myths. The most frequent epithet for them is 'incongruous' (for Greek ἀπεμφαίνος), which is used ten times in the *CH* and eight times in the works of Julian — exceptionally often when compared not only to Proclus but also to almost all other Neoplatonists. It is noteworthy that neither ἀπεμφαίνος nor its cognates are used anywhere in the *CD* outside the *CH*. It may be another indication of Dionysius extensively using here some borrowed writing with its proper vocabulary, while his own wording avoided the use of ἀπεμφαίνος. Moreover, Julian also uses ἀπεμφαίνος only when speaking of mythological incongruities, seven times in the *To Heracleios the Cynic* (*Or.* 7) and once in the *To the Mother of the Gods* (*Or.* 8 (5)). Taking into account Julian's reference to Iamblichus, it seems quite probable that he uses not only Iamblichus' ideas, but also the most characteristic wording.

This hypothesis can also explain the anomaly in the usage of the terms *the One* and *the Good*, i.e. as the names of the Neoplatonic ontological absolute. Julian pronounces these words in the *To Heracleios the Cynic* only in a short passage just following his reference to Iamblichus (*Or.* 7.12.16–21, 217d). The indicative Platonic word form τἀγαθόν, which has dozens of occurrences since the times of Plotinus to Damascius, is used by Julian in this letter only once (exactly in the abovementioned passage). In other writings of Julian, it also occurs surprisingly rarely. Thus, it seems probable that the whole paragraph *Or.* 7.12.8–21, 217c–218a is an excerpt or a quite accurate paraphrase of a work by Iamblichus that did not reach modern times, but was well known to Julian, Proclus, and Dionysius. A switch from citing Iamblichus to Julian's own narrative is obvious, due to the transition from a general theoretical discourse to a story of Julian's mystical experience, which he immediately interrupts due to a kind of self-censure.

Another lexical affinity between Julian and Dionysius is related to one surprising parallel. It is rather unexpected to encounter a Christian author calling Biblical names of angels a theatrical performance or

stage decorations, literally τῶν ἀγγελικῶν ὀνομάτων σκηνή (*CH* 10.16). This is the only instance of σκηνή in the *CD* meaning not the Old Testament tabernacle, but anything theatre-related. The reference to stage performance in the *CH* looks rather inconsistent unless we compare it to Julian's reflections on the incongruent and telestic myths, which, of course, had traditional stage versions and which are discussed in a dedicated paragraph of the *To Heracleios the Cynic* (*Or.* 7.11.1–27, 216d–217b).

At the doctrinal level, Julian seems to be much closer to Dionysius than Proclus does. The most striking is his appeal to mythical incongruities as a means to overcome anthropomorphic images of gods. As we have seen, Proclus treats the obscenity of Homeric myths as confusing an unprepared reader and exposing them to the danger of an incorrect idea of gods or even to straight blasphemy. On the contrary, according to both Dionysius and Julian, the incongruities are suitable for theological education because their inconsistency is obvious to a reader who is driven into surprise and then into the search for a deeper theological knowledge. Nevertheless, all three thinkers agree that the incongruities reveal the divine nature in a better, more adequate way, and their concealed sense can be grasped only by few people.

4. Symbol and myth in Julian and Iamblichus

Now let us turn to another passage from Julian found in his hymn *To the Mother of the Gods*:

> But our ancestors in every case tried to trace the original meanings of things, ⟨...⟩ then when they had discovered those meanings they clothed them in paradoxical myths (μύθοις παραδόξοις). This was in order that, by means of the paradox and the incongruity (ἀπεμφαίνοντος), the fiction (πλάσμα) might be detected and we might be induced to search out the truth. Now I think ordinary men derive benefit enough from the irrational myth (ἀλόγου) which instructs them through symbols alone (διὰ τῶν συμβόλων μόνων). But those who are more highly endowed with wisdom will find the truth about the gods helpful. (*Or.* 8 (5).10.4–12, 170bc)

Here, Julian not only reproduces his argument of paradox and incongruity as a stimulus for deeper theological inquiry, but also links the

incongruent mythological language with symbols. Proclus, as we have seen above, speaks of 'incongruent symbols' but only once and gives no details on the subject. Generally speaking, it is no surprise, as long as Proclus had a sophisticated theory of symbol, which can be chiefly restored via the analysis of his numerous 'symbolic' statements.[15]

For Julian, symbol (σύμβολον in all the following quotations) is solidly connected with myth and gods. On the one hand, symbols are the objects or deeds that gods direct to humans. For example, Julian speaks about Apollo, who encouraged Diogenes not with the words only, but also by deeds using symbols (*Or.* 9 (6).8.27, 188ab). Similarly, Dionysus gifted the vine to the human race, the plant which is a symbol of his epiphany (*Or.* 7.16.12, 221b). Divine forefathers or gods themselves are said to have established special features of particular races, so people of all the following generations carry a sign of this divine attendance, which Julian calls a symbol, and which should be imprinted on human souls also (*Or.* 2.25.14–24, 81cd).

On the other hand, there are symbolic objects made by human hands but devoted to gods and used for worship. These are priests' vestments, which require pious treatment, otherwise these 'symbols of gods are polluted' (*Ep.* 89b.425, 304a). Symbolic actions performed during the worship are, for instance, 'cutting a tree' (*Or.* 8 (5).9.19–21, 169a), 'castration' (9.30–38, 169cd) and the following unnamed ritual actions (15.3, 175a).

Also, there is one important passage where Julian explains the meaning of symbols in divine worship:

> For our fathers established images and altars, and the maintenance of undying fire, and, generally speaking, everything of the sort, as symbols of the presence of the gods, not that we may regard such things as gods, but that we may worship the gods through them. For since being in the body it was in bodily wise that we must need perform our service to the gods also, though they are themselves without bodies ⟨...⟩ For just as those who make offerings to the statues of the emperors, who are in need of nothing, nevertheless induce goodwill towards

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[15] See Trouillard 1981; Dillon 1975; Struck 2004; Rappe 2007.

themselves thereby, so too those who make offerings to the images of the gods, though the gods need nothing. (Jul. *Ep.* 89b.137–154, 293cd)

It is clear that for Julian divine symbols are objects, which in the ultimately sensual way express the invisible and intelligible. Symbols are not just visible, they are particular material objects that can be touched or actions that can be felt by the body. Their expressive function is the most important, however, their expression is not direct and is not always based on similarity — it is true not for mythological narrative only, but for ritual symbols as well.[16]

The crucial discrepancy between Julian's and Iamblichus' theories of symbol is the question of symbol's theurgical efficacy. For Iamblichus, symbols (and related συνθήματα) are capable of raising the human soul to the intelligible realm by their own (or divine, but essentially not human) power.[17] Julian never speaks about such potency of symbols, though almost in all cases, symbols are either produced by gods or devoted to them. The passage quoted above shows that, according to Julian, symbols in human hands could be the signs of human veneration of gods, and therefore gods can respond to human worship. But symbols in this case just carry proper semantics, they are not expected to 'work' on their own. Iamblichus, as he states himself (Iambl. *Myst.* 2.11.20–39, 4.2.20–32) and as modern scholars prove[18], expects the efficacy of theurgic symbols, though he does not consider all symbols as theurgic ones.[19]

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[16] This view on symbols allows Julian to extend this understanding to everyday human relationships, when a gift sent with a letter to someone is called a 'symbol of friendship', cf. *Ep.* 40.20, 86.2 (Wright 1923: 106, 108).

[17] For Iamblichus and Proclus, a term symmetrical to σύμβολον is σύνθημα, which can be considered as an inner kernel of a symbol (for details see Kurdybaylo 2019). For Julian, however, σύνθημα is nothing more than a sign, either a natural (such as the lightning of Zeus (*Or.* 7.14.34, 220a) or symptoms of an illness (*Mis.* 17.23, 347d)), or established by a convention (*Mis.* 33.7, 361a; 34.20, 362a), including official documents such as particular συνθήματα (*Ep.* 13.3, 36.1; Wright 1923: 3.2, 290). Thus, in the writings of Julian, σύνθημα has no theurgic potency and is almost unrelated to symbol.

[18] See Shaw 1995: 129–142.

[19] Iamblichus speaks about the Pythagorean ἀκούσματα calling them symbols many times in the *Protrepticus*; several times he mentions numerical symbols in a way

5. Symbols and 'dissimilar similarities' in the Celestial Hierarchy

There is no doubt that Dionysius gravitated to the 'theurgic' understanding of symbol, rather close to the positions of Iamblichus and Proclus. This is especially clear in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, where Dionysius speaks about "perceptible symbols lifting us upward hierarchically until we are brought as far as we can be into the unity of divinization" (*EH* 65.10–13; cf. 67.16–68.8) and elsewhere in the context of 'liturgical symbolism', using the term of Paul Rorem[20]. Moreover, besides the liturgical symbols, there is an example of 'Biblical symbols' in the *CH*, which are also considered capable of drawing the human soul to the intelligible realm:

> The source of spiritual perfection provided us with perceptible images of these heavenly minds ⟨…⟩ in the sacred pictures of the scriptures so that he might lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual (ἀναγάγοι διὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἐπὶ τὰ νοητά), from sacred shapes and symbols (ἱεροπλάστων συμβόλων) to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven. (*CH* 9.8–15)

However, the *CH* uses the word 'symbol' and its cognates very unevenly: the introductory paragraphs 1.2–2.1 extensively use the terms 'symbol', 'image', and 'imitation' to describe the general patterns of sacred imagery. Then, when the discussion of 'dissimilar similarities' starts, Dionysius does not speak about any symbols until the only mention in paragraph 2.5. After this passage, the discussion of 'dissimilar similarities' ends, and Dionysius proceeds with specific examples of Biblical verbal images of angels — from paragraph 7.2 and to the end of the treatise, the term 'symbol' is used more evenly but rather rarely (seven occurrences *vs* thirteen occurrences in the whole text of *CH*). It seems that Dionysius avoids using 'symbol' and 'dissimilar similarities' in the same context. To clarify this guess, let us return to paragraph 2.5:

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similar to that used in the *Theologoumena arithmeticae* (see *VP* 28.156.5–9; *in Nic.* 30.19–20; *Comm. math.* 18.17–20).

[20] Starting from the very title of his monograph, Rorem 1984.

the mysterious theologians ⟨…⟩ reveal something of God himself. They sometimes use the most exalted imagery (ἀπὸ τῶν φαινομένων τιμίων), calling him for instance sun of righteousness, star of the morning which rises into the mind, clear and conceptual light. Sometimes they use more intermediate, [down-to-earth images], such as the blazing fire which does not cause destruction, water filling up life and, speaking symbolically (συμβολικῶς εἰπεῖν), entering the stomach and forming inexhaustible streams. Sometimes [the images are of] the lowliest kind (ἀπὸ τῶν ἐσχάτων), such as sweet-smelling ointment and corner stone. Sometimes the forms are even derived from animals (θηριομορφίαν) so that God is described as a lion or a panther, a leopard or a charging bear. Add to this what seems the lowliest (ἀτιμότερον) and most incongruous (ἀπεμφαίνειν) of all, for the experts in things divine gave him the form (εἶδος… περιπλάττουσαν) of a worm. (*CH* 15.8–21)

If we suppose that Dionysian word usage here is not accidental, then 'symbols' appear here at the level of 'fire' and 'water', i.e. the elements and objects that are neither obvious images, nor incongruous 'dissimilarities'. Moreover, 'symbolic speech' here concatenates symbols in a complex pattern. On the contrary, 'dissimilar similarities' are usually simple in meaning and substantially primitive. The Areopagite keeps the standpoint evidently opposite to that of Julian, who interpreted mythological incongruities as symbols.

Conclusion

Searching for the origins of Areopagitic 'dissimilar similarities', we arrived at two important findings:

1) At the conceptual level, the Dionysian doctrine of 'dissimilarities' and Biblical incongruities stems from some work of Iamblichus, which is unknown to modern researchers, but was well known and was cited by Julian, Proclus, and Dionysius. We propose that the extant fragment of it is the passage of Julian's oration *To Heracleios the Cynic* (*Or.* 7.12.8–21, 217cd). It is quite plausible that in that work Iamblichus argued for the special importance of mythological incongruities, which help the reader to avoid anthropomorphic images of the gods and instead

provoke them to seek elevated concealed meaning behind literally odd, ludicrous or obscene narratives. Such investigation requires particular skill and, therefore, is available just to a few readers. Yet, these few can experience an ascent to the intelligible realm if they succeed in their scrutiny of the concealed sacred meaning.

2) At the level of terminology, Dionysius heavily depends on Proclus and employs his notion of 'dissimilar similarities', however with an altered meaning. Also, in general, Dionysius accepts the concept of effective theurgic symbol, which was developed by Iamblichus and Proclus and which was significantly altered by Julian. As far as historical facts make it obvious, the doctrinal context also confirms that there could be no Julian's influence on Dionysius.

Thus, what belongs to Dionysius' personal ingenuity, is the adoption of the Iamblichian doctrine[21] of mythological incongruities for the sake of Bible exegetics (chiefly, the Old Testament) and the engagement of Proclean term 'dissimilar similarities' to discern the discourse of incongruities from general symbolical interpretation. In the *CD*, 'dissimilar similarities' and symbols are either kept at a distance, or opposed to each other.

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[21] This proves the position of Gregory Shaw arguing that Dionysius owes to Iamblichus much more than it appears at first glance (Shaw 1999).

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