

ONTOLOGICAL PRAYER IN PART 3 OF *ON THE DIVINE NAMES* AND THE EARLY SYRIAC TRADITION, WITH ESPECIAL RESPECT TO 'APHRAHAṬ, THE *BOOK OF STEPS*, AND ST EPHREM'S *HYMNS ON PRAYER*

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In this paper, I depart from a philosophical analysis of the opening chapter of part 3 of *On the Divine Names*, which encapsulates a theory of prayer that has been pegged as 'ontological'. On account of this chapter I first look into how it specifies the relationship between the divine facet designated as the Good and the other processions or energies. Then I proceed to search for potential prefigurations of an ontological theory of prayer among relevant early Syriac source texts, in search of further evidence for the thesis that Denys' cultural and ecclesiastic background is a bilingual Greek and Syriac Christian community. In so doing, I look over some of 'Aphrahaṭ's discourses, then the so-called *Book of Steps*, and, finally, St Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith*. I conclude that although several significant momenta of what has been labelled as the ontological prayer are found in these sources—thus certainly foreshadowing Denys' idea of prayer—they are nevertheless probably only second to the influence of the Desert Father Evagrius Ponticus, a grand theoretician of prayer.

Chapter 1 of Part 3 of *On the Divine Names* opens with the compound imperative that 1. research into the divine names must start with the 'Good' because as a kind of universal revelatory term it best uncovers all the rest of the divine outpourings; and that 2. before embarking upon that investigation, a prayer must be addressed to the Trinity because it is *the* highest ranking source of revelation of all the processions, including even the Good. Hence it seems a strict Dionysian postulate that before putting our hands to systematic theology, an anagogical *prayer* must somehow carry us 'up' to the very source from where even the Good has stemmed, and initiate us into the bountiful things

sourrounding the Trinity as its first unmediated outpourings.¹ For in a first instance, suggests Denys, discussing the Good is not a matter of simple discursive reasoning but prayer (*εὐχαῖς*), elevation of the mind (*ἀνάγεσθαι*), and initiation (*μυεῖσθαι*). In order to reach out to the providential, philanthropic facet of God, the supereminent Good, a supernatural journey is necessary via an elevating, ecstatic prayer, in the vein of both the Christian and the Neoplatonic traditions. In these legacies, the formal momenta of such prayer are a real upward mobility of the mind, its initiation into the divine mysteries, and finally, a union with some form of the divine.

In historical terms, a similar scenario occurs in at least three potential Christian sources for Denys' idea: Origen's *On Prayer* (*Περὶ εὐχῆς*, especially 8, 2 and 9, 2), St Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Our Father* (*Εἰς τὴν προσευχήν*, Part 1), and Evagrius Ponticus' *On Prayer* (*Περὶ προσευχῆς*, especially 3, 35, 61, 65 etc.); while a little more distant Neoplatonic parallels are found in Plotinus' theory of the soul's return into the One, expounded in several treatises of the *Enneads* (e.g. 9,7–9; 10,1–3 and 11–12; 11,1; 12,5; 39,7 etc.), Iamblichus' explanation of the three stages of prayer as parts of the theurgical process in *Abammon's Epistle to Porphyry* (*Ἀβάμμωνος διδασκάλου πρὸς τὴν Πορφυρίου πρὸς τὸν Ἀνεβῶ ἐπιστολὴν ἀπόκρισις*—more commonly known as *Περὶ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων μυστηρίων* or *De mysteriis*—Part 5, Chapter 26 etc.), and Proclus' splendid analysis of the soul's ascension to and union with the gods via prayer (*Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, *Εἰς τὸν Πλάτωνος Τίμαιον*, Book 2, prooemium).² Whilst all these sources have been commented on extensively, surprisingly little attention has been dedicated to relevant early Syriac sources on the practical theology of prayer, even though, as is known, several different kinds of evidence have pointed modern research to the Syrian Church of the East as Denys' more immediate historical context.³ Hence guided by Hieromonk

¹ Denys' mode of expression here recalls his accounts of initiation in the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*, including the role of prayer during the synaxis and the ordinations (Parts 3 and 5) etc.

² Ernestvs Diehl, ed.: *Proclii Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentaria*. Lipsiae: In aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1907, vol. 1, 207–214. Proclus sums up by affirming that οὐσία μὲν αὐτῆς <τῆς εὐχῆς> ἡ συναγωγὸς καὶ συνδετικὴ τῶν ψυχῶν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ πάντων τῶν δευτέρων ἐνοποιὸς πρὸς τὰ πρότερα (ibid. 212–213). In other words, the essence of prayer is that the ontological cycle of exitus from the One and reditus to the One may come full circle.

³ The following is no exhaustive list, only a hint at some of the more important references to Denys' Syriac background: Joseph Stiglmayr: "Das Aufkommen der Pseudo-Dionysischen Schriften und ihr Eindringen in die Christliche Literatur bis zum Lateranconcil 649" = IV.

Alexander Golitzin's⁴ and Father Andrew Louth's⁵ respective analyses, I would like to look into such fourth-century texts as the Persian sage 'Aphrahat's (4th century) *Demonstrations* (Taḥwite'), the anonymous *Book of Steps* (*Liber graduum*, cca 400), and St Ephrem's (cca 306–373) *Hymns on Faith*, searching for Syriac antecedents or parallels to Denys' conception of the ontological prayer.⁶ This particular point of Dionysian philosophical theology is, as I shall try to point out, also clearly related to the query concerning the divine *πρόοδοι* or outpourings.

*A philosophical analysis of Part 3,
Chapter 1, of On the Divine Names, on 'ontological prayer'*

Part 3 of *On the Divine Names* is, virtually, already part and parcel of Part 4 in that it introduces and to some little extent adumbrates the main subject matter of Part 4, which is the analysis of the divine name 'Good' (ἀγαθωνυμία). But although Denys does start a discussion of the

Jahresbericht des öffentlichen Privatgymnasiums an der Stella matutina zu Feldkirch. Feldkirch: Im Selbstverlage der Anstalt, 1895, 1–96, especially 34–35, where reference is made to Petrus Fullo, patriarch of Antioch's liturgical reform; *Vetusta documenta liturgica primo edidit Latine vertit notisque illustravit Igantius Ephraem II Rahmani patriarcha Antiochenus Syrorum*. Typis patriarchalibus in Seminario Scharfensi de Monte Libano anno MCMVIII, document № 3 „De ordinationibus,” 54–66: Latin translation; 22–32: Syriac original (Studia Syriaca, Fasciculus III), very nearly resembling part 5 of the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*; Carlo-Maria Mazzucchi: “Damascio, autore del *Corpus Dionysiacum* e il dialogo *Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστημῆς*” = *Aevum*, Maggio–Agosto 2006, Anno 80, Fasc. 2, 299–334, more specifically 311–313, calling attention to the *Contra additiones Iuliani* and the *Adversus apologiam Iuliani* of Severus of Antiochia; Raymond Tonneau – Robert Devreesse, eds.: *Théodore de Mopsueste: Les homélies catéchétiques*. Reproduction photographique du ms. Mingana Syrr. 561 (Selly Oak Colleges' Library, Birmingham). Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949, 363–365, resembling Denys' account of the Eucharist in part 3 of the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*; István Perczel: “The Earliest Syriac Reception of Dionysius” = *Modern Theology*, 24/4 (October 2008), 556–571; and idem: “Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the Pseudo-Dormition of the Holy Virgin” = *Le Muséon* 125 (2012/1–2), 55–97; Emiliano Fiori, ed.: *Dionigi Areopagita: Nomi divini, Teologia mistica, Epistole*. La versione siriana di Sergio di Rēsh'aynā (VI secolo). Lovanii: in aedibus Peeters, 2014, lxvii, footnote 93. (Corpus scriptorum Christianorum orientaliū, Volumen 656, Scriptores Syri, Tomus 252), concerning a parallelism between Philoxenus of Mabbug's *Contra Habib* and part 2, chapter 10 of Denys' *On the Divine Names* etc.

⁴ *Et introibo ad altare Dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition*. Thessalonikē: Patriarkhikon Hidryma Paterikōn Meletōn, 1994. (Analecta Vlatadon № 59)

⁵ *Denys the Areopagite*. London – New York: Continuum, 1989. (Outstanding Christian Thinkers)

⁶ Defying age, Anton Baumstark's classical monograph is still an indispensable research tool in early Christian Syriac studies: *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur: mit Ausschluss der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*. Bonn: A. Marcus und E. Webers Verlag, 1922. – Some of the here discussed texts are found in manuscript at the Virtual Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, an online repository of Syriac manuscripts: <https://www.vhml.org/readingRoom>.

Trinity understood as the source of whatever is good in Part 3, really entering the thick of the matter by putting forward a well-articulated, complex proposition already in the first sentence, two obstacles as it were immediately pop up and hold off a detailed analysis of the divine bounty. The first obstacle is that before embarking on such an ambitious dialectic project, a prayer to the Trinity seems an absolute must to Denys. The other is the necessity of an apology for embarking on it at all, when apparently, all has been said and done by Denys's master Hierotheos. The divine aspect of the Good may be duly investigated only after these duties have been fulfilled. At this point, the duty of a preliminary prayer at least may seem like a nonessential detour, but finally it will turn out to be just the opposite: a precondition of, and a full-fledged alternative to, the systematic philosophical theology of the divine names.

I have said above that Denys puts forward a carefully honed formula early on in Chapter 1 of Part 3. In a first instance, this formula already suggests at least two important philosophical points: 1. That the divine name 'Good' is totally perfect (*παντελής*)—probably precisely because it illuminates every procession or emanation of God (*ἐκφαντορική τῶν ὄλων τοῦ θεοῦ προόδων*); and 2. that it is precisely *on account of* the all-inclusiveness of that name that it should be investigated first. This would imply that the 'Good' as a divine attribute is the productive aspect of God, so it is the natural starting point for the outpourings to come out. In a second instance, then, still in the same opening sentence, Denys also implies that 3. the Trinity is the steward and source of that goodness and hence it is also beyond goodness (*ἀγαθαρχική καὶ ὑπεράγαθος*); and that 4. the Trinity does take good care to reveal all its providential cares. The name 'Good' is 5. therefore something that is analogous with the operation of the Trinity because both are revelatory (*ἐκφαντορική*) of the salvific divine agency toward the world: they reveal a Creator condescending towards creation. This analogy is hardly surprising if the Trinity is as it were the understructure of the divine aspect of the Good. In fact, the Trinity itself has just been described in Part 2, Chapter 4 as the aspect of the godhead that is primarily characterized by difference (*διάκρισις*) as compared to the more transcendent divine core that displays unity or identity (*ἔνωσις*). Since the identities are the ultra-concealed infinite kernel in God, the metaphysical *Ungrund*,

the divine persons will emerge as a more manifestative *Grund*—so it is tempting to say that for Denys, author of Part 2 of *On the Divine Names*, the Trinity represents the more outward, creation-oriented facet of the infinite divinity:

<1.> Καὶ πρώτην, εἰ δοκεῖ, τὴν παντελῇ καὶ τῶν ὅλων τοῦ θεοῦ προόδων ἐκφαντορικὴν ἀγαθωνυμίαν ἐπισκεψώμεθα τὴν ἀγαθαρχικὴν καὶ ὑπεράγαθον ἐπικαλεσάμενοι τριάδα τὴν ἐκφαντορικὴν τῶν ὅλων ἐαυτῆς ἀγαθωτάτων προνοιῶν.

But this is only an anticipation of what is to come in Part 4—because the aorist participle *ἐπικαλεσάμενοι* at once announces that, first, a call must go out to the Trinity. As we have anticipated above, this is not a common cry for help but a reference to a being conducted ‘upwards’ (*ἀνάγεσθαι*) by virtue of prayers, unto the Trinity as a source of goodness (that is, the providential and so more accessible aspect of God); to the end that arriving into the Trinity’s more immediate vicinity, one may be initiated into the ‘perfectly good gifts’—probably, insights or intuitions—surrounding the Trinity. This ‘ontological’ exaltation is, theoretically, far from obvious for although the Trinity attends to everything in the place where a particular thing is, not everything is capable of leaving their respective, metaphysically designated places in the hierarchy of being in order to rise up to the Trinity. On the one hand, that requires individual capacity, willpower, and effort; while on the other, initiation—that is, baptism—and the supervision of ordained ecclesiastic authority and angelic hierarchy, as the two *Hierarchies* stipulate. However, we hear of no such intervention here; instead, Denys specifies that when our prayers are totally saintly and our mind untroubled and ready for a merger, then we have been elevated. This sounds more like a residue or reminiscence of the spiritual doctrine of the Desert Fathers and early Syrian monastic sources like the *Acts of Judas Thomas* or, better, the *Book of Steps*:

Χρὴ γὰρ ἡμᾶς ταῖς εὐχαῖς πρῶτον ἐπ’ αὐτὴν ὡς ἀγαθαρχίαν ἀνάγεσθαι καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτῇ πλησιάζοντας ἐν τούτῳ μυεῖσθαι τὰ πανάγαθα δῶρα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν ἰδρυμένα. Καὶ γὰρ αὕτη μὲν ἅπασι πάρεστιν, οὐ πάντα δὲ αὐτῇ πάρεστι. Τότε δέ, ὅταν αὕτην

ἐπικαλούμεθα πανάγνοις μὲν εὐχαῖς, ἀνεπιθολώτῳ δὲ νῶ καὶ τῇ
 πρὸς θεῖαν ἔνωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητι, τότε καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτῇ πάρεσμεν.
 Αὐτὴ γὰρ οὔτε ἐν τόπῳ ἔστιν, ἵνα καὶ ἀπῇ τινος ἢ ἐξ ἑτέρων εἰς
 ἕτερα μεταβῇ. Ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς οὖσιν αὐτὴν εἶναι λέγειν
 ἀπολείπεται τῆς ὑπὲρ πάντα καὶ πάντων περιληπτικῆς ἀπειρίας.

I have pointed out above that the operation of mediating hierarchical powers during the ἀναγωγή is remarkably absent from Denys' narrative of this elevation of the mind to the Trinity. This is so even in the two more concrete examples the Dionysian corpus gives us of the 'ontological prayer' at the head of the *Mystical Theology* where the Areopagite first prays to the Trinity, then exhorts Timothy to exert himself and ecstatically rise up (literally, 'be carried up,' ἀναχθήσῃ) beyond all sensible and intelligible reality, without the operation of the understanding, with a view to be unified with the supereminent one. From a Neoplatonic point of view, then, it is not the ecclesiastic or angelic hierarchies that are missing from this description of an unmediated contact with the highest one, but the Proclean henads, which, in principle, should be obligatory stages or checkpoints, places of transition, in the journey a lower-ranking being leaves behind as it ascends to return to its origin by way of a Neoplatonic ἐπιστροφή. For Denys in these passages, there is a vacuum in this region between the mind and God that used to be filled up, in Neoplatonic metaphysics, with the σείραι, the seamless cords or strings of causal derivation that secure a supervised and inevitable passage bottom-up (but also top-down), through the henads, the participable divine units, toward the One. But as a matter of historical fact, Denys, on the one hand, has revoked the henads into God so they essentially become divine aspects, powers, or outpourings by being 'eliminated upwards' and absorbed into God so no separate intermediary of a divine stature should remain between the highest angelic orders and God. This is so even when Denys utilizes the exact same term σείρᾱ in the same Chapter 1 of Part 3 of our source text with reference to the intellectual rays, ἀκτίδες beaming forth from God, because probably, these are also to be seen as divine outpourings. On the other hand, as far as Proclus's hypercosmic and encosmic gods, the subject matter of Book 6 of the *Platonic Theology*, are concerned, Denys has dragged them down, degrading them into the angelic orders

who have lost all divine attributes and whose only responsibility will be the smooth transfer of divine illumination and saving grace. So I think that at this point at least, the theory of the 'ontological prayer' borders on the query concerning the *πρόδος*:

Ἡμᾶς οὖν αὐτοὺς ταῖς εὐχαῖς ἀνατείνωμεν ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν θείων καὶ ἀγαθῶν ἀκτίνων ὑψηλοτέραν ἀνάνευσιν, ὥσπερ εἰ πολυφώτου σειρᾶς ἐκ τῆς οὐρανίας ἀκρότητος ἡρτημένης, εἰς δεῦρο δὲ καθηκούσης καὶ ἀεὶ αὐτῆς ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσω χερσὶν ἀμοιβαίαις δραττόμενοι καθέλκειν μὲν αὐτὴν ἐδοκοῦμεν, τῷ ὄντι δὲ οὐ κατήγομεν ἐκείνην ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω παροῦσαν, ἀλλ' αὐτοὶ ἡμεῖς ἀνηγόμεθα πρὸς τὰς ὑψηλοτέρας τῶν πολυφώτων ἀκτίνων μαρμαρυγὰς.

Further on in Chapter 1 of Part 3 of *On the Divine Names*, as Denys explains that in the course of a (Christian) prayer the Trinity is not made to descend to our level but, instead, we are exalted to its ontological altitude, he may be again taking a stance vis-à-vis a Neoplatonic idea, tacitly referring to the Iamblichean theory (and practice) of theurgy as it is abundantly described in several passages of *Abammon's Epistle to Porphyry*. For just like Iamblichus insists that while the *θεουργός* ascends—by way of purification, prayer, and sacrifice (1,15; 4,3; 5,26; 10,8)—to the universal demiurge in order to be unified with the Highest Good (10,6–7), the involved gods do not undergo any effect or influence (1,11), so Denys also emphasizes that the Trinity is not influenced in any way by our elevation. Then again, in Section 2,9 of the *Epistle*, Iamblichus uses the same verb (*καλεῖν*) to designate the act of praying as Denys does (who has *ἐπικαλεῖν*). And still there is a tacit but clear opposition on the side of the Areopagite as against Iamblichus because the latter also teaches (4,1–2) that by being unified with a specific god, it is possible to utilize their power to instruct the lower natural forces to execute what the theurge wants. This is certainly not something Denys would admit:

Ἡ ὥσπερ εἰς ναῦν ἐμβεβηκότες καὶ ἀντεχόμενοι τῶν ἔκ τινος πέτρας εἰς ἡμᾶς ἐκτεινομένων πεισμάτων καὶ οἷον ἡμῖν εἰς ἀντίληψιν ἐκδιδομένων οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς τὴν πέτραν, ἀλλ' ἡμᾶς

αὐτοὺς τῷ ἀληθεῖ καὶ τὴν ναῦν ἐπὶ τὴν πέτραν προσήγομεν. Ὡσπερ καὶ τὸ ἔμπαλιν, εἴ τις τὴν παραλίαν πέτραν ἐστῶς ἐπὶ τῆς νηὸς ἀπώσεται, δράσει μὲν οὐδὲν εἰς τὴν ἐστῶσαν καὶ ἀκίνητον πέτραν, ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐκείνης ἀποχωρίσει, καὶ ὅσῳ μᾶλλον αὐτὴν ἀπώσεται, μᾶλλον αὐτῆς ἀκοντισθήσεται. Διὸ καὶ πρὸ παντὸς καὶ μᾶλλον θεολογίας εὐχῆς ἀπάρχεσθαι χρεὼν οὐχ ὡς ἐφελκομένους τὴν ἀπανταχῇ παροῦσαν καὶ οὐδαμῇ δύναμιν, ἀλλ' ὡς ταῖς θεαῖς μνήμαις καὶ ἐπικλήσεσιν ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἐγχειρίζοντας αὐτῇ καὶ ἐνοῦντας.

To sum it all up so far, we see Denys relate to Neoplatonism in the same antagonistic manner on account of the 'ontological prayer' here as he usually does in the rest of the Dionysian corpus: Neoplatonic terms and ideas are resuscitated and baptized by him, gaining new life in an emphatically monotheistic Christian framework while at the same time core intuitions of the Plotinian and Proclean exitus-reditus scheme and the metaphysics of the One reinterpret and reorient Dionysian fundamental theology. The theory of the 'ontological prayer' is hence a good yardstick of Denys' dependence on, and also, independence from, a Neoplatonic understanding of reality, of his rejection of Proclus' henadology, and aligning with a Christian monotheism. However, Chapter 1 of Part 3 is also a token of the precedence prayer takes over systematic theology for the Areopagite: Prayer is not only a full-scale alternative to theology but it also perfects theology (as we can see on the concrete example of the opening paragraphs of the *Mystical Theology* where it is emphasized that conceptual knowledge and even intuition just break off in the eventual union with God—which is produced by prayer). This over-appreciation of prayer is also peculiar to the practical theology of the early Syriac Fathers, so it directs our Dionysian research towards Oriental Christianity—whilst Proclus in the *Platonic Theology* (Book 2, Chapter 1) as well as in the *Elements of Theology* (Thesis 1) reaches out for ultimate reality departing from a fundamentally different, logical ground: the Platonic theory of the One and the Many, and does not point us to prayer as a serious alternative. This is most certainly not to say that for Proclus prayer is a negligible means of religious praxis; Marinus' *Life of Proclus* (Chapters 17–19 and 28) or, indeed, the Proclean *Hymns* abundantly disprove that. But,

unlike a frustrated Denys (think of Chapter 3 of Part 13 of *On the Divine Names* where Denys abandons the entire project of naming the divine as essentially unfruitful and unsuccessful), Proclus is somehow satisfied with his doctrine concerning the divine names in Book 1, Chapter 29 of the *Platonic Theology* (even if he, in the wake of Plato's *Cratylus*, maintains the inscrutability of the primary names of the gods); and he dedicates the best of his anagogic effort to syllogistic reasoning about the *πρόοδος* and the *ἐπιστροφή*. Since, then, Greek Christian sources on prayer necessitate a separate inquiry,⁷ it seems a logical move, after our initial analysis of the Dionysian idea of the 'ontological prayer', to try to identify potential sources of inspiration for that idea in earlier Syriac authors, in the context of the proposition that the Areopagite belongs to a (bilingual) Syrian historical and cultural context.

*A potential Syriac context for the theory of the 'ontological prayer':
'Aphrahat's Tahwite', especially Demonstration 4: On Prayer*

Author of a collection of 22 epistles designated in Syriac as 'demonstrations' (*Tahwite*'), the fourth-century Persian Sage 'Aphrahat is the first major non-Gnostic Christian spiritual writer in the classical Syriac tradition, and also arguably the first Christian author to write theoretically about prayer without relying exclusively on the *Lord's Prayer*.⁸ His fourth demonstration—really a discourse in epistolary form—concerns prayer, *ṣluto'*; besides this, one may want to draw on *Demonstration 1* as well, a discourse on faith because there is considerable overlap in the discussion; and on *Demonstration 6 (On Monks)* as it expands on how prayer works. In these discourses, 'Aphrahat stands up for secret prayer recited in the purity of the heart (*dakyut lebo'*);

⁷ It may be a good idea to start with Alexander Golitzin's systematic overview of Denys' Greek sources in *Et introibo ad altare Dei* (see bibliographical references above, in footnote), 233–348.

⁸ As Sebastian Brock points out in his state-of-the-art volume on the early Syriac tradition of prayer, 'Aphrahat's *Demonstration 4* has the distinction of being the earliest extant Christian treatise on prayer which is not primarily concerned with the Lord's Prayer, as is the case with the well-known works on prayer by Tertullian [*De oratione*], Origen [*Περὶ εὐχῆς*], and Cyprian [*De dominica oratione*]' (S. Brock: *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*. Cistercian Studies, Volume 101, 1987, 2 [references added]; translation of *Demonstration 4*, with notes: 5–28.) Find 'Aphrahat's Syriac original in Ioannes D. Parisot, ed.: *Aphraatis demonstrationes* = *Patrologia Syriaca - Malponuto' d'abohoto' suryoye'*, vol. 1. Parisiis: Ediderunt Firmin-Didot et socii, 1926; *Demonstration 4*: coll. 137–181.

such prayer, if it is carried out in silence (*šetko*) and with a quiet mind (*bre'yono' šapyo*) is called 'pure prayer' (*šluto' dkito*).

At this point, then, we may already want to refer to Denys, who also considers a quiet mind (*ἀνεπιθόλωτος νοῦς*) to be a prerequisite of prayer—but the postulation of this condition is a commonplace in several Evagrian aphorisms too, for instance, in the *On Prayer* (2; 11; 21; 34b; 82, etc.). Further, 'Aphrahaṭ is convinced that pure prayer has literally supernatural power (*ḥaylo*; see especially Section 4 of *Demonstration* 4 and Sections 17–18 of *Demonstration* 1), which equals the power of a pure fast (*šawmo' dakyo*). Pure prayer can even have endless power, like indeed the prayer of Moses did (*ḥaylo' dašluteh dMuše' dlait loh soko*, Section 7, *Demonstration* 4), and can be accepted by God as a pure sacrificial present (*qurbono' dakyo*), so prayer is also a kind of sacrifice. Conversely, pure prayer conveys divine gifts to man (*bašluto' 'etqabalu qurbone*) in a manner similar to how Denys conceives of the ending of the mind's itinerary with an initiation into the divine mysteries by receiving the supernatural gifts of the Trinity. For 'Aphrahaṭ, too, prayer is an 'upward' journey, though this is more metaphorically stated in *Demonstration* 4 than by Denys as 'Aphrahaṭ utilizes the image of Jacob's ladder leading up from this world to the heavens (Section 5).

'Aphrahaṭ's imagery is even more Biblical than that of Denys when he in Section 9 enlarges upon Daniel's prayer in the lions' pit as he says that as a result of the lions' prayer (*pšaṭu 'idayhun lašmayo' w'op henun badmut Donieyl*) a receiver (*mqabel šlawoto*), that is, a herald of God (*mal'akeh*, cognate with the Hebrew term for 'angel', מלאך) was sent down from heaven to receive the prayer. Finally, the closing sections of *Demonstration* 4 reiterate the initial demand that prayer should be executed inside the mind, in secret (Section 10: *dahwaytun msaleyn bkesyo' lkasyo*), in a kind of inner chamber (*tawono*), which is the 'church' of the closed mouth (*aḥid pumo*; see also *Demonstration* 6, Section 1 and *Demonstration* 1, Section 3). The secrecy of prayer recited in a church that is the interior of the human mind (and even the human body) is a motif found in the Syriac *Acts of Judas Thomas* (Act 8, the tragic story of Migdonya' and Kariš) as well; then, in a more elaborate and systematic form, in the *Book of Steps* (Homily 12); and again, in a more poetical form, in St Ephrem's *Hymns on Faith* (Hymn

20); so it can be called a common fourth-century Syriac metaphor of the theory of prayer. But as far as Denys is concerned, the common theroetical ground he shares with 'Aphrahaṭ is reduced, after all, to a perhaps too general conception of prayer that requires a quiet mind, that is an elevation to heaven, and that is a conveyor of divine gifts.

*A potential Syriac context for the theory of the 'ontological prayer':
The Book of Steps, especially Homily 12*

Named the *Book of Steps*—*Liber graduum*, *Ktobo' dmasqoto'*—by its first publisher, Michael Kmosko (1876–1931),⁹ this familiar late fourth-century collection of 30 *mimrē* ('discourses') is the work of a preacher who lived in the region of the Lesser Zab River (today north-eastern Iraq) and who for some reason took great care to conserve his anonymity.¹⁰ His discourses were addressed to a community of clear-eyed and determined ascetes who strove after religious perfection: the 'perfect' (*gmire*), whom the collection carefully differentiates from the 'just' (*zadiqē*), that is, the 'ordinary' believers who only live up to the small commandments (on this very straightforward distinction, see especially *Homilies 2 and 11*).

For *Mimrō* 12, then, of church there is not one but three: the visible church ('*idto' dmethazyo*') with its authoritative ecclesiastic hierarchy, the church of the heart ('*idto' dlebo*'), and the invisible celestial church ('*idto' drawmo*'), in which the Anointed One himself, the *Mšiho*, celebrates the divine service. Before the 'pure prayer of the heart' (*sluto' ksito' dlebo*) could be born in the church of the heart, it must be preceded by the external, bodily tokens of baptism (*ma'mudito*), evangelical

⁹ A still sound philological basis for an investigation into the *Book of Steps* is Hungarian orientalist and professor of Semitic languages Michael Kmosko's critical edition of the original text: *Ktobo' dmasqoto'—Liber graduum* = *Patrologia Syriaca - Malponuto' d'abohoto' suryoye'*, vol. 3. Parisiis: Ediderunt Firmin-Didot et socii, 1926. E codicibus [...] edidit, praefatus est dr. Michael Kmosko in Universitate Budapestensi professor.

¹⁰ A full English translation of the *Book of Steps* is available from the pen of Robert A. Kitchen, Maartien F. G. Parmentier: *The Book Of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum*. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004. (Cistercian Studies Series, Volume 196.) Kristian S. Heal and Robert A. Kitchen edited the impressive collection of studies titled *Breaking the Mind: New Studies in the Syriac "Book of Steps"*, Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2014; while Matthias Westerhoff delved into the topic of Pauline reception in the *Book of Steps: Das Paulusverständnis im Liber Graduum*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. Further bibliographical tools are found in the online edition of the *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*: <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/entry/Book-of-Steps>.

poverty (*msarquto*'), and virginity (*btoluto*'). It is complemented by crying (*dem'e*', lit. 'tears'), fasting (*ṣawmo*'), and vigil (*ṣaḥro*'). These are all executed in the course of a monastic life consisting of work, reading of Scripture, and prayer—just like for the late fourth-century Pseudo-Makarian homilies, probably also written in Mesopotamia (see, for instance, *Homily 3*).¹¹ So the heart as the seat of an emotional religiosity has to rely on, and cooperate with, the body (*pagro*') in order that the monk may reach the stage of perfection, which implies that even the body must be wholly sanctified and function as a 'hidden church' (*hayklo' kasyo*'). All that, however, can only happen by virtue of the salvific, mediating intervention of the visible church, which delivers the redeeming sacraments even to the most perfect of monks.¹² Hence an anagogic prayer is enabled to ascend to the heavenly church only on the ground provided by the earthly institution.

This is, as has been pointed out by Alexander Golitzin,¹³ by and large the same ecclesiology as the one proposed by Denys in Parts 1, 5, and 6 of the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*: While the final objective of the sacerdotal orders, the indispensable mediators of the sacraments, is to facilitate, guide and control the elevation of the soul into the unmediated vicinity of God, it is also certain that there is no other way whatsoever to unite with the divine even via absolute personal moral sanctity or monastic perfection. In one passage (Part 1, Chapter 4), the Areopagite seems to suggest even that God has given first and foremost the ecclesiastic hierarchy to mankind so redemption may be channeled through it to us.¹⁴ Just like in the *Book of Steps*, then, Denys' apologetic interpretation

¹¹ H. Dörries, E. Klostermann, M. Kroeger, eds.: *Die 50 geistigen Homilien des Makarios*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964, 20. On the Mesopotamian background of the corpus, see Brock: *The Syriac Fathers*, 42.

¹² <2.> *Law geyr 'iqi' 'aqim Moran ukoruzawhi qadmoye' waḥroye' 'idto' umadbho' uma'amu-dit holeyn dmetḥzeyn l'ayne' dpagro', 'elo' dmen holeyn dmetḥazyon nehwe' bholeyn dlo' methazyon dbašmayo' l'ayne' dbesro', kad nehwn pagrayn haykle' ulebāyn madbhe' unegle' une'lul kad 'itayn bhode' 'idto' dmetḥazyo 'am kohnutoh w'am tešmeštoh dnehwun ḥawre' tobe' lkulhun bnaynošo' dmetdameyn boh bšāḥro' wabṣawmo' ubamsaybronuto' dMoran ukoruzawhi une'bed unalep.* ('It was not without purpose that our Lord and his preachers, of old and in more recent times, established this church, altar and baptism which can be seen by the body's eyes. The reason was this: by starting from these visible things, and provided our bodies become temples and our hearts altars, we might find ourselves in their heavenly counterparts which cannot be seen by the eyes of flesh, migrating there and entering in while we are still in this visible church with its priesthood and its ministry acting as fair examples for all those who initiate there the vigils, fasting and endurance of our Lord and of those who have preached Him.' 45–47)

¹³ *Et introibo ad altare Dei*, 371–373.

¹⁴ <4> Λέγωμεν τοίνυν ὡς ἡ θεαρχικὴ μακαριότης ἡ φύσει θεότης ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς θεώσεως, ἐξ

of the role of the clergy makes it more than likely that there had been a group within his church too that denied the priesthood this unexpendable function.

Thus in its ecclesiology, *Homily 12* of the *Book of Steps* displays the same defensive strategy regarding the visible church as the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*, and they also assert in unison that through an elevating prayer, the (purified) heart is able to go on an ecstatic journey (secretly), leave this world behind, and rise up to heaven.¹⁵ So something very much like ‘ontological prayer’ was not unknown to the practical theology of the *Book of Steps* either.

*A potential Syriac context for the theory of ‘ontological prayer’:
Ephrem’s Hymns on Faith, especially Hymn 20*

For Mar Ephrem (ca 306–373), the ‘Harp of the Holy Spirit’—a part of whose prolific writings include 87 mainly anti-Arian *Hymns on Faith*—the perfect prayer is accompanied by weeping (‘woto’) and is born only in the heart, never leaving that place unless in the form of a confession of faith (*haymonuto*’, in *Hymn 20*).¹⁶ The heart, much like for ‘Aphrahaṭ and the *Book of Steps*, is a spiritual organ that functions like a womb (*karso*’) as it brings forth the prayer internally, which in turn brings forth faith externally. Again, just like for ‘Aphrahaṭ, the *Book of Steps*, and partially also Denys, the heart as a place of prayer

ἥς τὸ θεοῦσθαι τοῖς θεουμένοις, ἀγαθότητι θείᾳ τὴν ἱεραρχίαν ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ καὶ θεώσει πάντων τῶν λογικῶν τε καὶ νοερῶν οὐσιῶν ἐδωρήσατο, καὶ ταῖς μὲν ὑπερκοσμίους καὶ μακαρίαις λήξεσιν αὐλότερον τε καὶ νοερώτερον (οὐ γὰρ ἔξωθεν αὐτὰς ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα κινεῖ, νοητῶς δὲ καὶ ἔνδοθεν ἐλλαμπομένων αὐτῶν ἐν αὐγῇ καθαρᾷ καὶ αὐλῳ τὴν θειοτάτην βούλησιν), ἡμῖν δὲ τὸ ἐκείναις ἐνιαίως τε καὶ συνεπτυγμένως δωρηθὲν ἐκ τῶν θεοπαραδότων λογίων ὡς ἡμῖν ἐφικτὸν ἐν ποικιλίᾳ καὶ πλήθει διαιρετῶν συμβόλων δεδωρηται.

¹⁵ *Homily 12* actually opens with this doctrine: <1.> ‘Aḥay, zodeq lan dkad mhaymninan d’it msarquto’ ksito’ dlebo’ dšobeq loh l’ar’o’ wmet’ale’ lašmayo’; nestaraq bapgar op men qenyonan wyortutan whoydeyn noṭrin l’nan puqdonawhi dmahe’ kul wyod’inan d’it šluto’ ksito’ dlebo’ lhaw man d’eṭesar bMoran wrone’ beh’amino’it. Nšale’ oḥp bapgar’am leban; aykano’ dbarek Yešu’ wšali bapgar wabruh; wašlihe’ wanbiye’ hokan šaliw. (‘Brethren, since we believe that there is a hidden self-emptying of the heart when it leaves the earth and is raised up to heaven, it is right that we should empty ourselves in the body too of our possessions and inheritance. Then we shall be keeping the commandments of Him who gives life to all, and we shall realize that the person who is bound up in our Lord and ponders on Him continuously possesses hidden prayer of the heart. Let us pray with our body as well as with our heart, just as Jesus blessed and prayed in body and in spirit; and so too did the apostles and prophets pray.’ Transl. by Sebastian Brock: *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer...*, 45.)

¹⁶ The original text has been published by Edmund Beck: *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de fide*. Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1955. (Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 154 = Scriptores Syri, vol. 73)

is like an internal chamber (*gnuno'*) where there is complete quiet and silence (*šli' ušetqo'*). Prayer should remain behind the bar of a closed mouth (which reminds us of Aphrahaṭ's 'church' of the closed mouth, *ʾahid pumo'*). Such 'dumb prayer'—*šluto' dadlo' qolo'* or *ḥaršo' šluto'*—is also called a 'pure rogation' (*bo'uto' mšalalto'*). However, when in the closing lines of *Hymn 20*, Ephrem wishes that such a prayer should 'unify' the praying person, he hardly alludes to a Proclean unification (ἔνωσις) which is also chronologically impossible, but rather to what he describes in the middle stanzas as the moral split of the soul caught between good and evil—a fundamentally different concept. (It is thus no wonder that in *Hymn 2*, Ephrem very consciously rejects 'the poison of Greek wisdom', *lme'rto' dḥekmat yawnoyo'*.) But at the same time, the agnostic leitmotiv of the entire collection of the *Hymns on Faith* is an affirmation of the unknowability of the divine essence together with the knowability of divine bounty and an acknowledgement that God's infinity is his main difference vis-à-vis creation, by virtue of which he is never entirely grasped or understood but remains always elusive for the finite human mind (see *Hymns 1, 2, 5, 72, 81*—actually, *passim*). And that is also Denys's upshot, although metaphysically argued, in Part 13 of *On the Divine Names*. Now Ephrem's *Hymn 81* adds to the list of theological parallels that prayer is not a means of rational inquiry into the divine nature (for Ephrem, that is an Arian misunderstanding), while we see Denys affirm something similar as he points us to prayer as overriding systematic theology. Yet the principal point that prayer should effectively carry us to where the Trinity is and unite us with it is poignantly missing from the *Hymns on Faith*.

Conclusion

In guise of a conclusion, it may be pointed out that there are indeed several common motifs or themes between Denys and the above-mentioned early Syriac fathers in respect to the theory of prayer—such as the prerequisite of a quiet of mind, the metaphor that the human soul is a secret internal altar and church, the real upward motion or ecstatic elevation of the soul to God (not in Ephrem), the reception of divine gifts when the soul has risen up. Hence this short inquiry into potential Syriac sources of Denys' idea of the 'ontological prayer' may reinforce

the general thesis concerning his Syrian ecclesiastic and theological background. Yet it is justified to say that at least for the conception of the 'ontological prayer' as an elevating spiritual tool with which God may be approached is more in the centre of the thought of an influential Greek Desert Father, Evagrius Ponticus. Ponticus, well known in Syria and abundantly translated into Syriac, is the true theoretician of 'ontological prayer' and may be regarded as coming nearest to Denys's idea of that kind of prayer. That said, it is also a fact that the *Book of Steps* and St Ephrem in particular develop some other core themes of Dionysian ecclesiology and theology, like the interpretation of the function of ecclesiastic hierarchy, the role of monks in the church, or the positioning of divine infinity—and hence, divine elusiveness and unknowability. Therefore, further inquiry into the Syrian theological heritage on account of Denys remains a promising perspective.