

Putting on the Form of the Gods: Sacramental Theurgy in Neoplatonism

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“All of theurgy has two aspects,” says Iamblichus in his famous treatise *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*¹. One is that it is a rite conducted by men, which preserves our natural order in the universe; the other is that it is empowered by divine symbols² and is raised up on high through them and joined to the gods and proceeds harmoniously toward the fulfilment of their purposes. This latter aspect can rightly be called “putting on the form of the gods”³. When Iamblichus speaks about “the form of the gods,” one ought to remember that the gods, both as the principles of manifested reality and administrators of theurgic reintegration, can be equated with *arithmoi*—a sort of aggregation of Pythagorean metaphysical numbers that stand as the graceful transcendent masters and models for the entire manifestation of the lower beings. As Proclus asserts, the gods are nothing but the primordial and self-sufficient principles of beings⁴, so that theology is a science of these principles⁵, or rather the exegesis of intellectual substance⁶.

The aim of our article is not to discuss the metaphysical principles

1. The title given by Marsilio Ficino. The actual Greek title of this work probably is *Abamōnos didaskalou pros tēn Porphuriou pros Anebō epistolēn apokrisis kai tōn en autēn aporēmātōn luseis*: “réponse d’Abamon, son professeur, à la lettre adressée par Porphyre à Anébon et solutions des questions qu’elle soulève.” See H.D.Saffrey *Abamon, pseudonyme de Jamblique*.- Philomathes. Studies and Essays in the Humanities in memory of Philip Merlan, The Hague, 1971, pp.227-239
2. (*tois theisis sunthēmasi*)
3. (*to tōn theōn schēma peritithēsthai*: *De myst.*184.1-8)
4. (*tas prōtistas archas tōn ontōn kai autarkestatas theous apokalousi*)
5. (*kai theologian tēn touton epistēmēn*: *In Plat.Theol.*1.3.13.6-8)
6. (*tēs noeras ouσίας exēgēsēin*: *ibid.*, 1.3.13.4-5)

themselves (be they called simply *archai* or designated as divine Names and Attributes), but to investigate what theurgy means in a strictly Neoplatonic sense and as viewed in certain broader contexts, including contemporary ones. Frithjof Schuon, for instance, tries to introduce the term “theurgy” in the universally understood religious sense as a vehicle of *barakah* and irradiation of the sacred. We are told that it is natural for man...

to make use of sensory supports towards the progress of his spirit or the equilibrium of his soul. These supports are either artistic, and so symbolic and aesthetic, or theurgic; in the latter case their function is to act as the vehicle of benefic, protective, and sanctifying forces; the two types can moreover be combined.⁷

The author here tacitly follows the tradition of Iamblichus and seems to accept the remark of Jean Trouillard who defines theurgy as “un symbolisme opératoire destiné à éveiller la présence divine” and adds: “la théurgie n’est pas la magie.”⁸ Schuon makes the same distinction when he explains: we say theurgy, and not magic, given that the forces that act in this case have their *raison d’être* and their essential source in Divine Grace and not in human art.⁹

Neoplatonic theurgy employed ritual in order to reveal the vestiges of a divine presence and subordinate man to the divine will—precisely the opposite of sorcery (*goēteia*), as most leading contemporary scholars observe. Therefore if, for Iamblichus, philosophy as a human art meant the demonstration of truths through intellectual discourse, theurgy, however, neither demonstrated nor proved but rather lifted the soul directly into the divine and was initiated through the power of the gods themselves. As a consequence, one cannot avoid suspecting that theurgic *klēsis*, invocation, is in some respect analogous to *dhikr* in Islamic mysticism.

In the most general (or even metaphorical) sense, theurgy is proximate to sacred art and both macrocosmic and microcosmic liturgy. Thus, despite the differences in meaning by various thinkers on such concepts as ‘substance’ and ‘essence’, one should agree with Schuon’s assertion as follows:

Every sacred symbol is an “enlightening form” that invites to a “liberating rite”;

7. Frithjof Schuon *The Function of Relics in Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, trans. W. Stoddart, Perennial Books, 1990, p. 205

8. Jean Trouillard *L’Un et l’âme selon Proclus*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1972, pp. 171-189

9. Frithjof Schuon *The Function of Relics*, p. 205

the “form” reveals the Essence to us, whereas the “rite” leads back to the Substance; to the Substance we are, the only one that is. All this concerns on the one hand sacred art, “liturgy”, and on the other hand the beauties of nature.¹⁰

No wonder that J.Trouillard equates theurgy with Christian sacramentalism, emphasizing their common principles, including similar notions of Divine grace, since, according to Iamblichus, “the tokens (*sunthēmata*) themselves, by themselves, effect their own work”¹¹. The general idea of theurgy requires perceiving the world as “a fabric of theophanies”¹² and imagining, in one sense or another, the multi-dimensional dialectical game between the One (*to hen*) and many, along with a providential kind of love (*erōs pronoētikos*) by which the higher causes contain and care for their effects.

Laurence J. Rosán goes so far as to equate the theurgic operation with a kind of “aesthetic technique” by which the mystical experience is initiated. By meditating on sacred symbols and uttering mysterious divine names, the Neoplatonic sages (such as Proclus, for instance) used to concentrate on the unity of some thing or idea, and after the sense of unity was grasped, tried to transfer this intuition of oneness to one’s own self and its relationship with the One Reality. But Rosán too hastily concludes (as if following the Aristotelian procedure of extracting the ‘higher’ from the ‘lower’) that:

All that the term “theurgy” or “theosophy” should denote, strictly speaking, is this aesthetic technique of obtaining a feeling of unity from sensory perceptions of material or meditation on evocative ideas.¹³

He further speculates that “whatever the actual content of Proclus’ mystical experience as such, it must have been pervaded by the memory of having made these aesthetic and religiously theurgic efforts,” including visual aesthetic contemplations of nature, similar to the Taoist or Zen aesthetics, and also what might be called “mantric” meditations on divine names and “mandalic” concentrations on symbols.¹⁴ But Rosán

10. Frithjof Schuon *The Liberating Passage in The Play of Masks*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1992, p.88

11. (*De myst.*II.11)

12. Frithjof Schuon *Roots of the Human Condition*, World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, 1991, p.56

13. Laurence J.Rosán *Proclus and the Tejobindu Upanisad*.- Neoplatonism and Indian Thought, ed. by R.Baine Harris, Norfolk, Virginia, 1982, p.48

14. Laurence J.Rosán, *ibid.*, p.48

appears not to appreciate that theurgy cannot be reduced to a sort of “aesthetic exercise,” since, according to Neoplatonists themselves, in theurgy the soul exchanges her life in the world of generation for another which is divine and immortal, not simply in a metaphorical sense.

Theurgy itself was ineffable, like the gods who worked through it: it was not a human response to the call of the divine but was the divine call itself, manifest in the hieratic rites. The sacred (*hiera*), perfect (*teleia*), and godlike objects only provided a “complete and pure receptacle” for the god¹⁵. When Dionysius the Areopagite, who in many respects faithfully follows his Neoplatonic masters, describes the Christian sacraments as theurgic mysteries¹⁶, he without hesitation introduces Christ as the principle (*archē*) and essence (*ousia*) “of every theurgy”¹⁷.

Despite various shades of the term *theourgia*, originally it appeared in the Middle Platonic milieu, and later on was adopted by certain Neoplatonists and used as a synonym for “hieratic art” (*hieratikē technē*) understood as a sacramental means for the ascent of the soul. The sacramental world-view, far from standing in opposition to the intellectual rigor of Neoplatonic dialectic or contemplation, should be regarded as the matrix of their intellectual tradition. Though, according to Iamblichus, “intellectual understanding does not connect theurgists with divine beings” (*oude gar hē ennoia sunaptei tois theois theourgois: De myst.*96.13), theurgy cannot be reduced either to “a manifesto of irrationalism”¹⁸ nor a one-sided mysticism which denies corporeality altogether.

The term *theourgia* most probably was coined by a certain Julianus who lived under Marcus Aurelius, the son of the elder Julianus, a “Chaldean philosopher,” according to Suidas. The adjective “Chaldean” here means simply “a master of occult sciences.” The theological or Platonic oracles (*ta logia*), the scattered fragments of which were collected by Western scholars under the title of “*Chaldean Oracles*” and even described as “*die Bibel der Neuplatoniker*,” are *theoparadota*, i.e. received from the gods. They were edited in hexameter verses by the younger Julianus, who himself, as the Byzantine writer Psellus asserts, has been

15. (*De myst.*V.23.)

16. (*ta theourgia musteria: Epist.*9.1.)

17. (*Eccl.Hier.*1.1.)

18. E.R.Dodds *Appendix II: Theurgy in The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p.287: “The *De mysteriis* is a manifesto of irrationalism, an assertion that the road to salvation is found not in reason but in ritual.”

in touch (*sustasis*) with the soul of Plato through archangelic intermediary. According to the scornful and sarcastic remark of a renowned modern scholar regarding these verses,

their diction is so bizarre and bombastic, their thought so obscure and incoherent, as to suggest rather the trance utterances of modern "spirit guides" than the deliberate efforts of a forger.¹⁹

Though the origin of the strictly Neoplatonic theurgy cannot be connected exclusively with these philosophical oracles in which some genuine elements of both Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions can be detected under the surface of their Platonic terminology, it seems clear that the nouns *theourgia* and *theourgōs* were coined after the pattern of *theologia* and *theologos*: as the theologians talked about the gods (*they are hoi theia legontes*), so the theurgists not only traced the descent of the divine into matter but, through the unutterable symbols, which are god-sent and comprehended only by the gods, ensured the soul's purification and return to the divine realm.

The souls of the genuine theurgists are said to derive from the angelic world. Since theurgy presupposes the active participation of the gods themselves, it can be characterized as "divine action" understood, first of all, as the action of the Divine on behalf of men. Theurgy as a sacramental *praxis* is aimed at the purification and salvation of the soul (*tes psychēs sōtērion*: *De myst.*I.12). The soul is conducted upward by the gods through the countless intermediaries: angels, daimons and specifically Chaldean spiritual entities such as the Iynges, Connectors (*sunochēis*) and Teletarchs. These various entities for the most part function as diverse aspects of the noetic cosmos or the world of Ideas. The Iynges, for instance, understood in the Middle-Platonic fashion as the Thoughts or Ideas of the Father, are actually magical or sacramental names (*voces mysticae*) sent forth by God to communicate with the theurgists. The mystic rays of the divine Sun flow down toward earth and mingle with the rays of the rising soul of the theurgist.

Though our present knowledge about secret theurgic rites and initiations is at best incomplete and sometimes close to nothing, it seems that theurgy ritually imitated the laws of cosmogony and was based, at least in some respect, on the archaic notions of *sumpatheia* and *philia*. The universal

19. E.R. Dodds, *ibid.*, p.284

sympathy assumes a direct correspondence between a given deity and its symbolic representations in the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdom. Theurgy accepts the idea of the divine help (*boētheia*) and conjunction or contact (*sustasis*) with the gods who are initially without form (*atupōta*) but who take on various shapes in order to become visible to human sight: descending into pure receptacles or manifesting themselves as luminous apparitions. The technical terms for these self-manifestations such as *autopton agalma* and *autopton phasmasin* are mentioned in the extant fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* (fr.101 and 142).

Hierocles observes that initiation into theurgical mysteries worked on the same principle as purification in mathematical analysis (*In Carmen aureum* 26.116.21 ff). Therefore Shaw argues that the “reference to the *συνπαθεια* which exists throughout the cosmos does not explain theurgy, because the power of theurgy is rooted in the gods, who utterly transcended the sympathies of which they are the *αρχαι*.”²⁰ However, the transcendence of the gods or henads does not prevent the analogies to be discovered everywhere in accordance with the famous dictum (repeated often by Numenius and Proclus): *panta en pasin*: “all things are in all things.” By the means of metaphysical exegesis even the language of agriculture may be blended with the language of mysteries. Proclus attests that his master Syrianus conceived the rites of the sacrifice offered up by the Homeric Achilles at the funeral pile of Patroclus (*Illiad*.XXIII.192f) as an imitation of the soul’s immortalization, performed by the theurgists²¹. According to this explanation, Achilles’ invocation to the winds proceeds from his intention that the subtle vehicle (*ochema*) of Patroclus’ soul should be cleansed and restituted to its native order, being drawn upwards. Thus Syrianus regards Achilles as the prototype of the theurgical officiant and Patroclus as that of the aspirant who is to be initiated into the mysteries and his soul separated by certain “sacred methods” (*beirais methodois*). Patroclus laid out upon the pyre resembles the initiate who has undergone a symbolic death and burial, while Achilles represents the priest or master of the initiation.

As Shaw meticulously pointed out:

20. Gregory Shaw *Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus.- Traditio*, vol.XLI, Fordham University Press, New York, 1985, p.25

21. (*του Αχιλλεὸς pragmateia mimeitai ton para tois theourgois tēs psuchēs apathanatismōn*: *In Remp*.1.152.7)

Theurgic rites transformed the soul from being its own idol, in an inverted attitude of self interest, into an icon of the divine, with its very corporeality, changed into a vehicle of transcendence.²²

Being a sort of junction in the cosmogonic process of creative irradiation as well as a sort of veil in a sanctuary-or-*agalma*-like cosmos (*agalma* means not simply “image,” but “animated hieratic statue”), the soul embraces the entire spectrum of demiurgical seeds or universal reasons (*logoi*), as it extends them into manifestation. The soul participates in perfecting the divine descent by assisting to transform the manifest chaos into cosmos, and thus aids the gods in the creation and salvation of the world. Therefore “the soul’s ascent and salvation is necessarily the salvation of the world.”²³

The Platonic *paideia* understood as a process of recollection by means of contemplation (moving from the sensible objects to the intelligible Forms) is rendered into the set of sacramental rites and cosmic liturgy that embraces all degrees of the manifested reality and becomes a sort of hieratic education which culminates in a mystical vision and theurgic union. The sense of divine beauty and unity is crucial in both cases. The real or imagined anagogical ascent is conducted by the singing of sacred hymns, the uttering of perfect (*teleia*) and true (*alēthine*) prayers, and supported by material, intermediary and noetic symbols (*sunthēmata*). We are told in the *Chaldean Oracles* that:

the Paternal Intellect has sown symbols throughout the cosmos (*symbola gar patrikos noos espeiren kata kosmon*), [the Intellect] which thinks the intelligibles. And [these intelligibles] are called inexpressible beauties.²⁴

In the Middle Platonic and Chaldean context these symbols are equated both with the thoughts of the Paternal Intellect and the potencies of Eros holding together the parts of the universe. They presuppose the fundamental triad of faith (*pistis*), truth (*alētheia*) and love (*erōs*). Faith gives contact with divine goodness, truth supports wisdom (*sophia*) and love reveals divine beauty. Therefore Proclus asserts:

Everything is saved by these means and joined to the original causes, some things through erotic madness, others through divine philosophy, others again through theurgic power (*dia tēs theourgikēs dunameōs*), which is greater than all human

22. Gregory Shaw, *ibid.*, p.21

23. Gregory Shaw, *ibid.*, p.14

24. (fr.108, Proclus *In Crat.*20.31-21.2)

temperance and knowledge (*sophrosunes kai epistēmēs*), gathering together the benefits of prophecy and the purifying forces of effective ritual and absolutely all the activities of divine inspiration.²⁵

The elevating (*anagōgon*) force of interior five-fold prayer awakens the hidden divine tokens (*sunthēmata*) of the gods in the depth of the soul and leads to the union (*henosis*) with them. The gods themselves are understood as henads or the first principles of being, life and intelligence. The term *anagōgē* itself goes back to Plato, who used variants of the verb *anagein* to describe both the ascent of certain heroes from Hades to Olympus (*Rep.*VII.521c) as well as the leading up of the soul through dialectical reasoning (*Rep.*VII.533d). For Plotinus *anagōgē* means a contemplative process which assures the increasing degrees of intellectual purification.

For ‘all the theurgists’ (*hoi hieratikoi pantes*), who are no less than ‘true athletes of the Fire’ (*De myst.*92.13-14), the leading up of the soul is not simply dialectical ascent supported by pure contemplation, but a sacramental or ritual event: the ineffable mystagogy (*he arrhête mustagogia*) which includes a sort of mystical arithmology and produces various degrees of illumination based on the concept of a luminous solar body (*augoeides soma*) able to receive the divine light. Since the sun ‘measures all things’ and is ‘analogous to the One’ (*Procl. In Parm.*1045.6-9), the *sunthēma* of sun as a symbol of the noetic fire constitutes one of the central mystery of Neoplatonic theurgy. As in Iranian Sufism of Najm Razi, the capacity to perceive the noetic light (*to noēton phōs*) partly depends on invocation (*dhikr* in Sufism) which consist in reciting “names without meaning” (*ta asema onomata*), sounds that are both *sunthēmata* and *agalmata*—“des statues que sont les noms divins,” according to Saffrey,²⁶ thus imitating the Demiurge in creation.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent distinction between operations of *hieratikē technē* and philosophical contemplation, the two cannot be separated. Though theurgy deals with the unutterable symbols and the unspeakable acts (*erga*) which are beyond all understanding (*hyper pasan noēsin*: *De myst.*II.11.96-97), it does not reject or even reduce the weight of the rational thinking which constitutes a considerable aspect

25. (*In Plat. Theol.*I.25.112.25-113.10 Saffrey-Westerink)

26. H.D.Saffrey *Nouveaux liens objectifs entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus.* - Revue des Sciences philosophiques et theologiques, 63, 1979, p.6

of the soul's experience. In some respect theurgy is an outgrowth of the Neoplatonic dialectic and negative theology as well as of the metaphysical exegesis of certain texts of Plato made in accord with the archaic mythology of mysteries (*teletai*). Trouillard, for instance, uses Plato's myth of the procession of the gods in the *Phaedrus* in order to reveal the cosmological structure in which Neoplatonic theurgy works. He rejects the common contemporary hypothesis about the duality of ways in Neoplatonism, namely, "rational" and "irrational" (the latter is usually condemned as "une décadence" or as "bewitching hocus-pocus" practiced by certain "solemn triflers"), and regards the later Hellenic Neoplatonism as one integral spiritual path which leads from moral purifications and dialectical demonstrations to contemplation and finally to theurgy which enables the *unio mystica*.²⁷ Even the sequence and arrangement of the selected texts, that ought to be studied with the guidance of a master, are anagogical and imitate the ascent through the seven grades of virtue, namely, natural (*phusikai*), ethical (*ethikai*), civic (*politikai*), purificatory (*kathartikai*), theoretic (*theoretikai*), paradigmatic (*paradeigmatikai*) and hieratic (*hieratikai*) virtues. The last set of *aretai* come into being in the godlike (*theoeides*) elements of the soul and are proper to the One. The supreme holiness is no less than the supreme union with the ultimate divine Principle which is beyond-Being.

Despite the well-known passage from Damascius' commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* which contrasts "those who honor philosophy more highly as Porphyry and Plotinus" and others who "honor more highly the hieratic art (*hieratikē*)"²⁸ as do Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus, the underlying similarities in Plotinus', Iamblichus', and Proclus' approach to mystical union suggest that their differences are more semantic (or differences in degree, mode, and style) than substantive. All of them emphasize that (notwithstanding occasionally different premises, methods, and exercises) the union (*henosis*) of the soul with the divine was caused and produced entirely by the divine.

In sharp contrast to modern scholars who prefer to regard the use of sacramental theurgy as "an enlightened type of sorcery" (Cumont), as "the corruption of Platonic rationalism with Oriental superstition" (Dodds)

27. See his chapter *La théurgie* in *L'Un et l'âme selon Proclus*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1972, pp.171-189

28. (*In Phaed.* II.1.172.1-3)

or as a lower alternative to rational philosophy, within the texts of Neoplatonism itself, the recognition and acceptance of the external and internal *telestikē* or theurgy was much more the norm than a deviation from it. For Iamblichus and Proclus theurgy was no less than culmination or rather 'transcendental' prolongation of philosophy and rational dialectic. The soul cannot ascend to the One by its own discursive power, since all levels of manifestation must be integrated and reverted upon their supreme source which, while presiding above intellect, nevertheless is represented by certain transcendent henads at every level of being. Though "every god is above Being, above Life, and above Intelligence,"²⁹ "the procession of all things existent and all cosmic orders of existents extends as far as do the orders of gods"³⁰.

The tendency to marginalize theurgy reflects the tendency to interpret ancient philosophy as a progressive one-way movement from *muthos* to *logos* that means the passage from naive "irrational superstitions" to the light of "rationality." It reflects, as Shaw pointed out,

a post-Enlightenment prejudice that ritual behavior exhibits a more "primitive" and "lower" stage in man's evolution than "pure" thought³¹

In the context of such 'anti-ritualistic' prejudices, Saffrey speaks of "le mirage de la théurgie"³² and asserts that "Plotinus alone appears as a heroic exception (*un exception héroïque*) to this general crazy infatuation."³³ We prefer the view of Peter Kingsley that the Neoplatonists simply revitalized "a centuries-old tradition" of dry and one-sided rationalism³⁴ by returning (through henological analysis, which images and words transforms into icons and allows the unifying and deifying experience to occur) to the heart of perennial wisdom as the origin of Hellenic or other therapeutic philosophy, understood as the living *praxis* and a set of spiritual exercises aimed at transformation of all aspects of man. The

29. (*huperousios esti kai huperzōos kai hupermous*: Proclus *Elements of Theology* 115)

30. (*tōn theōn diataxeis*: ibid.144)

31. Gregory Shaw *Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, p.9

32. H.D.Saffrey *La théurgie comme pénétration d'éléments extra-rationnels dans la philosophie grecque tradive*.-Wissenschaftliche & außerwissenschaftliche Rationalität. Referate und Texte des 4 Internationalen Humanistischen Symposiums 1978, Athènes, 1981, p.168

33. H.D.Saffrey *Les néoplatoniciens et les oracles chaldaïques*.- Revue des Études Augustiniennes, 27, 1981, p.225

34. Peter Kingsley *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic. Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 304

end of life, according to the famous passage of Plato's *Theaetetus* 176 bc, is *homoiōsis theō*—"likeness to God," which is to be attained by various means, including theurgy. The late Hellenic philosophers far from falling for the anti-intellectualist craze, realized the limits and aporias of any human discourse: at last, there is no 'One' to reach, because this word itself is merely a supreme *sunthēma* of the Ineffable. They were afraid that merely rational and mental ascent to the One in some respect may turn to be a discursive fantasy. Therefore they took inspiration not merely from propositional logic, but from the theological oracles of the Platonizing circle of Juliani and ancient Egyptian and Assyrian wisdom as well as from the types of love that had sustained Orphics and early Pythagoreans.

The abuses and misunderstandings of theurgy have no bearing upon it as an operative and esoteric kernel of the late Hellenic philosophy and religion the sacramental *technē* which was too easily but inevitably condemned by the Christian exoteric theologians and too easily accepted and discredited by some modern and pre-modern occult circles. It is evident that the Neoplatonic theurgy proper cannot be revived and used in our times even if our knowledge concerning its ritual operations and underlying mythological and metaphysical premises would be more profound. But one ought to remember that Neoplatonism (which itself is understood a sort of mystical monotheism by Kenney³⁵) far from being merely a "pagan superstition" or a narrow-minded "rationalism" appeals to revelation and divine inspiration as the source of its wisdom. Both the living tradition (*paradosis*) and initiation are indispensable for the Neoplatonic theurgy which cannot be regarded apart from ancient Hellenic cosmology and physiology and the higher forms of sophisticated spiritual hermeneutics. Marinus attests³⁶ that Proclus received the whole theurgic science from Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Syrianus' master Plutarch of Athens. In addition to his strictly Aristotelian and Platonic philosophical education, we are told that Proclus learned "all of Hellenic and non-Hellenic theology and also that truth which had been hidden in the form of myths."³⁷ He praised not only the Greek gods but,

35. See John Peter Kenney *Mystical Monotheism. A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*, Brown University Press, Hanover & London, 1991

36. (*Vita Procli* XXVIII)

37. (*ibid.* XXII)

among others, even those honored by the Arabs and Egyptians, and he claimed that it befitted the philosopher to observe the rites not only of any one city or of a few nations, but to be “the hierophant of the whole cosmos in common.”³⁸ We are told by Eunapius that Sosipatra, the mother of the Neoplatonic holy man Antoninus—and a brilliant theurgical philosopher in her own right, was initiated into Chaldean mysteries by two old men who appeared as *angeloi* thus confirming the Homeric verses that “gods, looking like strangers from abroad, assuming all kinds of shapes, wander through the cities” (*Od.*XVII.485-86). The old men, carrying voluminous purses and dressed in leathern garments, took the girl, and “no one found out into what mysteries they initiated her” and “whether they were heroes or daimons or belonged to some race even more divine.”³⁹

Several decades ago Henry Corbin sought to re-establish the term *theourgia* and find its equivalents within the Islamic Platonism of Iran. While discussing such terms as *bikmat ilāhīya* (divine wisdom), *bakim mota'allib* and *bakim ilāhi* (divine sage), Corbin argued that they should be rendered by their Neoplatonic equivalents, namely, *theosophia* and *theosophos* respectively. Now, if the word *ta'allub* covers the same ground of connotations as does ‘theurgy’ in the late Hellenic Neoplatonism, the word *mota'allib* could be understood as “le sage théurge, ou le *hiératique*.”⁴⁰ “Aussi bien le *hiératique*,” writes Corbin, “est-il une catégorie qui encadre toute la vision sohrawardienne du monde, où chaque espèce est la *théurgie*, l'oeuvre *hiératique* de son Ange.”⁴¹ Corbin goes to suggest that the Suhrawardian terms *sanam* and *tilism* might be rendered as “icon” and “theurgy” respectively. Since the word *talisman* may be an Arabic transformation of Greek *telesma* (initiation), it seems that the Neoplatonic term *sunthēma* stands more close to the meaning of *tilism* than “theurgy” which itself cannot be equated to some particular objects or tokens (be they natural or artificial) of both microcosmic

38. (*koinē hierophantēs tou bolou kosmou*: *ibid.*XIX)

39. Eunapius *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, pp.466-69 Boissonade. Cited from Georg Luck *Arcana Mundi. Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, A Collection of Ancient Texts, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1992, pp.157-159

40. Henry Corbin *En Islam iranien. Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, tome II: *Sohrawardi et les Platoniciens de Perse*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, pp.41-42

41. Henry Corbin, *ibid.*, p. 92

and macrocosmic *telestikē*. Nevertheless, Corbin writes: “Car l'espèce corporelle est comme une ombre, une projection, une icône (*sanam*) de son Ange, une théurgie (*tilism*, grec *telesma*) opérée par lui dans le *barzakh* qui par soi-même est mort et nuit absolue.”⁴²

In this respect we should bear in mind that long before the Suhrawardian school rose up in Syria and Iran, the Hellenic transmitters of theological oracles in the Second and Third centuries had already mythologized the world of Platonic Ideas and interpreted them as hierarchically ordered spiritual entities, angels included. Therefore when Corbin argues that the Persian Platonists interpreted Platonic Ideas in terms of Zoroastrian angelology,⁴³ this practice partly reflects the age-old Chaldean tradition. The term ‘Chaldean’ had come to denote the blending of Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions which occurred chiefly as a result of Cyrus’ conquest of Babylon,⁴⁴ but in the late Roman empire it simply meant an adept of occult sciences, astrology and magic, sometimes a charlatan, and a master of theurgical *anagōgē* (*inductio*), whatever one’s origin, whether it be Syrian, Greek, or Roman. The traces of theurgic legacy could be traced in such esoteric works as *Ghayat al-Hakim* (*Aim of the Sages*) and *Kitab al-Filaba al-nabatiya* (*Nabatean Agriculture*, which deals not with the agriculture, but with the hidden properties of natural things). Therefore no wonder that in her investigation of the Harranian Sabians, as the source of certain doctrines inherited by the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Safa*), Tamara M.Green mentions “the performance of theurgic ritual, but shaped within the framework of earlier Mesopotamian religion.”⁴⁵

Given its various shades of meaning, the term ‘theurgy’ can be used in broader contexts than the strictly Neoplatonic one. The term was legitimized within the *sophia perennis* school, witness Schuon’s exploration of “aesthetic and theurgic phenomenology.”⁴⁶ Through the writings

42. Henry Corbin, *ibid.*, p. 111

43. Henry Corbin, *ibid.*, p.25

44. See Peter Kingsley *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, p.539

45. Tamara M.Green *The City of the Moon God. Religious Traditions of Harran*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1992, p.207

46. Frithjof Schuon *Esotericism as Principle and as Way*, Perennial Books 1990, p.177-225. On p.219 the author argues: “Theurgic phenomenology not only includes sacred symbols, supports of heavenly currents and subjective graces, but also and even above all, rites in which man actively cooperates with a saving theurgy.”

of Pseudo-Dionysius this term entered into the Christian discourse. In looser and less restrictive but not an altogether metaphorical sense, we can still speak of theurgy not as a type of wonder-working (*thaumatourgia*), but as divine acts (*theia erga*) and divine grace (*barakah*, in Sufi terms), which deepen our remembrance (*anamnesis*) and serves for elevation (*anagoge*) through forms of sacred art, the relics of holy men and even the marvels of nature.