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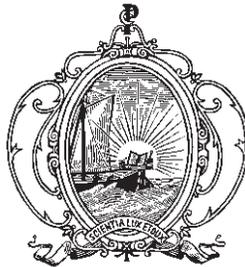
STUDIA PATRISTICA

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MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 22:
The Second Half of the Fourth Century
From the Fifth Century Onwards (Greek Writers)
Gregory Palamas' *Epistula* III



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Table of Contents

THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Kelley SPOERL Epiphanius on Jesus' Digestion.....	3
Young Richard KIM Nicaea is Not Enough: The Second Creed of Epiphanius' <i>Ancoratus</i>	11
John VOELKER Marius Victorinus' Use of a Gnostic Commentary.....	21
Tomasz STĘPIEŃ Action of Will and Generation of the Son in Extant Works of Euno- mius	29
Alberto J. QUIROGA PUERTAS 'In the Gardens of Adonis'. Religious Disputations in Julian's <i>Caesars</i>	37
Ariane MAGNY Porphyry and Julian on Christians	47
Jeannette KREJKES The Impact of Theological Concepts on Calvin's Reception of Chry- sostom's Exegesis of <i>Galatians</i> 4:21-6	57
Hellen DAYTON John Chrysostom on <i>katanuxis</i> as the Source of Spiritual Healing ..	65
Michaela DURST The <i>Epistle to the Hebrews</i> in the 7 th <i>Oration</i> of John Chrysostom's <i>Orationes Adversus Judaeos</i>	71
Paschalis GKORTSILAS The Lives of Others: Pagan and Christian Role Models in John Chrysostom's Thought.....	83
Malouine DE DIEULEVEULT L'exégèse de la faute de David (<i>2Règnes</i> 11-12) : Jean Chrysostome et Théodoret de Cyr	95

Matteo CARUSO	
Hagiographic Style of the <i>Vita Spyridonis</i> between Rhetoric and Exegetical Tradition: Analogies between John Chrysostom's Homilies and the Work of Theodore of Paphos	103
Paul C. BOLES	
Method and Meaning in Chrysostom's <i>Homily 7</i> and Origen's <i>Homily 1</i> on <i>Genesis</i>	111
Susan B. GRIFFITH	
Apostolic Authority and the 'Incident at Antioch': Chrysostom on <i>Gal. 2:11-4</i>	117
James D. COOK	
Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom	127
Demetrios BATHRELLOS	
<i>Sola gratia? Sola fide?</i> Law, Grace, Faith, and Works in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Romans</i>	133
Marie-Eve GEIGER	
Les homélie de Jean Chrysostome <i>In principium Actorum</i> : le titre pris comme principe exégétique	147
Pierre AUGUSTIN	
Quelques sources Parisiennes du <i>Chrysostome</i> de Sir Henry Savile.	157
Thomas BRAUCH	
The Emperor Theodosius I and the Nicene Faith: A Brief History ..	175
Sergey KIM	
Severian of Gabala as a Witness to Life at the Imperial Court in Fifth-Century Constantinople	189
FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS (GREEK WRITERS)	
Austin Dominic LITKE	
The ' <i>Organon</i> Concept' in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria ..	207
Barbara VILLANI	
Some Remarks on the Textual Tradition and the Literary Genre of Cyril of Alexandria's <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> ...	215

Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER All Cyrillians? Cyril of Alexandria as Norm of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon.....	225
Hans VAN LOON Virtue in Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Festal Letters</i>	237
George KALANTZIS Passibility, Tentability, and the Divine Οὐσία in the Debate between Cyril and Nestorius	249
James E. GOEHRING 'Talking Back' in Pachomian Hagiography: Theodore's Catechesis and the <i>Letter of Ammon</i>	257
James F. WELLINGTON Let God Arise: The Divine Warrior <i>Motif</i> in Theodoret of Cyrhus' Commentary on <i>Psalms</i> 67.....	265
Agnès LORRAIN Exégèse et argumentation scripturaire chez Théodoret de Cyr: l' <i>In Romanos</i> , écho des controverses trinitaires et christologiques des IV ^e et V ^e siècles	273
Kathryn KLEINKOPF A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theo- doret's <i>Historia Religiosa</i>	283
Maya GOLDBERG New Syriac Edition and Translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's Reconstructed <i>Commentary on Paul's Minor Epistles</i> : Fragments Collected from MS (<i>olim</i>) <i>Diyarbakir</i> 22	293
Georgiana HUIAN The Spiritual Experience in Diadochus of Photike.....	301
Eirini A. ARTEMI The Comparison of the Triadological Teaching of Isidore of Pelusium with Cyril of Alexandria's Teaching.....	309
Madalina TOCA Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind.....	325
Michael MUTHREICH Ein äthiopisches Fragment der dem Dionysius Areopagita zugeschrie- benen <i>Narratio de vita sua</i>	333

István PERCZEL	
Theodoret of Cyrhus: The Main Source of Pseudo-Dionysius' Christology?	351
Panagiotis G. PAVLOS	
Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite	377
Joost VAN ROSSUM	
The Relationship between Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor: Revisiting the Problem	397
Dimitrios A. VASILAKIS	
Dionysius <i>versus</i> Proclus on Undefined Providence and its Byzantine Echoes in Nicholas of Methone	407
José María NIEVA	
The Mystical Sense of the Aesthetic Experience in Dionysius the Areopagite	419
Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI	
Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father... ..	425
Alexandru PRELIPCEAN	
The Influence of Romanos the Melodist on the <i>Great Canon</i> of Saint Andrew of Crete: Some Remarks about Christological Typologies ..	441
Alexis TORRANCE	
'Assuming our nature corrupted by sin': Revisiting Theodore the Studite on the Humanity of Christ	451
Scott ABLES	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Polemic of John of Damascus.....	457
James A. FRANCIS	
Ancient Seeing/Christian Seeing: The Old and the New in John of Damascus.....	469
Zachary KEITH	
The Problem of ἐνωπόστατον in John Damascene: Why Is Jesus Not a Human Person?	477
Nicholas BAMFORD	
Being, Christian Gnosis, and Deified Becoming in the 'Theoretikon'	485

Alexandros CHOULIARAS	
The <i>Imago Trinitatis</i> in St Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos: Is this the Basic Source of St Gregory Palamas' own Approach?.....	493
GREGORY PALAMAS' <i>EPISTULA</i> III (edited by Katharina HEYDEN)	
Katharina HEYDEN	
Introduction: The Two Versions of Palamas' <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos	507
Katharina HEYDEN	
The Two <i>Epistulae</i> III of Palamas to Akindynos: The Small but Important Difference between Authenticity and Originality.....	511
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS	
The Problem of the Distinction between Essence and Energies in the Hesychast Controversy. Saint Gregory Palamas' <i>Epistula</i> III: The Version Published by P. Chrestou in Light of Palamas' Other Works on the Divine Energies.....	521
Renate BURRI	
The Textual Transmission of Palamas' <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos: The Case of Monac. gr. 223.....	535
Dimitrios MOSCHOS	
Reasons of Being versus Uncreated Energies – Neoplatonism and Mathematics as Means of Participating in God according to Nicephorus Gregoras.....	547

Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite¹

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ABSTRACT

That a certain principle pervades the whole of the Dionysian corpus has been commonly acknowledged by readers of the works of this intriguing author. The principle is that of participation, which frames the structure of Dionysian thinking in all its aspects, the Christological, the liturgical and ecclesiological as well as the ontological. Most scholarly studies of this Christian, nonetheless Neoplatonic, figure mostly recognize the participatory character of his thinking. In his participatory metaphysical system there is a feature that seems to be crucial. Except for some sporadic remarks – few in relation to the huge number of relevant studies – and in spite of the influence exercised on the thought of Maximus the Confessor and Thomas Aquinas, this feature has not received the attention that its centrality merits. I refer to the concept of aptitude (ἔπιτηδειότης). In the present study I explore aptitude as a critical component of the Dionysian development of participation, with a view to the Neoplatonic background of the concept, especially as established by Plotinus and Proclus. My aim is to argue for a novelty consisting in the fact that the Areopagite regards aptitude as a fundamental element that sets forth the receptive capacity of beings as the regulatory principle for participation in the life of the divinity.

Introduction

A study of the concept of aptitude (ἔπιτηδειότης) is proposed herein as a way of going deeper into the roots of participation as Dionysius the Areopagite

¹ I should extend my profound gratitude to several people who contributed with their original ideas and thinking, invaluable discussions, comments and suggestions in the development of this study: Vladimir Cvetković, Panos Dimas, fr. Vasileios Gontikakis, Thomas Kjeller Johansen, George Karamanolis, fr. Andrew Louth, Dominique O'Meara, George Pavlos, István Perczel, Øyvind Rabbås, Norman Russell, Carlos Steel, Markus Vinzent, Jon Wetlesen and Christian Wildberg. In particular, I feel indebted to my supervisors at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas in the University of Oslo, Torstein Theodor Tollefsen and Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, for their intelligent guidance through the perplexities of Late Antique philosophical thought. It is only the author's inaptitude that is accountable for the imperfections throughout the present piece of research work.

conceives of them. In the texts of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*² a certain interconnection occurs between participation and aptitude, culminating in the formulation *aptitude for participation* (ἐπιτηδειότης πρὸς μέθεξιν).³ These interrelated concepts are worth studying; aptitude appears as a significant component in the Dionysian instances of participation.⁴ It is very likely that the Areopagite grants aptitude a substantial role: that of becoming the regulatory principle of participation in the divine life for all beings and without discrimination. This point touches precisely upon a particular variation of the usage of aptitude in the formulation *aptitude for deification* (ἐπιτηδειότης πρὸς θέωσιν),⁵ the latter corresponding both to the corner-stone and to the end of his philosophy.

In the following I include some preliminary remarks on the Dionysian development of participation, in both its historical and systematic aspects.⁶ There are certain motives prompting the disputed author of the *CD* to elaborate a concept of participation as a central pillar of his philosophy. These may be recognized through an overview of the preceding historical development of the idea and a consideration of the ways in which the concept emerges within his writings. I suggest distinguishing participation according to the Areopagite as

² Hereafter, *CD*.

³ *Corpus Dionysiacum I. De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla, PTS 33 (Berlin, 1990), 148.12-8.

⁴ *Ibid.* 117.15, 118.1, 130.2, 147.15-8, 148.12-8, 166.1-4, 170.8-11, 210.3.

⁵ *Corpus Dionysiacum II. De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, ed. Gunter Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, PTS 62 (Berlin, 2012), 70.7. See, also, 83, 108.

⁶ Considerable attention has already been paid to the topic. The following significant research pieces are indicative. In his late 60's philosophical inquiry into Dionysius' mystical thought, Spearritt offered an investigation of participation, where, among other things, he argued for the complexity of its reality and stressed the importance of regarding it in a balanced way in order to avoid both a polytheistic account and an understanding of participation within a Procline emanationist context, see Placid Spearritt, *A Philosophical Inquiry into Dionysian Mysticism* (Fribourg, 1968). A study of the Dionysian contribution to participation noting its substantial divergences from the relevant Neoplatonic developments, is offered in Eric Perl, *Methexis: Creation, Incarnation, Deification in St. Maximus the Confessor* (Yale, 1991). Perl introduces Dionysius as a thinker who establishes a phase transition between the understanding of participation as share of those intermediary entities that mediate between the ontological multitude and the One, as suggested by Proclus, and the suggestions of the participated-ness of divinity as introduced by Maximus the Confessor. Moreover, a thorough insight into Dionysius' participatory thinking is to be found in a book that is crucial for Dionysian studies, Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis. L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Areopagite* (Leiden, 1996), 77-100. In addition, several illuminating, though sporadic, remarks are offered in Torstein Theodor Tollefsen's book, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford, 2008), 68, 162-3, 220. Tollefsen's main concern is to investigate the background of what he names a Christocentric cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor. He devotes an entire chapter to arguing for a concept of participation in Maximus' thought, the foundations of which are likely to be found in the Areopagite. Tollefsen analyzes further the Dionysian influence on St. Maximus, in Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought* (Oxford, 2012).

either *unconditional* or *conditional*. I relate the *unconditional* aspect to what Dionysius calls *essential participation* (οὐσιώδης μέθεξις), an expression reminiscent of several formulations in Proclus' *Elements of Theology* that refer to the natural constitution of beings. Essential participation corresponds to what St. Maximus the Confessor acknowledged, in explicating Dionysius, as sharing in *being* (ὄν) and *eternal being* (ἀεὶ ὄν).⁷ By the term *conditional*, I refer to what the Areopagite regards as radical, universal, or complete participation (ὀλική μέθεξις).⁸ This formulation and the idea behind it is a Dionysian novelty; it does not seem to have a match in Proclus' participatory language.⁹

⁷ In chapter 25 of the third century of *Chapters on Charity (Capita de charitate III)*, St. Maximus discusses those four divine attributes by which God sustains, guards and preserves beings, and which He communicated because of his ultimate goodness when He brought the rational and intellectual substance into being; these are a) *being*, b) *eternal being*, c) *goodness*, and d) *wisdom*. He also indicated that the first two of them were provided as substantial idioms (τέσσερα τῶν θεῶν ἰδιωμάτων, συνεκτικὰ καὶ φρουρητικὰ καὶ διασωστικὰ τῶν ὄντων, δι' ἄκραν ἀγαθότητα ἔκοινοποίησεν ὁ Θεός, παραγαγὼν εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὴν λογικὴν καὶ νοερὰν οὐσίαν· τὸ ὄν, τὸ ἀεὶ ὄν, τὴν ἀγαθότητα καὶ σοφίαν. Τούτων τὰ μὲν δύο τῆ οὐσία παρέσχε), in *Sancti Maximi Confessori. Capita de charitate III*, PG 90, 25.

⁸ CD I. Div. Nom., 166.

⁹ In several places Proclus uses the adjective *universal* (ὀλικός) and its comparatives, e.g. in the form ὀλικώτερα, but he never uses it as predicating participation. Yet the specific Dionysian formulation appears in the second part of chapter 4 of the *DN*. That means that, if my claim concerning Dionysius' novelty were wrong, it should have been evident from the meticulous comparison of the views of Proclus and Dionysius on Evil made by Carlos Steel, 'Proclus et Denys: De l'Existence du Mal', in Ysabel de Andia (ed.), *Denys l'Areopagite et sa posterité en Orient et en Occident* (Paris, 1997), 89-116. But Steel does not show how this formulation could have been copied from Proclus (see especially on page 110 and the Appendix, on page 105). One cannot exclude the possibility of a similar formulation in any of the lost works of Proclus. In that case, I imagine that Steel would immediately think of the transmission of Proclus' lost Greek texts to us through the mediation of Isaac Sebastokrator, and he would probably advise us to check his texts. Indeed, the editorial work of the second among the three treatises attributed to Isaak Sebastokrator, *Isaak Sebastokrator's Περὶ τῆς τῶν κακῶν ὑποστάσεως. De Malorum Subsistentia*, ed. James John Rizzo, BKP 42 (Meisenheim, 1971), offers access to it:

Dionysius' *De Divinis Nominibus*
(DN, 166, 1-4)

Εἰ γὰρ μὴ ἀναλόγως ἐκάστῳ τὰγαθὸν
παρῆν, ἦν ἂν τὰ θεϊότατα καὶ πρεσβύτατα
τὴν τῶν ἐσχάτων ἔχοντα τάξιν. Πῶς δὲ καὶ
ἦν δυνατὸν μονοειδῶς πάντα μετέχειν τοῦ
ἀγαθοῦ μὴ πάντα ὄντα ταυτῶς εἰς τὴν
ὀλικὴν αὐτοῦ μέθεξιν ἐπιτηδεῖα;

Isaak Sebastokrator's *Περὶ τῆς τῶν κακῶν*
ὑποστάσεως (DMS, 4, 3, 28)

εἰ γὰρ μὴ ἀναλόγως ἐκάστῳ τὰγαθὸν
παρῆν, ἦν ἂν τὰ θεϊότατα καὶ τὰ
πρεσβύτατα τὴν τῶν ἐσχάτων ἔχοντα
τάξιν. πῶς δὲ καὶ ἦν δυνατὸν μονοειδῶς
πάντα μετέχειν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, μὴ πάντων
ὄντων ταυτῶς εἰς τὴν ὀλικὴν αὐτοῦ
μέθεξιν ἐπιτηδεῖων;

The parallel columns show not only a great similarity between the texts of the Areopagite and Sebastokrator, but also and more importantly that the latter had almost copied everything from the former. That the rest of the copied extract is not reminiscent of any Procline formulation, makes one assume that *complete participation* (ὀλική μέθεξις) is introduced for the first time by Dionysius. At least, this is a safe assumption pending the recovery of Proclus' lost works.

Given that no similar gradation of participation seems to appear in the *CD*, I think that by *complete participation* Dionysius intends to designate what in Maximus' account results in *well-being* (εὖ εἶναι) and *eternal well-being* (ἀεὶ εὖ εἶναι).¹⁰ This brings me to what is my principal concern here, namely the concept of aptitude and a preliminary examination of it in the Areopagite's thought.¹¹ In contrast to other terms, Dionysius is not the inventor of *epitēdeiotēs*, but rather an innovator of the concept that derives from it. Grounding this claim is effectively to speak of a novelty emerging in the way the Areopagite employs aptitude, as compared to its previous Neoplatonic usages. It is true that Dionysius invents several terminological formulations, which, although they seem at first to point to acknowledged Neoplatonic conceptual schemes, are in fact novel. Conceiving of this novelty presupposes that his constantly stated reliance upon Scripture finds receptive ears.¹²

Participation

It is indisputable that participation plays an important role in Greek thought.¹³ This is remarkable both in its pagan and Christian form. Indeed, a study of participation would be helpful in clarifying what seems to be the most acute problem in Byzantine thinking, namely, the relation of the finite to the infinite, of the one to the many.¹⁴ These categories are fundamental to Greek philosophy. Within the Christian tradition the view of the world as creation out of nothing and the eschatological perspective of deification transform the problem into a question about the relation of the created cosmos to the uncreated God. Hence the foundations of cosmology develop as answers to the question of creation. It is true that in its non-Christian form the Greek philosophical tradition develops within a cosmological framework, a masterful account of which is given in Plato's *Timaeus*. But within its Christian development cosmology is related to a dimension essentially unknown previously and only intuitively outlined: the soteriological. Soteriology comes to the fore as a discourse deriving from the novel possibility of the deification (θεώσις) of the human being and the

¹⁰ *De char.* 3, 24. See also T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008), 173.

¹¹ The methodological considerations concerning participation apply equally to aptitude.

¹² From this point of view, Perl is somewhat misleading when he is claiming that Dionysius conceives of divine transcendence and its radical immanence as Plotinus and Proclus do. See Eric Perl, *Theophany. The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (New York, 2007), 112.

¹³ T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008), 192.

¹⁴ Polycarp Sherwood, 'Survey of Recent Works on St. Maximus the Confessor', *Traditio* 20 (1964), 435.

redemption of the entire created cosmos.¹⁵ Such a possibility is introduced and acclaimed only with the Incarnation of Logos (καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο).¹⁶ Since then, Christian philosophy has put together the cosmological and soteriological dimensions. That means that the Christian philosophical mind of the Areopagite approaches the creature and conceives of it within the perspective of deification. For him creation is life within the horizon of deification. This is a fundamental condition that should be remembered in any attempt to interpret his philosophy by the aid of Neoplatonism. Equally, the affinity between cosmology and soteriology is a *conditio sine qua non* in examining aptitude with respect to participation.

Participation pervades the whole of the Dionysian corpus and frames the ground upon which its dimensionality flourishes: the Christological,¹⁷ the Liturgical¹⁸ and the Ecclesiological,¹⁹ as well as the ontological aspects. It is conceived as a reality emerging from the beautiful and the good in such a way that there is no single being that does not have a share in them.²⁰ This ontological claim has an epistemological equivalent, which is uttered in a way that promotes the centrality of the concept of participation and underlines the interconnected fullness of Dionysian thought. Dionysius asserts that any knowledge about divinity is possible only through participation (μετοχάϊς).²¹

The Areopagite introduces participation as a gift of Divine Goodness to Creation.²² His philosophy is essentially a hymn to Divine Goodness.²³ He responds to the ultimate Platonic lesson on the idea of the Good²⁴ with hymns, not because – as anyone who would acknowledge Neoplatonic influences in Dionysian mysticism would notice²⁵ – singing (ὕμνεῖν) is a genuine Neoplatonic sacred activity, which, with roots in Homeric and Orphic practice, was performed and especially promoted by Proclus, but mainly because this was his normal approach through having been initiated by the Scriptural tradition into venerating the greatness of the Divine name of Goodness.²⁶ Certainly, the scope of Proclus' hymns was the Good One and the constitutive and divinizing power and activity of the substances emanating from it, along with the reversion of

¹⁵ For an interpretative insight to the tradition on creation that Dionysius inherits and bequeaths to posterity, see especially the chapters III, V and VI, on creation, redemption and its dimensions in Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Massachusetts, 1976).

¹⁶ *John* 1:14.

¹⁷ *CD II. Ep.* 8, 173.

¹⁸ *CD II. Eccl. Hier.*, 63 and 93.

¹⁹ *CD II. Ep.* 8, 176-7.

²⁰ *CD I. Div. Nom. IV*, 152.

²¹ *Ibid.* 131.

²² *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 128-9, *CD II. Eccl. Hier.*, 79.

²³ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 180.

²⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 505b.

²⁵ P. Spearritt, *Philosophical Inquiry* (1968), 37.

²⁶ *CD II. Eccl. Hier.*, 94.

the human soul upon the divine world, as Van Den Berg shows in his excellent edition of *Proclus' Hymns*.²⁷ And, certainly, Dionysius is an author who deliberately and for historical reasons relates to the mainstream of philosophical production of his times, yet hides under a Neoplatonic cloak and follows up the Platonic tradition of the unknowability of the Good. However, the Dionysian Good is beyond Plato's conceptions. The divine name of Goodness (*ἀγαθωνυμία*) is identified with the Godhead (*θεαρχία*) and remains unknown by being remote – not in terms of locality but of modality – from any earthly speculation.²⁸ Yet, this suggestion of the modal remoteness of Divine Goodness as distinguishing Dionysian thinking from the Platonic tradition by no means renders divinity desperately inaccessible to the human being.²⁹ Access is granted through participation. Thus, the *Areopagitica* can also be read as a hymn to the much highlighted, thoroughly developed and extensively employed reality of participation.³⁰ This reality emerges mysteriously and is founded on a principal divergence distinguishing Christian from non-Christian Platonism. The mystery consists in the fact that participation occurs in a cosmos created out of nothing. *Creatio ex nihilo* is that central doctrinal truth and belief which, springing from the prophetic wisdom of *Genesis*, forms and pervades the thought of the Church Fathers in general, and of Dionysius the Areopagite in particular.³¹

²⁷ Rudolphus Maria Van Den Berg, *Proclus' Hymns* (Leiden, 2001), 9-12.

²⁸ *CD II. Ep.* 8, 180.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 174.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 84. This sentence should be read carefully in order not to attribute to Dionysius' thinking any notion of Neoplatonically conceived and performed theurgy. Dionysius does not adopt the idea of theurgy as it has been developed within Proclean Neoplatonism, as Sorabji remarks in Richard Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and their Influence* (London, 1990), 11-2. In other words, I do not imply that he suggests worshipping a mundane entity or activity; not at all! He distinguishes between divine and human activity: the former is to be *hymned* (*δυνῆσαι*) as *theurgy* (*θεοῦ ἔργον*), whereas the latter is to be *praised* (*αἰνέσαι*) as *hierurgy* (*ἱερουργία*), a work offered by holy men. For him theurgy corresponds to transmission (*μετάδοσις*) and hierurgy to partaking (*μετάληψις*). Indeed, the last two constitute the reality of participation, both in its particular sacramental aspect, and in the wider metaphysical contours. So, what I propose above is rather to read Dionysius as venerating the superabundant love that renders the substantially unparticipated benevolently and philanthropically participable.

³¹ One should not expect to find any explicit reference to creation in the *CD*. As Golitzin remarks, the word *creation* (*κτίσις*) and its derivatives appear in the *Corpus* only in direct quotations from Scripture: Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy. A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Collegeville, 2013), 105-6. But he also argues that Dionysius' creaturely account ought to be read on the basis of his distinction between God's essence and powers, the act of creation being placed in the latter, *ibid.* 112. For a possibility of arguing for an Orthodox doctrine of creation in the Dionysian system and relevant reservations, see Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, 'The Doctrine of Creation in Dionysius the Areopagite', in Leena Pietila-Castren and Vesa Vahtikari (eds), *Grapta Poikila II. Saints and Heroes* (Helsinki, 2008), 75-89. One of the conditions Tollefsen points out to be crucial for affirming creation is to clarify whether a temporal beginning can be discerned in the *CD*. But it should be granted that there is no mention of 'time' when creation was not, as Golitzin comments. I would say that Tollefsen is right in finding an indication of time

In his thought, participation emerges as exclusively dependent on Divine Goodness. The Dionysian Good itself is an inaccessible mystery. Therefore, the only way to speak of that which is incomprehensible to all minds and exceeds all frames of reasonable discourse is to resort equally to cataphatic and apophatic utterances.³² In the preface of St. Maximus the Confessor's *Mystagogia*, the Dionysian influence is obvious as Maximus interprets the *rationale* of negation and affirmation.³³ Negation is introduced as the kind of utterance that is most appropriate to, and closest to him who transcends being (τὸ μὴ εἶναι μᾶλλον, διὰ τὸ ὑπερεῖναι ὡς οἰκειότερον ἐπ' αὐτοῦ λεγόμενον, προσιέμενος).³⁴ On the other hand, Maximus affirms that God equals to negating being (θέσιν εἶναι τοῦ ὑπερόντος τὴν τῶν ὄντων ἀφαίρεσιν).³⁵ The Confessor stresses the significance of equality, and simultaneity, so to speak, of a cataphatic and an apophatic discourse in uttering divinity and all relations with it. He sets forth a fundamental concern about negative theology: both affirmative and negative predications of being and non-being should be treated equally with regard to God, so that none of them imposes its principal role on the other (καὶ ἄμφω περὶ τὸν αὐτὸν εὐσεβῶς θεωρεῖσθαι τὰς προσηγορίας, καὶ μηδεμίαν κυρίως δύνασθαι, τὸ εἶναι φημι καὶ μὴ εἶναι).³⁶

In Dionysius' philosophy the mystery of Divine Goodness renders the idea of participation as a mystery, too. For how else could one think of a share of being (*ens creatum*) in non-being (*ens increatum*)?³⁷ Dionysius' philosophy has a somewhat paradoxical purpose: to exhaust the capabilities of philosophical reasoning in order to allow room for revelation.³⁸ One might exclaim: 'But this is Plato!' alluding to Diotima's speech on gradual erotic ascent, which is unpredictably interrupted by the sudden vision of the eternal being.³⁹ Following Plato's method of adopting everything good, no matter whence does it come,⁴⁰ Dionysius adopts the Platonic start reflected in the famous adverb ἐξαίφνης and explicates it.⁴¹ Indeed, what solves the mystery is a new mystery: divinity reveals itself and it does so in a way proportional to the receptive capacity of

lacking and I would suggest that such an inadequacy may be healed with the notion of production (παραγωγή) that frequently designates God's creative activity. Moreover, time should not be conceived of outside creation; it too is created.

³² For a thorough account of the presuppositions of Dionysian apophatic and cataphatic discourse, see Y. De Andia, *Henosis* (1996), 375-98.

³³ *Maximi Confessoris Mystagogia*, ed. Christian Boudignon, CChr.SG 69 (Turnhout, 2011), 9-10.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 9, 110-1.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 9, 113-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 9, 115-7.

³⁷ T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008), 190.

³⁸ *CD II. Eccl. Hier.*, 82.

³⁹ Πλάτωνος *Συμπόσιον*, ed. Ioannis Sykoutris, AAEB 1 (Athens, 1990), 179.

⁴⁰ Πλάτωνος *Επινομίς*, in: *Platonis Opera*, ed. James Burnet, vol. 5 (Oxford, 1907), 987de.

⁴¹ *CD II. Ep.* 3, 159.

the human mind.⁴² For Dionysius, revelation is the solid source of, and exclusive motivation for, any discourse on divinity and any sharing in it, the latter being spelled out not in terms of persuasive words deriving from human wisdom, but rather in terms of the demonstrative Spirit-moved power of those who have been granted the power of uttering a word concerning God.⁴³

An account of participation in the Areopagite requires an awareness of the vocabulary he employs and its fine nuances.⁴⁴ The general tendency in English literature on Late Antique thought is to render the terms μέθεξις and μετοχή by the word *participation*. *Methexis* is a frequently used term in all discussions of participation from the time of Plato up to the Byzantine philosophy of St. John of Damascus. In Dionysius' case, the richness of the semantics of the notion is reflected in a series of derivatives employed by him in a way reminiscent of Proclus' usage.⁴⁵ Systematizing them may fruitfully give us an accurate outline of his account of participation.⁴⁶

The syntactical structure of the vocabulary of participation in the *CD* includes four of the major parts of utterance, that is, nouns, adjectives, verbs (including infinitives) and participles. I list them in their principal form.⁴⁷ Terms belonging to the first class are: μετοχή, μετουσία, μέθεξις (and its deprivative ἀμεθεξία), all of them usually rendered by *participation* (with ἀμεθεξία by *imparticipability*), μετάδοσις and μετάληψις, rendered by *imparting* and *partaking of*, respectively. The second class consists of adjectives, some of which appear with their opposites, μέτοχος – ἀμέτοχος (*partaking – non-partaking*), μετοχικός (*able to participate*), μεθεκτός – ἀμέθεκτος (*participable – non-participable*), μεταδότις (*transmitter*), μεταδοτικός (*able to transmit*). The third group contains three verbs: μετέχω, μεταδίδωμι, μεταλαμβάνω, rendered respectively by *have a share in*, *give a share of* / *impart* / *communicate* and *partake of*. Finally, when it comes to participles, the use of μετέχων (*participant*, most frequently in the inclinations of the plural number) is central.

In discussing participation, a distinction between two specific parts is indispensable; without it any relevant discussion is fruitless. These are the *participated*

⁴² *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 109.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 108.

⁴⁴ Such awareness is decisive in any successful reconstruction of his account. Unfortunately, the widespread use of the English term *participation* is not always helpful in depicting the distinctions occurring within several instantiations of participatory vocabulary. Thus, moving from the particular to the general on the basis of specific terminological instances might not always be fruitful. One has to proceed in a different way: first by considering the entire system of Dionysian thought, and then by drawing from it an understanding of specific terms.

⁴⁵ Y. De Andia, *Henosis* (1996), 98.

⁴⁶ It is impossible to refer in detail to each of the 273 instances of the vocabulary of participation in the *CD*. Only selective remarks can be made of what appear to me the most central cases.

⁴⁷ With some exceptions, wherever I think it necessary, the translations of Greek terms are those offered in the corresponding entries by Geoffrey William Hugo Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961).

(μεθεκτόν) and the *participant* (μετέχον). As Tollefsen explicates it, the first refers to something that is portioned out to be shared by receivers, while the second designates the receiver of the portion to be shared.⁴⁸ As a notion of participation presupposes that which is about to be shared, it is obvious that without the participated there is no chance for any participation at all. So the relation between participated and participant is not equivalent. That means that, although an absence of the participant would render the idea of participation unimplemented, its lack is not as serious as that of the participated. For the possibility for participation still remains open, even without a participant. But an absence of the participated would result in the abolition of the idea of participation. In other words, so long as there is a participant participation is possible if a participated entity comes along. This detail is considered by Dionysius, who seems to regard the presence of the participated as unconditional.

In the opening of Chapter 4 of his treatise *On the Divine Names* (Περὶ Θεῶν Ὀνομάτων) Dionysius adopts an attribution initially proclaimed by Scripture and ascribes the divine name of Goodness to the Supremely Divine Existence (τὴν θεαρχικὴν ὑπαρξιν ἀγαθότητα λέγοντες).⁴⁹ The name of the Good is not merely an attribute of divinity but a substantial idiom of it (οὐσιώδες ἀγαθόν). It is tempting to think that divine Goodness and Substance are considered to be one and the same.⁵⁰ One should be careful not to presume that Dionysius is suggesting that our awareness of the divine goodness renders us knowers of the divine substance. Rather, the only knowledge we may obtain of divinity is conveyed through divine goodness. But this is knowledge about a notion of divine substance and not about divine substance itself.⁵¹ For while divine goodness by being substantially good extends its goodness to all beings (καὶ ὅτι τῷ εἶναι τὰγαθὸν ὡς οὐσιώδες ἀγαθὸν εἰς πάντα τὰ ὄντα διατείνει τὴν ἀγαθότητα),⁵² it remains ultimately imparticipable (ὑπέρκειται ἢ τῆς θεότητος ἀμεθεξία), since it has neither substantial contact nor any commingled communion with the beings participating in it (τῷ μῆτε ἐπαφήν αὐτῆς εἶναι μῆτε ἄλλην τινὰ πρὸς τὰ μετέχοντα συμμιγῆ κοινωνίαν).⁵³

⁴⁸ T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008), 193.

⁴⁹ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 143.

⁵⁰ I am not claiming that Dionysius suggests comprehensibility of the divine substance. What I think is that if one takes what St. Luke says, that *no one is Good, except for one, who is God* (οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς, ὁ Θεός, in *Luke* 18:19), and if one remembers what the Areopagite states in the beginning of paragraph 7 of chapter 4 in the *Divine Names* – that *the good is hymned by the holy theologians also as love* (τοῦτο τὰγαθὸν ὑμνεῖται πρὸς τῶν ἱερῶν θεολόγων καὶ ὡς καλὸν καὶ ὡς κάλλος καὶ ὡς «ἀγάπη», in *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 150) –, and if one recalls that *God is love* (ὅτι ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν, in *1John* 4:8), then, if one experiences divine goodness one should feel confident about knowing God himself.

⁵¹ See n. 7.

⁵² *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 143-4.

⁵³ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 129.

Thus, the fact that divinity is introduced as substantially good entails that it never ceases to provide that which is participated. Dionysius explicates this quality of Divine Goodness by employing a favorite Platonic metaphor, originated in the *Republic* and elaborated by both Plotinus and Proclus.⁵⁴ He asserts divine goodness as exceeding its faint impression, the sun (ὕπερ ἥλιον ὡς ὑπερ ἄμυδρὰν εἰκόνα), the rays of which *unconditionally* illuminate the whole. Un-conditionality here entails that the sun does not calculate or expand its rays in a deliberate manner: by simply being the sun it sheds its light without any discrimination on all that can have a share of the sunlight.⁵⁵ This illustration can to some extent shed light upon how the Good superabundantly bestows the rays of its whole divinity on all beings, proportionally in accordance with their receptive capacity.⁵⁶

I have argued above that the two components of participation, the participated and the participant, are not on equal level. My analysis has so far focused on the participated (μεθεκτόν). I still need to say something on the component of the participant (μετέχον). I suggested earlier that participation should be regarded as a mystery. It should also be regarded as a paradox. As so is Dionysius' paradoxical claim that divine Goodness, being the Source of Good, is present to all, but not all is present to it.⁵⁷ As suggested earlier, it is plausible according to the Areopagite to argue for a distinction between unconditional and conditional participation. This distinction emerges from a consideration of the bi-dimensionality of the concept of participation, as becomes evident from the above analysis. What does that mean?

On the one hand, participation designates that unique reality that exclusively renders human beings capable of discovering divinity and gaining an overview of divine goodness.⁵⁸ This reality occurs when the two compulsory components, the participated and the participant are engaged and the participant receives what is transmitted by the participated. On the other hand, participation is introduced as potency, in the sense that it is not a necessarily reciprocal reality. Non-reciprocity can be understood in terms of what was stated earlier, namely, that an abolition of participation would be due not to the absence of the participated, but to the lack or incapacity of the participant. Certainly, the participated

⁵⁴ For the position of the sun in the Neoplatonist thought of Plotinus and Proclus, see Radek Chlup, *Proclus. An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2012), 63, 100-1, 174 and 214.

⁵⁵ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 144.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 144. Dionysius' use of the metaphor of the sun should not be confused with Plotinus' depiction of the sun as a means of claiming that the ultimate metaphysical principle about the cosmos is indifferent. Dionysius' emphasis is not to stress the lack of interest, on the part of the One, for the reality that emanates from it, as Plotinus had suggested. What he wants to stress here is that divine goodness arranges the distribution of its goodness in such a natural way, that naturally, precisely like the sun, it cannot 'decide' not to shed its rays.

⁵⁷ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 138.

⁵⁸ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 109.

does not cease to be participable. But the transmission of the participated not to be received by the participant remains possible. Such a condition, caused by the lack of reception on behalf of the participant, underlines what I would highlight as the *conditional character* of participation. This conditionality allows the possibility that the participation remains unfulfilled; that is acknowledged by Dionysius when he confirms that the Godhead is present to all, but not all are present to it (καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ μὲν [ἡ ἀγαθαρχία] ἅπασι πάρεστι, οὐ πάντα δὲ αὐτῇ πάρεστι).⁵⁹ The fulfillment of partaking, the reciprocity of participation, can only be established under one condition. This condition is summed up concisely as *aptitude for participation* (ἐπιτηδειότης πρὸς μέθεξιν).

Aptitude

My treatment of Dionysius' account of aptitude entails to include certain parameters and to respond to the following questions that shape the framework of my discussion.⁶⁰ What does the term *epitēdeiotēs* designate? Where is aptitude

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 138.

⁶⁰ In preparing the present study, I consulted several secondary works on Late Antique thought that discuss *epitēdeiotēs*. I list them chronologically below as a helpful bibliography on the topic. With regard to Dodds's comments on *epitēdeiotēs*, one should bear in mind that he was greatly influenced by Sambursky's remarks. Sambursky's contributions appear in the literature in 1962, but Dodds seems to have been already informed on the outcomes of the Oxford Conference in 1961, where Sambursky had a considerable discussion on his views with Owen. This is how he added a note on *epitēdeiotēs* in the 2nd edition of his epochal work on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, in 1963, the same year that the aforementioned Oxford Conference Proceedings were published. Arthur Hilary Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus. An Analytical and Historical Study* (Cambridge, 1940); René Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien. Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys* (Paris, 1954); Samuel Sambursky, 'Conceptual Developments and Modes of Explanation in later Greek Scientific Thought', in Alistair Cameron Crombie (ed.), *Scientific Change. Historical Studies in the Intellectual, Social and Technical Conditions for Scientific Discovery and Technical Invention, from Antiquity to the Present* (London, 1963), 61-78; Gwilym Ellis Lane Owen, 'Commentary', in A.C. Crombie (ed.), *Scientific Change* (1963), 93-102; Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. Eric Roberston Dodds (Oxford, 1963); David Balás, *Μετοσσία Θεοῦ. Man's Participation in God's Perfection according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa* (Rome, 1966); Robert Bob Todd, 'Epitēdeiotēs in Philosophical Literature. Towards an Analysis', *Acta Classica* 15 (1972), 25-35; Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena. An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden, 1978); Jonathan Scott Lee, 'The Doctrine of Reception According to the Capacity of the Recipient in Ennead VI. 4-5', *Dionysius* 3 (1979), 79-97; Dominique O'Meara, 'The Problem of Omnipresence in Plotinus Ennead VI, 4-5: A Reply', *Dionysius* 4 (1980), 61-73; George Berthold, *Maximus Confessor. Selected Writings* (New York, 1985); Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, ed. Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon (Princeton, 1987); Samuel Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1987); Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus on the Elements and the Celestial Bodies. Physical Thought in Late Neoplatonism* (London, 1989); A. Golitzin, *Mystagogy* (2013), initially published in 1994; Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator. The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago, 1995); Y. de Andia, *Henosis* (1996); E. Perl,

to be located and what is its source? Is it a self-sufficient concept or a complementary notion within the Dionysian system? Is there any specific role for aptitude in the participatory ontology of Dionysius, in other words, how does he relate it to participation? Furthermore, does it demonstrate any virtues that could introduce it as a regulatory principle of participation? Finally, given the extant uses of the term by Proclus, in what sense may one claim a Dionysian novelty exceeding its Neoplatonic contours?

Dionysius does not provide any definition of aptitude;⁶¹ as I said at the beginning, he should be regarded not as the inventor of the term but as an innovator in the use of the concept. The twenty instances of the term throughout the *CD* provide evidence of its author's awareness of the background of the concept and its history.⁶² Indeed, one would expect a significant development to have taken place long before the beginning of the 6th century AD.⁶³ The term had a long life in the evolution of Late Antique thought. It would be tempting to think

Theophany (2007); T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008); *Proclus. Ten Problems Concerning Providence*, ed. Jan Opsomer, Carlos Steel, Ancient Commentators on Aristotle (London, 2012); R. Chlup, *Proclus* (2012); Eric Perl, *Thinking Being. Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden, 2014); and *Plotinus. Ennead VI.4-5*, ed. Eyjólfur Kjaljar Emilsson, Steven Keith Strange (Las Vegas, 2015).

⁶¹ Although there are five English translations of the Dionysian writings, the options of rendering *epitēdeiotēs* they offer are four: a) *aptitude*, by John Parker, *Dionysius the Areopagite. Works* (London, 1897), and Clarence Eliot Rolt, *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London, 1920), and b) *capacity*, by The Shrine of Wisdom, *The Divine Names by Dionysius the Areopagite* (Surrey, 1957), c) *receptivity* and d) *suitability*, by Colm Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works* (New York, 1987). The fifth edition is John Jones, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee, 1980), containing only periphrastic renditions. Although a combination of all of them would be ideal for a best possible approach to the demanding Dionysian authorship, Parker and Rolt seem to have had a valuable understanding of Dionysius' language. Certainly, since Parker, the only available complete translation of the *CD* is Luibheid's. However, the literature in the previous footnote seems to present no consensus in rendering the term. It employs another four, additional ones to the above renditions. The most often employed term is *fitness*, by Sambursky, Owen, Dodds, Todd, Gersh, Siorvanes, Perl, Tollefsen and Chlup (the last also uses *capacity*). *Aptitude* is used by Roques, Berthold, Thunberg, De Andia, Opsomer and Steel, while *suitability* by O'Meara and Siorvanes (the term is used as a second option by Sambursky and Gersh, as well, whereas Sambursky also employs *appropriateness*). Moreover, Morrow and Dillon, and Golitzin employ the term *receptivity*, to which Perl consents. The classic complex rendition *receptive capacity*, is chosen by Armstrong, Balás, Lee and Emilsson, while the last suggests the term *adaptability*, as well. I should note that Todd also maintains the Greek term with Latin characters, as *epitēdeiotēs*. As is already evident, and after extensive discussions with my supervisors, Torstein Tollefsen and Eyjólfur Emilsson, I suggest agreement with those who render *ἐπιτηδειότης* as *aptitude*. This is a preferable rendition, as István Perczel and Christian Wildberg would admit.

⁶² *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 117-8, 130, 138, 147-8, 166, 170, 210, 214, *CD II. Ep.* 8, 174, 180, 188, 197, *CD II. Cel. Hier.*, 10, 45, and *CD II. Eccl. Hier.*, 69-70, 83, 108.

⁶³ There is nowadays a consensus on the dating of the *Areopagitiica*. I do not mention any particular study, since the vast majority of writers on Dionysius hardly refrain from saying a word on the obscurity shrouding the identity of *CD*'s author and, consequently, the difficulty of dating his work.

that the philosophical development and the technical usages of aptitude by the Neoplatonists had been inspired by the Platonic conception of the *receptacle* (ὑποδοχή), that plays a central role in the cosmology of the *Timaeus*. After introducing the primary, immutable and invisible paradigm, which bears the qualities corresponding to the Plotinian One, and the secondary, visible and changeable model form, Plato wonders in *Timaeus* 49a what should be that third, obscure kind of form whose essential property is to be the receptacle, the matrix, for all becoming.⁶⁴ Moreover, in a terminological connection closer to our concern, Plato often employs the related term ἐπιτήδευμα (*pursuit*), the adjective ἐπιτήδειος (*capable, suitable*) and the verb ἐπιτηδεύω (*to pursue*), as referring to the pursuits necessary for living and well being and to the human ability for such pursuits.⁶⁵ Similarly, Aristotle employs the term ἐπιτηδεύματα in *Politics* VII, in his inquiry into the pursuits that are the means that lead human beings to goodness.⁶⁶

When it comes to commentators on Aristotle before Plotinus, one finds extant uses of the term in Alexander of Aphrodisias' works. Alexander, influenced by the Timaeian 'receptacle', develops the technical usage of the term as a means of explicating and interpreting Aristotle's insight into nature through his distinction between potency and actuality. In *De anima* he introduces an image that is firmly dependent on Plato's conception of the receptacle and helps us to understand the notion of aptitude. In distinguishing between the human intellect and its objects, the intelligible objects, he provides a detailed analysis of the functional mechanism that the human intellect follows in receiving the forms. This argument concludes that the material intellect is just a kind of aptitude for the reception of the forms (ἐπιτηδειότης τις ἄρα μόνον ἐστὶν ὁ ὕλικὸς νοῦς).⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Plato. *Timaeus*, ed. Robert Gregg Bury, LCL 234 (Massachusetts, 1929), 49a, 112.

⁶⁵ That the *Timaeus*' uses of aptitude terms have influenced its Neoplatonic developments, may be concluded from the extensive analysis of the term ἐπιτήδευμα used by Plato in *Timaeus* 17cd in Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus: Proclus Diadochus. In Platonis Timaeum Commentaria*, ed. Ernestus Diehl, Bibliotheca Teubneriana (Lipsiae, 1903), 35. The same class of names is extensively used in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Characteristic is the use of the terms in the *Apology of Socrates* (28b) in Plato's designation of the service Socrates provided to the city, which resulted in his risking his very life (Ἐἴτ' οὐκ αἰσχύνῃ, ὃ Σώκρατες, τοιοῦτον ἐπιτήδευμα ἐπιτηδεύσας ἐξ οὗ κινδυνεύεις νυνὶ ἀποθανεῖν). The likelihood that aptitude originated from the distribution of pursuits can be argued from Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides* as well. See: Procli in Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria. Procli philosophi Platonici Opera Inedita, ed. Victor Cousin (Paris, 1864), 651. The connection between ἐπιτήδευμα and ἐπιτηδειότης becomes even more comprehensible through an analogy Proclus uses in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*. As for any *pursuit* (ἐπιτήδευμα), a relevant preparation is necessary. Likewise, the ascent towards being requires a truthful and purified knowledge, which is guaranteed by the presence of aptitude (ἐπιτηδειότης), V. Cousin (1864), 927.

⁶⁶ Aristotle. *Politics*, ed. Henry Rackham, LCL 264 (Massachusetts, 1967), 1333a15, 604.

⁶⁷ *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis. Praeter Commentaria Scripta Minora. Quaestiones. De Fato. De Mixtione*, ed. Ivo Bruns, Supplementum Aristotelicum III.I *Alexandri De Anima Cum Mantissa* (Berlin, 1887), 84.

As such, it resembles a *tabula rasa*, a blank tablet. Immediately, however, he corrects his metaphor by likening aptitude to the blankness of the plate. That aptitude is not something material is confirmed by the fact that while a plate apt for receiving writing is affected by the act of writing, aptitude is not suffering anything by leading to activity, since it is not subject to anything.⁶⁸ Aphrodisias therefore conceives of aptitude as an intangible attribute of material beings, and distinguishable in any of them, designating an ever present, specific drive for directing a being from potency to actuality, irrespective of whether this direction will be implemented.

As such, aptitude is introduced as mediating between potency and actuality. In the first book of *De quaestionibus* he develops an argument for the claim that the will of God would not be capable of preventing the corruptibility of the cosmos if the cosmos were perishable by nature. Alexander's setting is the following. The potential for being or becoming is mainly predicated of those beings that are contingent with respect both to being and becoming. Thus potentiality applies to anything that is not deprived of the possibility of being or of becoming what it is capable of. For potentiality is not predicated of becoming by all means, but merely of not preventing something from becoming. For potentiality still applies to what has not been prevented in some specific way from becoming what it is *apt* for, even though it may not actually become so.⁶⁹ Another aspect of aptitude in Aphrodisias is evident within his scheme of causality. In the *Problemata* he remarks that *epitedeiotes* is that condition of passive matter that is responsible for the diversity of effects caused by the same cause.⁷⁰ This view is crucial for the later Procline view that aptitude is the ground for the diversified measures of being's *return*.⁷¹

Arguably, Aphrodisias' developments influenced Plotinus' thought on the matter. Porphyry confirms, in his *Vita Plotini*, that Alexander's commentaries were among the works of tradition respected by Plotinus, and read extensively by him in his school.⁷² The term is rather rarely present in the *Enneads*; but Plotinus alludes to the concept several times and aptitude becomes a central component of his thought about participation, as it develops especially in *Enneads* VI 4-5. Plotinus' thought constitutes a transition-point on the matter. For he is the one who, thanks to his detailed insights into the problem of participation, offers a significant contribution to the historical development of aptitude, so that he

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 85.

⁶⁹ *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis. Praeter Commentaria Scripta Minora. Quaestiones. De Fato. De Mixtione*, ed. Ivo Bruns, Supplementum Aristotelicum II.II *Alexandri Scripta Minora Reliqua* (Berlin, 1892), 30.

⁷⁰ *Physici et medici Graeci minores. Alexander Aphrodisiensis. Problemata*, ed. Julius Ludwig Ideler, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1841), 30, 89.

⁷¹ See E.R. Dodds, *Proclus* (1963), 39, 42.

⁷² *Porphyry. The Life of Plotinus*, ed. Arthur Hilary Armstrong, LCL 440 (Massachusetts, 1966), 14, 40. See, also, E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus* (2015), 235-6.

should be proclaimed as an innovator as well.⁷³ To claim a Plotinian novelty on aptitude is another way of confirming Emilsson's remark that 'Plotinus is the author of the phrase "reception according to the capacity of the recipient" and he was the first to formulate such a doctrine'.⁷⁴ Emilsson implies that Plotinus opens a new horizon to aptitude, going beyond its natural context. In speaking of natural context I simply refer to the usage of the term by the Commentators of Aristotle, in their attempt to designate the inherent capacity, as Dodds asserts, of nature in the process of transition from potentiality (δυνάμει) to actuality (ἐνεργεία).⁷⁵

In the Plotinian mind participation is introduced as deriving from the metaphysical hierarchy. Nature is located within the third hypostasis and its gradations, namely, the cosmic Soul and the natural souls. As such, it is consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος) with the primary hypostasis, the One, the Good, or God. The theory of emanation, the cornerstone of Plotinian cosmology, conceives of the overflow of the divine good substance – in other words, the internal activity of the One – as the external activity of the first hypostasis. This activity causes the constitution of the other hypostases, namely, the Intellect and the Soul. Thus, what emanates from the One is nothing other than the very substance of it, the only difference being that what is emanated is inferior to the One in terms of otherness. Therefore the Intellect, being something other than the One, is automatically a hypostasis inferior to it. The Plotinian distinction between the internal and external activities of the One is assumed by Dionysius and signified by the fundamental distinction between divine substance (ἀμέθεκτον) and divine activity (μεθεκτόν). Plotinus distinguishes between two states of a hypostasis, of the One: rest (μονή) and procession (πρόοδος). Both are states of activity. A hypostasis is introduced on the basis of an activity constitutive of the same and an activity constitutive of the other. That which is constitutive of the same activity constitutes the substance of the One. Hence, for Plotinus and all his Neoplatonic legacy the substance and the activity of the One are identical. Now the fact that the hypostases secondary to the One partake of the One is because, being emanated from it, they are not self-sufficient. Their being cannot be taken for granted; it should rather be considered as dependent on their participation in the One.

⁷³ See especially, *Ennead VI.4*, 11 and 15.

⁷⁴ E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus* (2015), 28. Plotinus' doctrine had been initially recognized by A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible* (1940), 60. Armstrong's formulations of Plotinus' doctrine were followed up 35 years later by O'Meara who addressed and brought them to the forefront of research; see D. O'Meara, *Structures hiérarchiques* (1975); J.S. Lee, *The Doctrine of Reception* (1979); and D. O'Meara, *The Problem of Omnipresence* (1980).

⁷⁵ E.R. Dodds, *Proclus* (1963), 344.

The above outline intends to show that, from a Christian point of view, Plotinus does not conceive of any consubstantial personal otherness.⁷⁶ Plotinian otherness is established in terms of hypostases demonstrating a partial otherness, or more precisely, an incomplete identity of substance. The degree of identity of substance is dependent on the grade of participation, which, in turn, is regulated by the receptive capacity, the aptitude for participation of the recipient. At the same time, and from Dionysius' point of view, Plotinus' theory of emanation obliges the consideration of the other hypostases, the Intellect and the Soul, not as consubstantial with, but as similarly-substantial (ὁμοιοούσιον or ὁμοιούσιον), or of like substance, to the One.⁷⁷ By employing the term *similarly-substantial*, or *of like substance*, I wish to stress the fact that the logic of the Plotinian metaphysical hierarchy is founded on two principles. The first principle is the reality of participation. The second is the fact that Plotinian hierarchy develops in terms of a gradual mitigation of the substance of the One. The ultimate consequence of this impairment is the presence of a farthest, lowest, at the same time paradoxical level in the hierarchy, that is the level of Evil. Evil is nothing other than complete privation, perfect lack of substance, namely, as the very term indicates, deficiency and absence (ἀπ-οὐσία). I believe that, although not explicitly stated, Plotinus would agree with Dionysius that evil occurs as absolute inaptitude for anything. In this respect Dionysius considers the existence of evil not as any substantial quality but as that status of ultimate inaptitude that prevents beings from participating in divine matters and results in a closed, mundane way of being.⁷⁸

The Areopagite explains aptitude by elaborating two metaphors used extensively in Neoplatonic circles, the images of the *circle* and the *seal*.⁷⁹ He introduces the seal as a symbol of divinity, in order to remark that all beings participate in divinity entirely and as a whole, and that, in principle, there is no single being that participates only in a part of divinity. A unique seal is an archetype that delivers its impression to many items, so that the multiplicity of the seal's imprints partake of the archetypical seal. Although different, the impressions depict the whole of the archetypical figure; any one of the imprinted items bears completely the whole imprint of the one and the same seal. So no one could claim that in the one impression the archetype is not completely and totally present, or that in the impression the archetypical figure is present differently. There is no single imprint that bears just a part of the seal, because it is not

⁷⁶ This parameter is important, because for Dionysius aptitude for deification develops on the basis of an encounter between persons that presupposes a consideration of being as a person with freedom of will (αὐτεξούσιον).

⁷⁷ This term needs a separate study which cannot be undertaken here.

⁷⁸ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 170.

⁷⁹ I refer to paragraphs 5 and 6 from chapter 2 of *DN*. The analogy of the circle is elaborated by Plotinus in explicating the relation of the intelligible and sensible to the One, and occupies the whole of chapter 5 of *Ennead VI.5*. See also E.K. Emilsson, *Plotinus* (2015), 235-8.

possible for the one and the same seal to leave different imprints in its several impressions.⁸⁰

But immediately afterwards, and in contrast to what has been already discussed, he admits that the very same seal does not appear entirely identical in all its imprints. The reason for this should not be sought in the seal itself but rather in the differentiation of the items that participate dissimilarly in the wholeness and sameness of the original seal (ἀρχετυπία). What is the reason for the difference? If the wax (ἀπομόργματα) were soft (ἀπαλά) and impressionable (εὐτύπωτα) and smooth (λεία) and easily stamped (εὐχάρακτα), then it would sustain a clear (καθαρόν) and sharp (σαφή) and persistent imprint (ἐναπομένοντα τύπον). This cannot be so if the imprints are unimpressionable (ἀντίτυπα) and hard (σκληρά), fluent (εὐδιάχυτα) and unstable (ἀσύστατα).⁸¹ In a manner reminiscent of Aphrodisias' description of aptitude in *De anima*, the first group of wax' characteristics recapitulates what Dionysius regards as the effects of aptitude. Any lack of these qualities would due to *inaptitude for participation*, which, in turn, would result in the negation of participation (ἀμέθεκτον).⁸²

The next major influence on Dionysius with regard to aptitude seems to have been the thought of Proclus. His awareness of Proclus' understanding can be traced through a formulation reminiscent of the *Elements of Theology*. In proposition 39 Proclus asserts that the measures of the reversion of beings is in accordance with their procession, arguing for a hierarchically ordered *epistrophe*, seen progressively as essential, vital and cognitive (πᾶν τὸ ὄν ἢ οὐσιωδῶς ἐπιστρέφει μόνον, ἢ ζωτικῶς, ἢ καὶ γνωστικῶς).⁸³ The lowest entities maintain an appetition proper to their mere existing, which is identified as aptitude for participation in their causes (καὶ ἡ ὄρεξις οὖν τοῖς μὲν ἐστὶ κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι μόνον, ἐπιτηδειότης οὐσα πρὸς τὴν μέθεξιν τῶν αἰτιῶν).⁸⁴ Although Proclus' sentence deserves a detailed treatment, I shall confine myself here to note the plurality of causes he speaks of as a crucial, as I will argue in detail.

Following his favorite strategy, Dionysius emulates Proclus with a similar utterance. He refers to the production (παραγωγή) and sustenance (ὑπόστασις) of all, by asserting that it is that to which all entities aspire: the intellectual and the rational aspire cognitively, their subordinates (ὑφειμμένα τούτων) do so through the senses, and all the rest through vital motion or essential and habitual aptitude (καὶ τὰ ἄλλα κατὰ ζωτικὴν κίνησιν ἢ οὐσιώδη καὶ ἐκτικὴν

⁸⁰ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 129-30.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² A distinction should be made between ἀμέθεκτον and ἀμεθεξία, in Dionysius: the first denotes the lack of participation that is due to the inaptitude for participation of the participant, while the second refers to the fundamental unknowability, and thus eternal imparticipability, of divine substance.

⁸³ E.R. Dodds, *Proclus* (1963), 39, 40.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 39, 42.

ἐπιτηδειότητα).⁸⁵ My intuition is that behind the apparent similarity of the above passages, some fundamental differences lie concealed. Allowing them to emerge can be fruitful in identifying whether there is any convergence or divergence between Proclus and Dionysius on this matter.

Since beings have been created out of nothing and have been granted being as a result of their essential, unconditional participation, one would naturally think that aptitude itself is also a divine gift. Dionysius does not explicitly state this but it can be inferred from the context of a passage of the *DN* significant for the understanding of aptitude.⁸⁶ All beings are entirely dependent on the Good, which is introduced in terms of the Pauline prepositional formula as *source* (ἐξ οὗ), *ground* and *bond* (ἐν ᾧ) and *end* (εἰς ὃ) of all (πάντα).⁸⁷ Again, in a sentence reminiscent of Proclus' *ET* proposition 39, Dionysius regards aptitude as given by God in order for beings to fulfill their participation according to the grade of their being. Proclus was already conscious that aptitude is a providential divine gift, as expressed in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*. But, as it is consistent with Procline thought and in contrast to Dionysius, the gift of aptitude is not provided directly from the One but from the intermediary divine entities.⁸⁸

Moreover, Proclus and earlier Neoplatonists employ aptitude without any further predication. Dionysius, however, proceeds to make a distinction that was not made before. He distinguishes between *essential* and *habitual* aptitude. For he sees that since God has created all beings *ex nihilo*, they have all in consequence been granted an aptitude regulating their essential participation. Indeed, it is their participation in divine activity that constitutes them as beings and perpetually secures their status of being. Aptitude for such participation is inherent in the nature of beings, since they are not granted any possibility for choosing between being and non-being. This, perhaps, is the reason why in the Neoplatonic context aptitude appears without distinction: being is eternal and particular beings eternally emanate from it.

The second predication of Dionysian aptitude relates to *habitus* (ἕξις), and as such calls for further consideration. For it entails an aptitude that is not attached to the substance, so it is not an inherent capacity of nature. Predicating habitual aptitude makes sense in the Dionysian system, since what beings have been granted is the choice of performing those activities that are effective in leading them towards the reception of the divine attribute of goodness. Thus, although Dionysius does not provide an explanation of habitual aptitude, we are in a position to assume what its content is by positing a connection with the distinction made earlier between essential and complete participation. Thus

⁸⁵ *CD I. Div. Nom.*, 117-8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 148.

⁸⁷ *Col.* 1:16-7.

⁸⁸ V. Cousin, *Procli in Parmenidem* (1864), 690.

an association of habitual aptitude for complete participation with that participation which is attainable is plausible. Indeed, goodness is an idiom, which although pertaining to divine substance, as mentioned earlier, is communicated so that human beings can exercise their will in receiving it. This account clearly suggests the dynamic character of aptitude, which points precisely at deification.

Dionysius founds his concept of aptitude for deification on a crucial passage from the *Gospel of John*. *John* stresses the reciprocal character of aptitude for deification in stating that the gift of power (ἐξουσία) to become sons of God is offered to those who receive the incarnated Logos. This reception is a reforming of the human beings by mystically elevating them to the divine tribe.⁸⁹ In establishing further how Dionysius conceives of deification, one may distinguish between the following. First there is Plotinus' conception. By interpreting likeness to God (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ) as suggested by Plato in *Theaetetus* 176ab, as a capacity for deification of the substance, Plotinus is led to highlight the third substantial activity of the hypostases (the One excluded) that completes the cycle of the Neoplatonic metaphysical circular motion, namely the conversion (ἐπιστροφή). Secondly there is what follows as a natural consequence from the assumption of a cosmos created out of nothing, which, as I explained earlier, results in the fundamental distinction between created and uncreated. Which means that while for Plotinus beings fall hierarchically into the ontological chain that stems from the One, for Dionysius they belong to the *created* cosmos. In this perspective, substance in general is created by God and as such it has no measure of comparison to the uncreated, the latter designating divinity, namely God himself. Dionysius' assertion that substance is created and not eternally existent entails delimiting of its capacity for deification, since nothing can overcome the restrictions arising from its nature. But if this is so, then what would deification consist in? What is the Dionysian equivalent of the Plotinian *return*? If nature cannot be deified because of its radical otherness to divine nature, then what pertains to deification?

It has been said above that deification, according to the Areopagite, is attainable through participation in divinity. From the point of the participant, what facilitates partaking in divinity is the human *will* and *gnome*. As attributes of the human being, these properties are created and bear a personal character. As such, they presuppose the *acceptance* of a personal God, who proceeds freely to the creation of beings out of nothing. This perspective on deification has formed the ground for the further elaboration of the Neoplatonic concept of aptitude by the Areopagite and, later, by Maximus the Confessor. The latter comments fully on developments in the Dionysian use of aptitude and distinguishes between *substantial* and *gnomic* aptitude.⁹⁰ It is within this framework that deification is conceived of as potency actualized through aptitude for deification,

⁸⁹ CD II. *Eccl. Hier.*, 70.

⁹⁰ T.T. Tollefsen, *Christocentric Cosmology* (2008), 171.

the latter designating the voluntary communion and participation of beings in the life of the incarnated Logos and the Divine activity. The significance of this theme is confirmed by the fact that it has considerably influenced the medieval metaphysical thought of Thomas Aquinas,⁹¹ who had been influenced by the works of Dionysius the Areopagite – thanks to the translations of Burgundius of Pisa and Grosseteste –, of Maximus the Confessor and of John of Damascus.

Conclusions

The appearances of *epitēdeiotēs* in the *CD* makes one argue for a notion that is designating relation. Aptitude is not a self-sufficient concept; it acquires its value as correlative to other concepts. As ‘aptitude for something’, it designates a movement towards an ontological fulfillment that is granted by sharing in divinity. It is precisely its usage in the Dionysian formulation of *aptitude for participation* that suggests aptitude to be the foundation of and the regulatory principle for participation. Dionysius acknowledges two kinds of aptitude, the *essential* and the *habitual* one, both being associated with essential and complete participation. Essential participation establishes the *raison d’être* of beings, the foundations of their constitution. Essential aptitude underlines the potentiality of beings within the natural restrictions of creation. As such, essential aptitude is created as well. Habitual aptitude, however, exceeds the restrictions of natural necessity; it regulates beings’ complete participation in the life of Divinity and, thus, it crosses the boundaries of restrictions applying to creation. Such an aptitude for deification is uncreated: it is a divine gift granted to beings through the differentiated processions of God, that is, through the divine activity.

⁹¹ From the above it becomes clear that John Tomarchio’s, ‘Thomistic Axiomatics in an Age of Computers’, *HPQ* 16 (1999), 249-75, 250, claim, that in spite of Aquinas’ invocation of Pseudo-Dionysius, one searches in vain in Dionysius for an explicit formulation of the doctrine of receptivity, is, at least, questionable.

Volume 1
STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXV

STUDIA PATRISTICA

Markus VINZENT	
Editing <i>Studia Patristica</i>	3
Frances YOUNG	
<i>Studia Patristica</i>	11
Mark EDWARDS	
The Use and Abuse of Patristics	15

PLATONISM AND THE FATHERS

Christian H. BULL	
An Origenistic Reading of Plato in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.....	31
Mark HUGGINS	
Comparing the Ethical Concerns of Plato and John Chrysostom	41
Alexey FOKIN	
Act of Vision as an Analogy of the Proceeding of the Intellect from the One in Plotinus and of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father in Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine	55
Laela ZWOLLO	
Aflame in Love: St. Augustine's Doctrine of <i>amor</i> and Plotinus' Notion of <i>eros</i>	69
Lenka KARFÍKOVÁ	
Augustine on Recollection between Plato and Plotinus	81
Matthias SMALBRUGGE	
Augustine and Deification. A Neoplatonic Way of Thinking.....	103
Douglas A. SHEPARDSON	
The Analogical Methodology of Plato's <i>Republic</i> and Augustine's <i>De trinitate</i>	109

MAXIMUS CONFESSOR

Paul A. BRAZINSKI	
Maximus the Confessor and Constans II: A Punishment Fit for an Unruly Monk	119
Ian M. GERDON	
The Evagrian Roots of Maximus the Confessor's <i>Liber asceticus</i>	129
Jonathan GREIG	
Proclus' Doctrine of Participation in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Centuries of Theology</i> 1.48-50	137
Emma BROWN DEWHURST	
The 'Divisions of Nature' in Maximus' <i>Ambiguum</i> 41?	149
Michael BAKKER	
Gethsemane Revisited: Maximus' <i>Aporia</i> of Christ's γνώμη and a 'Monarchic Psychology' of Deciding.....	155
Christopher A. BEELEY	
Natural and Gnostic Willing in Maximus Confessor's <i>Disputation with Pyrrhus</i>	167
Jonathan TAYLOR	
A Three-Nativities Christology? Maximus on the <i>Logos</i>	181
Eric LOPEZ	
Plagued by a Thousand Passions – Maximus the Confessor's Vision of Love in Light of Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Religious Persecution.....	189
Manuel MIRA	
The Priesthood in Maximus the Confessor.....	201
Adam G. COOPER	
When Action Gives Way to Passion: The Paradoxical Structure of the Human Person according to Maximus the Confessor	213
Jonathan BIELER	
Body and Soul Immovably Related: Considering an Aspect of Maximus the Confessor's Concept of Analogy	223

Luke STEVEN	
Deification and the Workings of the Body: The Logic of ‘Proportion’ in Maximus the Confessor	237
Paul M. BLOWERS	
Recontextualizations of Maximus the Confessor in Modern Christian Theology.....	251

Volume 2

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVI

EL PLATONISMO EN LOS PADRES DE LA IGLESIA

(ed. Rubén Pereto Rivas)

Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
Introducción.....	1
Viviana Laura FÉLIX	
Platonismo y reflexión trinitaria en Justino.....	3
Juan Carlos ALBY	
El trasfondo platónico del concepto de <i>Lex divina</i> en Ireneo de Lyon.....	23
Patricia CINER	
La Herencia Espiritual: la doctrina de la preexistencia en Platón y Orígenes.....	37
Pedro Daniel FERNÁNDEZ	
Raíces platónicas del modelo pedagógico de Orígenes.....	49
Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
La <i>eutonía</i> en la dinámica psicológica de Evagrio Póntico	59
Santiago Hernán VAZQUEZ	
El ensalmo curativo de Platón y la potencialidad terapéutica de la palabra en Evagrio Póntico	67
Oscar VELÁSQUEZ	
Las <i>Confesiones</i> en la perspectiva de la Caverna de Platón	79

Gerald CRESTA	
Acerca de la belleza metafísica en Pseudo-Dionisio y Buenaventura.....	91
Graciela L. RITACCO	
La perennidad del legado patrístico: Tiempo y eternidad.....	103

Volume 3

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVII

BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WEST (3rd-6th CENTURIES)

(ed. Ariane Bodin, Camille Gerzaguët and Matthieu Pignot)

Ariane BODIN, Camille GERZAGUËT & Matthieu PIGNOT	
Introduction	1
Matthieu PIGNOT	
The Catechumenate in Anonymous Sermons from the Late Antique West.....	11
Camille GERZAGUËT	
Preaching to the <i>ecclesia</i> in Northern Italy: The Eastertide Sermons of Zeno of Verona and Gaudentius of Brescia.....	33
Adrian BRÄNDLI	
Imagined Kinship: Perpetua and the Paternity of God	45
Jarred MERCER	
<i>Vox infantis, vox Dei</i> : The Spirituality of Children and Becoming Christian in Late Antiquity	59
Rafał TOCZKO	
The Shipwrecks and Philosophers: The Rhetoric of Aristocratic Conversion in the Late 4 th and Early 5 th Centuries	75
Ariane BODIN	
Identifying the Signs of Christianness in Late Antique Italy and Africa.....	91

Hervé HUNTZINGER

- Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity
and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity 103

Volume 4**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVIII**

LITERATURE, RHETORIC, AND EXEGESE IN SYRIAC VERSE

(ed. Jeffrey Wickes and Kristian S. Heal)

Jeffrey WICKES

- Introduction 1

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

- The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Mêmrê* at Work..... 5

Kristian S. HEAL

- Construal and Construction of *Genesis* in Early Syriac Sermons..... 25

Carl GRIFFIN

- Vessel of Wrath: Judas Iscariot in Cyrillona and Early Syriac Tradition 33

Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY

- The Poet's Prayer: Invocational Prayers in the *Mêmrê* of Jacob of Sarug 51

Andrew J. HAYES

- The Manuscripts and Themes of Jacob of Serugh's *Mêmrâ* 'On the Adultery of the Congregation' 61

Robert A. KITCHEN

- Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai 73

Erin Galgay WALSH

- Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh Preaching the Canaanite Woman 85

Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON

- Biblical Historiography in Verse Exegesis: Jacob of Sarug on Elijah and Elisha 99

Volume 5

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXIX

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

(ed. Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski)

Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
Introduction	1
Judith L. KOVACS	
‘In order that we might follow him in all things’: Interpretation of Gospel Texts in <i>Excerpts from Theodotus</i> 66-86	7
Veronika ČERNUŠKOVÁ	
The <i>Eclogae Propheticae</i> on the Value of Suffering: A Copyist’s Excerpts or Clement’s Preparatory Notes?	29
Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i> – A Search for the Theological Matrix. An Examination of the Document in the Light of Some Coptic Treatises from the Nag Hammadi Library	55
Jana PLÁTOVÁ	
How Many Fragments of the <i>Hypotyposes</i> by Clement of Alexandria Do We Actually Have?	71
Davide DAINESI	
Cassiodorus’ <i>Adumbrationes</i> : Do They Belong to Clement’s <i>Hypotyposes</i> ?	87
Joshua A. NOBLE	
Almsgiving or Training? Clement of Alexandria’s Answer to <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> ?	101
Peter WIDDICOMBE	
Slave, Son, Friend, and Father in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria	109
H. CLIFTON WARD	
We Hold These ἀρχαί To Be Self-Evident: Clement, ἐνάργεια, and the Search for Truth	123
Annette BOURLAND HUIZENGA	
Clement’s Use of Female Role Models as a Pedagogical Strategy ...	133

Brice ROGERS	
‘Trampling on the Garment of Shame’: Clement of Alexandria’s Use of the <i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i> in Anti-Gnostic Polemic.....	145
Manabu AKIYAMA	
L’Unigenito Dio come «esegeta» (<i>Gv.</i> 1:18) secondo Clemente Alessandrino	153
Lisa RADA KOVICH HOLSBERG	
Of Gods and Men (and Music) in Clement of Alexandria’s <i>Protrep-</i> <i>ticus</i>	161
Joona SALMINEN	
Clement of Alexandria on Laughter	171
Antoine PARIS	
La composition des <i>Stromates</i> comme subversion de la logique aris- totélicienne.....	181

Volume 6

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXX

THE CLASSICAL OR CHRISTIAN LACTANTIUS

(ed. Oliver Nicholson)

Oliver NICHOLSON	
Introduction	1
John MCGUCKIN	
The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian	17
Mattias GASSMAN	
<i>Et Deus et Homo</i> : The Soteriology of Lactantius.....	35
Gábor KENDEFFY	
More than a <i>Cicero Christianus</i> . Remarks on Lactantius’ Dualistic System	43
Stefan FREUND	
When Romans Become Christians... The ‘Romanisation’ of Christian Doctrine in Lactantius’ <i>Divine Institutes</i>	63

Blandine COLOT	
Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero: ‘Romideologie’ and Legit- imization of Christianity	79
Jackson BRYCE	
Lactantius’ Poetry and Poetics	97
Oliver NICHOLSON	
The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History	119
Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Persecution and the Art of Reading: Lactantius, Porphyry and the Rules for Reading Sacred Texts	139
David RUTHERFORD	
The Manuscripts of Lactantius and His Early Renaissance Readers ..	155
Carmen M. PALOMO PINEL	
The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius’ Work ...	173
Ralph KEEN	
Gilbert Burnet and Lactantius’ <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i>	183

Volume 7

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXI

HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND CHRISTIANITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

(ed. Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf and Christoph Marksches)

Jared SECORD	
Introduction: Medicine beyond Galen in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity	1

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Christoph MARKSCHIES	
Demons and Disease	11
Ellen MUEHLBERGER	
Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research	37

CHRISTIANS, DOCTORS, AND MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

Jared SECORD	
Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome	51
Róbert SOMOS	
Origen on the Kidneys	65
Heidi MARX-WOLF	
The Good Physician: Imperial Doctors and Medical Professionalization in Late Antiquity	79
Stefan HODGES-KLUCK	
Religious Education and the Health of the Soul according to Basil of Caesarea and the Emperor Julian	91
Jessica WRIGHT	
John Chrysostom and the Rhetoric of Cerebral Vulnerability	109

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH,
DISABILITY, AND ILLNESS

Helen RHEE	
Portrayal of Patients in Early Christian Writings	127
Meghan HENNING	
Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell	139
Maria E. DOERFLER	
The Sense of an Ending: Childhood Death and Parental Benefit in Late Ancient Rhetoric	153
Brenda Llewellyn IHSEN	
‘Waiting to see and know’: Disgust, Fear and Indifference in <i>The Miracles of St. Artemios</i>	161

CONCEPTIONS OF VIRGINITY

Michael ROSENBERG	
Physical Virginity in the <i>Protevangelium of James</i> , the Mishnah, and Late Antique Syriac Poetry	177

Julia Kelto LILLIS Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginitly in Patristic Texts	187
Caroline MUSGROVE Debating Virginitly in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine	203

Volume 8

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXII

DEMONS

(ed. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe)

Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Introduction	1
Gregory SMITH Augustine on Demons' Bodies	7
Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Chaotic Mob or Disciplined Army? Collective Bodies of Demons in Ascetic Literature	33
Travis W. PROCTOR Dining with 'Inhuman' Demons: Greco-Roman Sacrifice, Demonic Ritual, and the Christian Body in Clement of Alexandria	51
Gregory WIEBE Augustine on Diabolical Sacraments and the Devil's Body	73
Katie HAGER CONROY 'A Kind of Lofty Tribunal': The Gathering of Demons for Judgment in Cassian's <i>Conference Eight</i>	91

Volume 9

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIII

EMOTIONS

(ed. Yannis Papadogiannakis)

Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS Introduction	1
--	---

J. David WOODINGTON
 Fear and Love: The Emotions of the Household in Chrysostom 19

Jonathan P. WILCOXSON
 The Machinery of Consolation in John Chrysostom’s Letters to Olympias..... 37

Mark THERRIEN
 Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song: John Chrysostom’s Exegesis of *Ps.* 41:1-2 73

Christos SIMELIDIS
 Emotions in the Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus 91

Yuliia ROZUMNA
 ‘Be Angry and Do Not Sin’. Human Anger in Evagrius of Pontus and Gregory of Nyssa 103

Mark ROOSIEN
 ‘Emulate Their Mystical Order’: Awe and Liturgy in John Chrysostom’s Angelic πολιτεία 115

Peter MOORE
 Deploying Emotional Intelligence: John Chrysostom’s Relational Emotional Vocabulary in his Beatitude Homilies 131

Clair E. MESICK
 The Perils and Virtues of Laughter in the Works of John Chrysostom 139

Andrew MELLAS
 Tears of Compunction in John Chrysostom’s *On Eutropius* 159

Maria VERHOEFF
 Seeking Friendship with Saul: John Chrysostom’s Portrayal of David 173

Blake LEYERLE
 Animal Passions. Chrysostom’s Use of Animal Imagery 185

Justus T. GHORMLEY
 Gratitude: A Panacea for the Passions in John Chrysostom’s Commentary on the *Psalms* 203

Brian DUNKLE	
John Chrysostom's Community of Anger Management	217
Andrew CRISLIP	
<i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i> and Early Christian Emotional Formation	231
Niki Kasumi CLEMENTS	
Emotions and Ascetic Formation in John Cassian's <i>Collationes</i>	241
Margaret BLUME FREDDOSO	
The Value of Job's Grief in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Job</i> : How John Blesses with Job's Tears	271
Jesse SIRAGAN ARLEN	
'Let Us Mourn Continuously': John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning.....	289
Martin HINTERBERGER	
Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus Speaking about Anger and Envy: Some Remarks on the Fathers' Methodology of Treating Emotions and Modern Emotion Studies	313

Volume 10

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIV

EVAGRIUS BETWEEN ORIGEN, THE CAPPADOCIANS, AND NEOPLATONISM

(ed. Ilaria Ramelli, with the collaboration of Kevin Corrigan,
Giulio Maspero and Monica Tobon)

Ilaria RAMELLI	
Introduction	1
Samuel FERNÁNDEZ	
The Pedagogical Structure of Origen's <i>De principiis</i> and its Christology	15
Martin C. WENZEL	
The Omnipotence of God as a Challenge for Theology in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa	23

Miguel BRUGAROLAS
 Theological Remarks on Gregory of Nyssa’s Christological Language
 of ‘Mixture’ 39

Ilaria VIGORELLI
 Soul’s Dance in Clement, Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa 59

Giulio MASPERO
Isoangelia in Gregory of Nyssa and Origen on the Background of
 Plotinus 77

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Response to the Workshop, “Theology and Philosophy between
 Origen and Gregory of Nyssa” 101

Mark J. EDWARDS
 Dunamis and the Christian Trinity in the Fourth Century 105

Kevin CORRIGAN
 Trauma before Trauma: Recognizing, Healing and Transforming the
 Wounds of Soul-Mind in the Works of Evagrius of Pontus 123

Monica TOBON
 The Place of God: Stability and Apophasis in Evagrius 137

Theo KOBUSCH
 Practical Knowledge in ‘Christian Philosophy’: A New Way to
 God 157

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Gregory Nyssen’s and Evagrius’ Biographical and Theological Rela-
 tions: Origen’s Heritage and Neoplatonism 165

Volume 11

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXV

AMBROSE OF MILAN

Isabella D’AURIA
 Polemiche antipagane: Ambrogio (*epist.* 10, 73, 8) e Prudenzio
 (*c. Symm.* 2, 773-909) contro Simmaco (*rel.* 3, 10) 1

Victoria ZIMMERL-PANAGL <i>Videtur nobis in sermone revivescere... Preparing a New Critical Edition of Ambrose's Orationes funebres</i>	15
Andrew M. SELBY Ambrose's 'Inspired' Moderation of Tertullian's Christian Discipline	23
Sarah EMANUEL Virgin Heroes and Cross-Dressing Kings: Reading Ambrose's <i>On Virgins 2.4</i> as Carnavalesque.....	41
Francesco LUBIAN Ambrose's <i>Disticha</i> and John 'Reclining on Christ's Breast' (Ambr., <i>Tituli</i> II [21], 1).....	51
D.H. WILLIAMS Ambrose as an Apologist.....	65
Brendan A. HARRIS 'Where the Sanctification is One, the Nature is One': Pro-Nicene Pneumatology in Ambrose of Milan's Baptismal Theology.....	77
David VOPŘADA <i>Bonum mihi quod humiliasti me</i> . Ambrose's Theology of Humility and Humiliation.....	87
Paola Francesca MORETTI 'Competing' <i>exempla</i> in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	95
Metha HOKKE Scent as Metaphor for the Bonding of Christ and the Virgin in Ambrose's <i>De virginitate</i> 11.60-12.68.....	107
J. WARREN SMITH Transcending Resentment: Ambrose, David, and <i>Magnanimitas</i>	121
Andrew M. HARMON Aspects of Moral Perfection in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	133
Han-luen KANTZER KOMLINE From Building Blocks to Blueprints: Augustine's Reception of Ambrose's <i>Commentary on Luke</i>	153

Hedwig SCHMALZGRUBER Biblical Epic as Scriptural Exegesis – Reception of Ambrose in the So-called <i>Heptateuch</i> Poet	167
Carmen Angela CVETKOVIĆ Episcopal Literary Networks in the Late Antique West: Niceta of Remesiana and Ambrose of Milan.....	177
Stephen COOPER Ambrose in Reformation Zürich: Heinrich Bullinger’s Use of Ambrosiaster’s Commentaries on Paul.....	185

Volume 12

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVI

AUGUSTINE ON *CONSCIENTIA*

(ed. Diana Stanciu)

Diana STANCIU Introduction	1
Allan FITZGERALD Augustine, Conscience and the Inner Teacher	3
Enrique A. EGUIARTE <i>Conscientia</i> (...) <i>itineribus</i> (...) in <i>sapientiam</i>	13
Matthew W. KNOTTS With Apologies to Jiminy Cricket. The Early Augustine’s ‘Sapiential’ Account of <i>conscientia</i>	21
Anne-Isabelle BOUTON-TOUBOLIC <i>Conscientiae requies</i> (<i>Conf. X</i> , 30, 41): Sleep, Consciousness and Conscience in Augustine.....	37
Andrea BIZZOZERO <i>Beati mundi cordes</i> (<i>Mt</i> 5:8). <i>Coscienza</i> , <i>Conoscenza</i> e <i>Uisio Dei</i> in Agostino prima del 411.....	55
Josef LÖSSL How ‘Bad’ is Augustine’s ‘Bad Conscience’ (<i>mala conscientia</i>)? ...	89

Marianne DJUTH	
The Polemics of Moral Conscience in Augustine	97
Diana STANCIU	
<i>Conscientia, capax Dei</i> and Salvation in Augustine: What Would Augustine Say on the ‘Explanatory Gap’?	111
Jeremy W. BERGSTROM	
Augustine on the Judgment of Conscience and the Glory of Man....	119
Mark CLAVIER	
A Persuasive God: Conscience and the Rhetoric of Delight in Augustine’s Interpretation of <i>Romans</i> 7	135
John COMSTOCK	
The Augustinian <i>Conscientia</i> : A New Approach.....	141
Jérôme LAGOUANÈRE	
Augustin, lecteur de Sénèque: le cas de la <i>bona uoluntas</i>	153
Gábor KENDEFFY	
Will and Moral Responsibility in Augustine’s Works on Lying	163

Volume 13

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVII

AUGUSTINE IN LATE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

(ed. John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt)

David C. FINK & John T. SLOTEMAKER	
<i>In Memoriam</i> David C. Steinmetz	1
John T. SLOTEMAKER & Jeffrey C. WITT	
Introduction	3
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
The Reception of Augustine’s Thought in the Later Middle Ages: A Historiographical Introduction	5
Peter EARDLEY	
Augustinian Science or Aristotelian Rhetoric? The Nature of Theol- ogy According to Giles of Rome	23

Bernd GOEHRING	
Giles of Rome on Human Cognition: Aristotelian and Augustinian Principles	35
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
The Reception of Augustine in the Theology of Alexander de Sancto Elpidio	47
Graham MCALEER	
1277 and the Sensations of the Damned: Peter John Olivi and the Augustinian Origins of Early Modern Angelism	59
Florian WÖLLER	
The Bible as Argument: Augustine in the Literal Exegesis of Peter Auriol (c. 1280-1322) and Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349).....	67
Severin V. KITANOV	
Richard FitzRalph on Whether Cognition and Volition are Really the Same: Solving an Augustinian Puzzle.....	81
Simon NOLAN	
Augustine in Richard FitzRalph (c. 1300-1360)	95
Jack HARDING BELL	
Loving Justice: Cicero, Augustine, and the Nature of Politics in Robert Holcot's <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> Commentary.....	109
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
Peter Lombard's Inheritance: The Use of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> in Gregory of Rimini's Discussion of the Divine Processions	123
John W. PECK	
Gregory of Rimini's Augustinian Defense of a World <i>ab aeterno</i>	135
Jeffrey C. WITT	
Tradition, Authority, and the Grounds for Belief in Late Fourteenth-Century Theology	147
Pekka KÄRKKÄINEN	
Augustinian, Humanist or What? Martin Luther's Marginal Notes on Augustine.....	161
David C. FINK	
Bullshitting Augustine: Patristic Rhetoric and Theological Dialectic in Philipp Melanchthon's <i>Apologia</i> for the Augsburg Confession	167

Ueli ZAHND	
The Early John Calvin and Augustine: Some Reconsiderations	181

Volume 14

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVIII

LATREIA AND IDOLATRY: AUGUSTINE AND THE QUEST FOR RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

(ed. Paul Camacho and Veronica Roberts)

Veronica ROBERTS & Paul CAMACHO	
Introduction	1
Michael T. CAMACHO	
‘Having nothing yet possessing all things’: Worship as the Sacrifice of Being not our Own	3
Erik J. VAN VERSENDAAL	
The Symbolism of Love: Use as Praise in St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Creation	21
Paul CAMACHO	
Ours and Not Ours: Private and Common Goods in Augustine’s Anthropology of Desire.....	35
Christopher M. SEILER	
<i>Non sibi arroget minister plus quam quod ut minister</i> (S. 266.3): St. Augustine’s Imperative for Ministerial Humility.....	49
Robert McFADDEN	
Becoming Friends with Oneself: Cicero in the Cassiciacum Dia- logues.....	57
Veronica ROBERTS	
Idolatry as the Source of Injustice in Augustine’s <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> ...	69
Peter BUSCH	
Augustine’s Limited Dialogue with the Philosophers in <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> 19	79
Joshua NUNZIATO	
Negotiating a Good Return? St. Augustine on the Economics of Secular Sacrifice.....	87

Volume 15

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIX

THE FOUNTAIN AND THE FLOOD:
 MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY
 (ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis)

Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
Introduction	1
Dionysios SKLIRIS	
The Ontological Implications of Maximus the Confessor's Eschatology	3
Nicholas LOUDOVIKOS	
Consubstantiality beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intra-divine Relations, and Personal Consubstantiality in Augustine's, Thomas Aquinas' and Maximus the Confessor's Trinitarian Theologies.....	33
Torstein Theodor TOLLEFSEN	
Whole and Part in the Philosophy of St Maximus the Confessor	47
Sebastian MATEIESCU	
Counting Natures and Hypostases: St Maximus the Confessor on the Role of Number in Christology	63
David BRADSHAW	
St. Maximus on Time, Eternity, and Divine Knowledge	79
Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
A Coherent Maximian Spatiotemporality: Attempting a Close Reading of Sections Thirty-six to Thirty-nine from the Tenth <i>Ambiguum</i>	95
Vladimir CVETKOVIĆ	
The Concept of Delimitation of Creatures in Maximus the Confessor	117
Demetrios HARPER	
The Ontological Ethics of St. Maximus the Confessor and the Concept of Shame.....	129
Smilen MARKOV	
Maximus' Concept of Human Will through the Interpretation of Johannes Damascenus and Photius of Constantinople	143

John PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS	
St. Augustine and St. Maximus the Confessor between the Beginning and the End.....	155

Volume 16

STUDIA PATRISTICA XC

CHRIST AS ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM IN EARLY BYZANTINE THOUGHT

(ed. Marcin Podbielski)

Anna ZHYRKOVA	
Introduction	1
Sergey TROSTYANSKIY	
The Compresence of Opposites in Christ in St. Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Oikonomia</i>	3
Anna ZHYRKOVA	
From Christ to Human Individual: Christ as Ontological Paradigm in Early Byzantine Thought	25
Grzegorz KOTŁOWSKI	
A Philological Contribution to the Question of Dating Leontius of Jerusalem	49
Marcin PODBIELSKI	
A Picture in Need of a Theory: Hypostasis in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua ad Thomam</i>	57

Volume 17

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCI

BIBLICA

Camille LEPEIGNEUX	
L'éphod de David dansant devant l'arche (2S. 6:14): problèmes textuels et exégèse patristique.....	3
Stephen WAERS	
<i>Isaiah</i> 44-5 and Competing Conceptions of Monotheism in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries	11

Simon C. MIMOUNI
 Jésus de Nazareth et sa famille ont-ils appartenus à la tribu des prêtres ?
 Quelques remarques et réflexions pour une recherche nouvelle..... 19

Joseph VERHEYDEN
 The So-Called *Catena in Marcum* of Victor of Antioch: Throwing
 Light on *Mark* with a Not-So-Little Help from *Matthew* and *Luke* .. 47

Miriam DECOCK
 The Good Shepherd of *John* 10: A Case Study of New Testament
 Exegesis in the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch 63

H.A.G. HOUGHTON
 The Layout of Early Latin Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and
 their Oldest Manuscripts 71

David M. REIS
 Mapping Exilic Imaginaries: Greco-Roman Discourses of Displace-
 ment and the Book of *Revelation* 113

Stephan WITETSCHEK
 Polycrates of Ephesus and the ‘Canonical John’ 127

Gregory Allen ROBBINS
 ‘Many a Gaud and a Glittering Toy’ (Sayers): Fourth-Century Gospel
 Books 135

PHILOSOPHICA, THEOLOGICA, ETHICA

Frances YOUNG
 Riddles and Puzzles: God’s Indirect Word in Patristic Hermeneutics. 149

Methody ZINKOVSKIY
 Hypostatic Characteristics of Notions of Thought, Knowledge and
 Cognition in the Greek Patristic Thought..... 157

Elena Ene D-VASILESCU
 Early Christianity about the Notions of Time and the Redemption of
 the Soul..... 167

Jack BATES
 Theosis *Kata To Ephikton*: The History of a Pious Hedge-Phrase ... 183

James K. LEE	
The Church and the Holy Spirit: Ecclesiology and Pneumatology in Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine.....	189
Maria LISSEK	
In Search of the Roots. Reference to Patristic Christology in Gilbert Crispin's Disputation with a Jew	207
Pak-Wah LAI	
Comparing Patristic and Chinese Medical Anthropologies: Insights for Chinese Contextual Theology	213

HAGIOGRAPHICA

Katherine MILCO	
<i>Ad Proendam Virtutis Memoriam</i> : Encomiastic Prefaces in Tacitus' <i>Agricola</i> and Latin Christian Hagiography.....	227
Megan DEVORE	
<i>Catechumeni</i> , Not 'New Converts': Revisiting the <i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i>	237
Christoph BIRKNER	
Hagiography and Autobiography in Cyril of Scythopolis.....	249
Flavia RUANI	
Preliminary Notes on Edifying Stories in Syriac Hagiographical Collections.....	257
Nathan D. HOWARD	
Sacred Spectacle in the Biographies of Gorgonia and Macrina.....	267
Marta SZADA	
The Life of Balthild and the Rise of Aristocratic Sanctity	275
Robert WIŚNIEWSKI	
Eastern, Western and Local Habits in the Early Cult of Relics.....	283

ASCETICA

Maria Giulia GENGHINI	
'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything' (<i>AP</i> Moses 6): How the Physical Environment Shaped the Spirituality of Early Egyptian Monasticism	299

Rodrigo ÁLVAREZ GUTIÉRREZ
 El concepto de *xénitéia* en la hagiografía Monástica primitiva..... 313

Sean MOBERG
 Examination of Conscience in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* 325

Daniel LEMENI
 The Fascination of the Desert: Aspects of Spiritual Guidance in the
Apophthegmata Patrum..... 333

Janet TIMBIE
 ‘Pay for Our Sins’: A Shared Theme in the Pachomian Koinonia and
 the White Monastery Federation..... 347

Paula TUTTY
 The Political and Philanthropic Role of Monastic Figures and Mon-
 asteries as Revealed in Fourth-Century Coptic and Greek Corres-
 pondence..... 353

Marianne SÁGHY
 Monica, the Ascetic..... 363

Gáspár PARLAGI
 The Letter *Ad filios Dei* of Saint Macarius the Egyptian – Questions
 and Hypotheses..... 377

Becky LITTLECHILDS
 Notes on Ascetic ‘Regression’ in Asterius’ *Liber ad Renatum Mona-*
chum..... 385

Laura SOURELI
 The ‘Prayer of the Heart’ in the *Philokalia*: Questions and Caveats 391

Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY
 Monastic Hybridity and Anti-Exegetical Discourse: From Philoxenus
 of Mabbug to Dadišo Qatraya 417

Volume 18

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCII

LITURGICA AND TRACTATUS SYMBOLI

Liuwe H. WESTRA
 Creating a Theological Difference: The Myth of Two Grammatical
 Constructions with Latin *Credo*..... 3

Tarmo TOOM	
<i>Tractatus symboli: A Brief Pre-Baptismal Explanation of the Creed..</i>	15
Joseph G. MUELLER	
The Trinitarian Doctrine of the <i>Apostolic Constitutions</i>	25
Gregory TUCKER	
‘O Day of Resurrection!’: The Paschal Mystery in Hymns.....	41
Maria MUNKHOLT CHRISTENSEN	
Witnessed by Angels: The Role of Angels in Relation to Prayer in Four Ante-Nicene Euchological Treatises	49
Barry M. CRAIG	
He Lifted to You? Lost and Gained in Translation	57
Anna Adams PETRIN	
Reconsidering the ‘Egyptian Connection’ in the Anaphora of Fourth- Century Jerusalem	65
Anthony GELSTON	
The Post-Sanctus in the East Syrian Anaphoras	77
Graham FIELD	
Breaking Boundaries: The Cosmic Dimension of Worship	83
George A. BEVAN	
The Sequence of the First Four Sessions of the Council of Chalcedon	91

ORIENTALIA

Todd E. FRENCH	
Just Deserts: Origen’s Lingering Influence on Divine Justice in the Hagiographies of John of Ephesus.....	105
Benedict M. GUEVIN	
Dialogue between Death and the Devil in Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Saint Romanos the Melodist	113
Paul M. PASQUESI	
<i>Qnoma</i> in Narsai: Anticipating <i>Energeia</i>	119

David G.K. TAYLOR Rufinus the Silver Merchant's Miaphysite Refutation of Leontius of Byzantium's <i>Epaporemata</i> (CPG 6814): A Rediscovered Syriac Text.....	127
Valentina DUCA Pride in the Thought of Isaac of Nineveh	137
Valentin VESA The Divine Vision in Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Christology	149
Theresia HAINTHALER <i>Colossians</i> 1:15 in the Christological Reflection of East Syrian Authors	165
Michael PENN, Nicholas R. HOWE & Kaylynn CRAWFORD Automated Syriac Script Charts.....	175
Stephen J. DAVIS Cataloguing the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Monastery of the Syrians: A Preliminary Report	179
Damien LABADIE A Newly Attributed Coptic <i>Encomium</i> on Saint Stephen (BHO 1093)	187
Anahit AVAGYAN Die armenische Übersetzung der pseudo-athanasianischen Homilie <i>De passione et cruce domini</i> (CPG 2247).....	195

CRITICA ET PHILOLOGICA

B.N. WOLFE The Gothic Palimpsest of Bologna.....	205
Meredith DANEZAN Proverbe (<i>paroimia</i>) et <i>cursus</i> spirituel : l'apport de l'Épitomé de la Chaîne de Procope.....	209
Aaron PELTTARI <i>Lector inueniet</i> : A Commonplace of Late Antiquity	215
Peter VAN NUFFELEN The Poetics of Christian History in Late Antiquity	227

Yuliya MINETS	
Languages of Christianity in Late Antiquity: Between Universalism and Cultural Superiority	247
Peter F. SCHADLER	
Reading the Self by Reading the Other: A Hermeneutical Key to the Reading of Sacred Texts in Late Antiquity and Byzantium	261

HISTORICA

Peter GEMEINHARDT	
Teaching Religion in Late Antiquity: Divine and Human Agency ...	271
David WOODS	
Constantine, Aurelian, and Aphaca.....	279
Luise Marion FRENKEL	
Procedural Similarities between Fourth- and Fifth-Century Christian Synods and the Roman Senates: Myth, Politics or Cultural Identity?	293
Maria KONSTANTINIDOU	
Travelling and Trading in the Greek Fathers: Faraway Lands, Peoples and Products	303
Theodore DE BRUYN	
Historians, Bishops, Amulets, Scribes, and Rites: Interpreting a Christian Practice	317
Catherine C. TAYLOR	
Educated Susanna: Female <i>Orans</i> , Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography	339
David L. RIGGS	
Contesting the Legacy and Patronage of Saint Cyprian in Vandal Carthage.....	357
Jordina SALES-CARBONELL	
The Fathers of the Church and their Role in Promoting Christian Constructions in <i>Hispania</i>	371
Bethany V. WILLIAMS	
The Significance of the Senses: An Exploration into the Multi-Sensory Experience of Faith for the Lay Population of Christianity during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.....	381

Jacob A. LATHAM
Adventus, Occursus, and the Christianization of Rome 397

Teodor TĀBUŞ
 The Orthodoxy of Emperor Justinian’s Christian Faith as a Matter
 of Roman Law (*CJ I,1,5-8*)..... 411

Nicholas MATAYA
 Charity Before Division: The Strange Case of Severinus of Noricum
 and the Pseudo-Evangelisation of the Rugians..... 423

Christian HORNING
 Die Konstruktion christlicher Identität. Funktion und Bedeutung der
 Apostasie im antiken Christentum (4.-6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.) 431

Ronald A.N. KYDD
 Growing Evidence of Christianity’s Establishment in China in the
 Late-Patristic Era..... 441

Luis SALÉS
 ‘Aristotelian’ as a *Lingua Franca*: Rationality in Christian Self-
 Representation under the ‘Abbasids’ 453

Volume 19

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIII

THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

Joshua KINLAW
 Exegesis and *Homonoia* in *First Clement* 3

Janelle PETERS
 The Phoenix in *1Clement*..... 17

Jonathan E. SOYARS
 Clement of Rome’s Reconstruction of Job’s Character for Corinth:
 A Contextual Reading of the Composite Quotation of LXX *Job* 1-2
 in *1Clem.* 17.3 27

Ingo SCHAAF
 The Earliest Sibylline Attestations in the Patristic Reception: Eru-
 dition and Religion in the 2nd Century AD 35

J. Christopher EDWARDS	
Identifying the Lord in the <i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>	51
Donna RIZK	
The Apology of Aristides: the Armenian Version.....	61
Paul R. GILLIAM III	
Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon?	69
Alexander B. MILLER	
Polemic and Credal Refinement in Ignatius of Antioch	81
Shaily SHASHIKANT PATEL	
The ‘Starhymn’ of Ignatius’ <i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i> : Re-Appropriation as Polemic	93
Paul HARTOG	
The Good News in Old Texts? The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Archives’ in <i>Ign.Phld.</i> 8.2	105
Stuart R. THOMSON	
The Philosopher’s Journey: Philosophical and Christian Conversions in the Second Century	123
Andrew HAYES	
The Significance of Samaritanism for Justin Martyr	141
Micah M. MILLER	
What’s in a Name?: Titles of Christ in Justin Martyr.....	155
M ADRYAEL TONG	
Reading Gender in Justin Martyr: New Insights from Old Apologies	165
Pavel DUDZIK	
Tatian the Assyrian and Greek Rhetoric: Homer’s Heroes Agamemnon, Nestor and Thersites in Tatian’s <i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>	179
Stuart E. PARSONS	
Trading Places: Faithful Job and Doubtful Autolycus in Theophilus’ Apology	191
László PERENDY	
Theophilus’ Silence about Aristotle. A Clandestine Approval of his View on the Mortality of the Soul?.....	199

Roland M. SOKOLOWSKI 'Zealous for the Covenant of Christ': An Inquiry into the Lost Career of Irenaeus of Lyons	213
Eric COVINGTON Irenaeus, <i>Ephesians</i> , and Union with the Spirit: Examining the Scriptural Basis of Unity with the Spirit in <i>AH V 20.2</i>	219
Sverre Elgvin LIED Irenaeus of Lyons and the Eucharistic Altar in Heaven.....	229
John KAUFMAN The Kingdom of the Son in the Theology of Irenaeus	237
Thomas D. MCGLOTHLIN Why Are All These Damned People Rising? Paul and the Generality of the Resurrection in Irenaeus and Tertullian	243
Scott D. MORINGIELLO Allegory and Typology in Irenaeus of Lyon.....	255
Francesca MINONNE Aulus Gellius and Irenaeus of Lyons in the Cultural Context of the Second Century AD	265
Eugen MAFTEI Irénée de Lyon et Athanase d'Alexandrie: ressemblances et diffé- rences entre leurs sotériologies	275
István M. BUGÁR Melito and the Body.....	303

APOCRYPHA AND GNOSTICA

Pamela MULLINS REAVES <i>Gnosis</i> in Alexandria: A Study in Ancient Christian Interpretation and Intra-Group Dynamics.....	315
Csaba ÖTVÖS Creation and Epiphany? Theological Symbolism in the Creation Narrative of <i>On the Origin of the World</i> (NHC II 5).....	325

Hugo LUNDHAUG	
The <i>Dialogue of the Savior</i> (NHC III,5) as a Monastic Text	335
Kristine Toft ROSLAND	
Fatherhood and the Lack thereof in the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	347
Jeremy W. BARRIER	
Abraham's Seed: Tracing <i>Pneuma</i> as a Material Substance from Paul's Writings to the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	357

Volume 20

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIV

FROM TERTULLIAN TO TYCONIUS

Anni Maria LAATO	
Tertullian, <i>Adversus Iudaeos</i> Literature, and the 'Killing of the Prophets'-Argument	1
Ian L.S. BALFOUR	
Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know?	11
Benjamin D. HAUPT	
Tertullian's Text of <i>Galatians</i>	23
Stéphanie E. BINDER	
Tertullien face à la romanisation de l'Afrique du Nord : une discussion de quelques aspects	29
Christopher T. BOUNDS	
The Doctrine of Christian Perfection in Tertullian	45
Kathryn THOSTENSON	
Serving Two Masters: Tertullian on Marital and Christian Duties ...	55
Edwina MURPHY	
Widows, Welfare and the Wayward: 1 <i>Timothy</i> 5 in Cyprian's <i>Ad Quirinum</i>	67
Charles BOBERTZ	
Almsgiving as Patronage: The Role of the Patroness in Third Century North African Christianity.....	75

Daniel BECERRA	
Origen, the Stoics, and the Rhetoric of Recitation: Spiritual Exercise and the <i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>	85
Antti LAATO	
A Cold Case Reopened: A Jewish Source on Christianity Used by Celsus and the <i>Toledot Yeshu</i> Literature – From Counter-Exegetical Arguments to Full-Blown Counter-Story	99
Eric SCHERBENSKE	
Origen, Manuscript Variation, and a Lacking Gospel Harmony	111
Jennifer OTTO	
Origen’s Criticism of Philo of Alexandria	121
Riemer ROUKEMA	
The Retrieval of Origen’s <i>Commentary on Micah</i>	131
Giovanni HERMANIN DE REICHENFELD	
Resurrection and Prophecy: The Spirit in Origen’s Exegesis of Lazarus and Caiaphas in <i>John 11</i>	143
Elizabeth Ann DIVELY LAURO	
The Meaning and Significance of Scripture’s Sacramental Nature within Origen’s Thought	153
David Neal GREENWOOD	
Celsus, Origen, and the Eucharist	187
Vito LIMONE	
Origen on the <i>Song of Songs</i> . A Reassessment and Proposal of Dating of his Writings on the <i>Song</i>	195
Allan E. JOHNSON	
The Causes of Things: Origen’s Treatises <i>On Prayer</i> and <i>On First Principles</i> and His Exegetical Method	205
Brian BARRETT	
‘Of His Fullness We Have All Received’: Origen on Scripture’s Unity	211
Mark Randall JAMES	
Anatomist of the Prophetic Words: Origen on Scientific and Herme- neutic Method	219

Joseph LENOW	
Patience and Judgment in the Christology of Cyprian of Carthage...	233
Mattias GASSMAN	
The Conversion of Cyprian's Rhetoric? Towards a New Reading of <i>Ad Donatum</i>	247
Laetitia CICCOLINI	
Le texte de 1 <i>Cor.</i> 7:34 chez Cyprien de Carthage.....	259
Dawn LAVALLE	
Feasting at the End: The Eschatological <i>Symposia</i> of Methodius of Olympus and Julian the Apostate	269
Marie-Noëlle VIGNAL	
Méthode d'Olympe, lecteur et exégète de Saint Paul	285
Johannes BREUER	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion as Hermeneutical Key to Arnobius' <i>Adversus nationes</i>	295

Volume 21

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCV

THE FOURTH CENTURY

Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Pseudo-Justin's <i>Cohortatio ad Graecos</i> and the Great Persecution ..	3
Atsuko GOTOH	
The 'Conversion' of Constantine the Great: His Religious Legislation in the Theodosian Code.....	13
Vladimir LATINOVIC	
Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging	27
Sébastien MORLET	
Eusèbe le grammairien. Note sur les <i>Questions évangéliques</i> (À Mari- nos, 2) et une scholie sur Pindare	43
Thomas O'LOUGHLIN	
Some Hermeneutical Assumptions Latent within the Gospel Appa- ratus of Eusebius of Caesarea	51

Michael Bland SIMMONS	
Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Eusebius of Caesarea's <i>Theophany</i> (Book IV): The Contemporary Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecies.....	65
Sophie CARTWRIGHT	
Should we Grieve and Be Afraid? Christ's Passions versus the Pas- sions of the Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria	77
William G. RUSCH	
Athanasius of Alexandria and ' <i>Sola Scriptura</i> '	87
Lois M. FARAG	
<i>Organon</i> in Athanasius' <i>De incarnatione</i> : A Case of Textual Inter- polation	93
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD	
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental Theology.....	107
Olga LORGEUX	
Choice and Will in the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem.....	119
Florian ZACHER	
Marius Victorinus, <i>Opus ad Candidum</i> . An Analysis of its Rhetorical Structure.....	127

CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS

Claudio MORESCHINI	
Is it Possible to Speak of 'Cappadocian Theology' as a System?.....	139
Nienke M. VOS	
'Teach us to pray': Self-Understanding in Macrina's Final Prayer...	165
Adam RASMUSSEN	
Defending Moses. Understanding Basil's Apparent Rejection of Allegory in the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	175
Marco QUIRCIO	
A Philological Note to Basil of Caesarea's Second Homily on the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	183

Mattia C. CHIRIATTI ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἔκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil's <i>In Gordium martyrem</i>	189
Arnaud PERROT Une source littéraire de l'Ep. 46 de Basile de Césarée : le traité <i>De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité</i>	201
Aude BUSINE Basil of Caesarea and the <i>Praise of the City</i>	209
Benoît GAIN Le voyage de Basile de Césarée en Orient : hypothèses sur le silence des sources externes	217
Seumas MACDONALD Contested Ground: Basil's Use of Scripture in <i>Against Eunomius 2</i>	225
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN An Unpublished Funerary Speech (CPG 2936) and the Question of Succession to St. Basil the Great	237
Kimberly F. BAKER Basil and Augustine: Preaching on Care for the Poor	251
Oliver LANGWORTHY Sojourning and the Sojourner in Gregory of Nazianzus	261
Alexander D. PERKINS The Grave Politics of Gregory Nazianzen's Eulogy for Gorgonia....	269
Gabrielle THOMAS Divine, Yet Vulnerable: The Paradoxical Existence of Gregory Nazianzen's <i>Imago Dei</i>	281
Bradley K. STORIN Reconsidering Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter Collection	291
Andrew RADDE-GALLWITZ Gregory on Gregory: <i>Catechetical Oration 38</i>	303
Andrew J. SUMMERSON Gregory Nazianzus' Mixture Language in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua</i> : What the Confessor Learned from the Theologian	315

Ryan CLEVENGER	
Ἐκφρασις and Epistemology in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	321
Karen CARDUCCI	
Implicit Stipulations in the <i>Testamentum</i> of Gregory of Nazianzos <i>vis-à-vis</i> the <i>Testamenta</i> of Remigius of Rheims, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelianus of Ravenna.....	331
Michael J. PETRIN	
Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον..	343
Andra JUGĂNARU	
The Function of Miracles in Gregory of Nyssa's Hagiographical Works.....	355
Makrina FINLAY	
Gregory of Nyssa's Framework for the Resurrected Life in <i>The Life of St. Macrina</i>	367
Marta PRZYSZYCHOWSKA	
Three States after Death according to Gregory of Nyssa.....	377
Ann CONWAY-JONES	
An Ambiguous Type: The Figure of Aaron Interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian	389
Robin ORTON	
The Place of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriology	399
Anne KARAHAN	
Cyclic Shapes and Divine Activity. A Cappadocian Inquiry into Byzantine Aesthetics	405
Hilary Anne-Marie MOONEY	
Eschatological Themes in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena	421
Benjamin EKMAN	
'Natural Contemplation' in Evagrius Ponticus' <i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>	431
Margaret GUISE	
The Golden and Saving Chain and its (De)construction: Soterio- logical Conversations between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and the Cappadocian Fathers	441

Volume 22

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVI

THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Kelley SPOERL Epiphanius on Jesus' Digestion	3
Young Richard KIM Nicaea is Not Enough: The Second Creed of Epiphanius' <i>Ancoratus</i>	11
John VOELKER Marius Victorinus' Use of a Gnostic Commentary	21
Tomasz STEPIEŃ Action of Will and Generation of the Son in Extant Works of Euno- mius	29
Alberto J. QUIROGA PUERTAS 'In the Gardens of Adonis'. Religious Disputations in Julian's <i>Caesars</i>	37
Ariane MAGNY Porphyry and Julian on Christians	47
Jeannette KREIJKES The Impact of Theological Concepts on Calvin's Reception of Chrysostom's Exegesis of <i>Galatians</i> 4:21-6	57
Hellen DAYTON John Chrysostom on <i>katanuxis</i> as the Source of Spiritual Healing ...	65
Michaela DURST The <i>Epistle to the Hebrews</i> in the 7 th <i>Oration</i> of John Chrysostom's <i>Orationes Adversus Judaeos</i>	71
Paschalis GKORTSILAS The Lives of Others: Pagan and Christian Role Models in John Chry- sostom's Thought	83
Malouine DE DIEULEVEULT L'exégèse de la faute de David (2 <i>Règnes</i> 11-12) : Jean Chrysostome et Théodoret de Cyr.....	95

Matteo CARUSO	
Hagiographic Style of the <i>Vita Spyridonis</i> between Rhetoric and Exegetical Tradition: Analogies between John Chrysostom's Homilies and the Work of Theodore of Paphos.....	103
Paul C. BOLES	
Method and Meaning in Chrysostom's <i>Homily 7</i> and Origen's <i>Homily 1 on Genesis</i>	111
Susan B. GRIFFITH	
Apostolic Authority and the 'Incident at Antioch': Chrysostom on <i>Gal. 2:11-4</i>	117
James D. COOK	
Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom.....	127
Demetrios BATHRELLOS	
<i>Sola gratia? Sola fide?</i> Law, Grace, Faith, and Works in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Romans</i>	133
Marie-Eve GEIGER	
Les homélies de Jean Chrysostome <i>In principium Actorum</i> : le titre pris comme principe exégétique	147
Pierre AUGUSTIN	
Quelques sources Parisiennes du <i>Chrysostome</i> de Sir Henry Savile ..	157
Thomas BRAUCH	
The Emperor Theodosius I and the Nicene Faith: A Brief History ..	175
Sergey KIM	
Severian of Gabala as a Witness to Life at the Imperial Court in Fifth-Century Constantinople.....	189

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS
(GREEK WRITERS)

Austin Dominic LITKE	
The ' <i>Organon</i> Concept' in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria ..	207
Barbara VILLANI	
Some Remarks on the Textual Tradition and the Literary Genre of Cyril of Alexandria's <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> ...	215

Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER	
All Cyrillians? Cyril of Alexandria as Norm of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon.....	225
Hans VAN LOON	
Virtue in Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Festal Letters</i>	237
George KALANTZIS	
Passibility, Tentability, and the Divine Οὐσία in the Debate between Cyril and Nestorius	249
James E. GOEHRING	
'Talking Back' in Pachomian Hagiography: Theodore's Catechesis and the <i>Letter of Ammon</i>	257
James F. WELLINGTON	
Let God Arise: The Divine Warrior <i>Motif</i> in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Commentary on <i>Psalm 67</i>	265
Agnès LORRAIN	
Exégèse et argumentation scripturaire chez Théodoret de Cyr: l' <i>In Romanos</i> , écho des controverses trinitaires et christologiques des IV ^e et V ^e siècles.....	273
Kathryn KLEINKOPF	
A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theodoret's <i>Historia Religiosa</i>	283
Maya GOLDBERG	
New Syriac Edition and Translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's Reconstructed <i>Commentary on Paul's Minor Epistles</i> : Fragments Collected from MS (<i>olim</i>) <i>Diyarbakir 22</i>	293
Georgiana HUIAN	
The Spiritual Experience in Diadochus of Photike	301
Eirini A. ARTEMI	
The Comparison of the Triadological Teaching of Isidore of Pelusium with Cyril of Alexandria's Teaching	309
Madalina TOCA	
Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind.....	325

Michael MUTHREICH Ein äthiopisches Fragment der dem Dionysius Areopagita zuge- schriebenen <i>Narratio de vita sua</i>	333
István PERCZEL Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Main Source of Pseudo-Dionysius’ Christology?	351
Panagiotis G. PAVLOS Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite	377
Joost VAN ROSSUM The Relationship between Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor: Revisiting the Problem.....	397
Dimitrios A. VASILAKIS Dionysius <i>versus</i> Proclus on Undeclared Providence and its Byzantine Echoes in Nicholas of Methone	407
José María NIEVA The Mystical Sense of the Aesthetic Experience in Dionysius the Areopagite	419
Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father ..	425
Alexandru PRELIPCEAN The Influence of Romanos the Melodist on the <i>Great Canon</i> of Saint Andrew of Crete: Some Remarks about Christological Typologies..	441
Alexis TORRANCE ‘Assuming our nature corrupted by sin’: Revisiting Theodore the Studite on the Humanity of Christ.....	451
Scott ABLES The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Polemic of John of Damascus.....	457
James A. FRANCIS Ancient Seeing/Christian Seeing: The Old and the New in John of Damascus.....	469
Zachary KEITH The Problem of ἐνυπόστατον in John Damascene: Why Is Jesus Not a Human Person?	477

Nicholas BAMFORD	
Being, Christian Gnosis, and Deified Becoming in the ‘Theoretikon’ .	485
Alexandros CHOULIARAS	
The <i>Imago Trinitatis</i> in St Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos: Is this the Basic Source of St Gregory Palamas’ own Approach?	493
GREGORY PALAMAS’ <i>EPISTULA</i> III	
(ed. Katharina Heyden)	
Katharina HEYDEN	
Introduction: The Two Versions of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos	507
Katharina HEYDEN	
The Two <i>Epistulae</i> III of Palamas to Akindynos: The Small but Important Difference between Authenticity and Originality.....	511
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS	
The Problem of the Distinction between Essence and Energies in the Hesychast Controversy. Saint Gregory Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III: The Version Published by P. Chrestou in Light of Palamas’ Other Works on the Divine Energies.....	521
Renate BURRI	
The Textual Transmission of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos: The Case of Monac. gr. 223	535
Dimitrios MOSCHOS	
Reasons of Being versus Uncreated Energies – Neoplatonism and Mathematics as Means of Participating in God according to Nicephorus Gregoras	547

Volume 23

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVII

FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY ONWARDS (LATIN WRITERS)

Anthony P. COLEMAN	
Comparing Institutes: Lactantius’ <i>Divinae Institutiones</i> in Calvin’s <i>Institutio christianae religionis</i> 1.1-5.....	3

Jessica VAN 'T WESTEINDE	
Jerome and the <i>Christianus Perfectus</i> , a Transformed Roman Noble Man?	17
Silvia GEORGIEVA	
Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana: The Identity of the Correspondent in Saint Jerome's Letters.....	37
Roberta FRANCHI	
<i>Muliercularum socii</i> (Hier., <i>Ep.</i> 133,4): donne ed eresia nell' <i>Epistolario</i> di Gerolamo	51
Richard SEAGRAVES	
Prudentius: <i>Contra orationem Symmachi</i> , Bk. I	63
Klazina STAAT	
'Let him thus be a Hippolytus' (<i>Perist.</i> 11.87): Horror and Rhetoric in Prudentius' <i>Peristephanon</i> 11.....	79
Diane Shane FRUCHTMAN	
Witness and Imitation in the Writings of Paulinus of Nola.....	87
Lorenzo SCIAJNO	
Salvation behind the Web (Paul. Nol., <i>Carm.</i> XVI 93-148): Connections and Echoes of a Fairy-tale Theme in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages between West and East	97
Ewa DUSIK-KRUPA	
Politician, Theologian, Tutor. Luciferi Calaritanis' Use of Holy Scripture.....	103
Vincenzo MESSANA	
Massimino ariano e la Sicilia: il dibattito storiografico negli ultimi decenni su una <i>vexata quaestio</i>	115
Salvatore COSTANZA	
Il variegato panorama di accezioni dei termini <i>Romanus</i> e <i>barbarus</i> , <i>Christianus</i> e <i>paganus</i> negli scritti di Salviano.....	129
Matthew J. PEREIRA	
The Intertextual Tradition of Prosper's <i>De vocatione omnium gentium</i>	143

Raúl VILLEGAS MARÍN	
Abjuring Manichaeism in Ostrogothic Rome and Provence: The <i>Commonitorium quomodo sit agendum cum Manichaeis</i> and the <i>Prosperi anathematismi</i>	159
Mantè LENKAITYTĖ OSTERMANN	
John Cassian Read by Eucherius of Lyon: Affinities and Diver- gences	169
Daniel G. OPPERWALL	
Obedience and Communal Authority in John Cassian.....	183
Gerben F. WARTENA	
Epic Emotions: Narratorial Involvement in Sedulius' <i>Carmen</i> <i>Paschale</i>	193
Tim DENECKER	
Evaluations of Multilingual Competence in Cassiodorus' <i>Variae</i> and <i>Institutiones</i>	203
Hector SCERRI	
On Menstruation, Marital Intercourse and 'Wet Dreams' in a Letter by Gregory the Great.....	211
Jerzy SZAFRANOWSKI	
To See with Body and to See with Mind: Corporeal and Spiritual Cognition in the 'Dialogues' of Gregory the Great.....	219
Pere MAYMÓ I CAPDEVILA	
Chants, Icons, and Relics in the Evangelization Doctrine of Gregory the Great: The Case of Kent.....	225
Stephen BLACKWOOD	
Scriptural Allusions and the Wholeness of Wisdom in Boethius' <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i>	237
Juan Antonio JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ	
A Brief Catalogue of Superstitions in Chapter 16 of Martin of Bra- ga's <i>De correctione rusticorum</i>	245
Alberto FERREIRO	
' <i>Sufficit septem diebus</i> ': Seven Days Mourning the Dead in the <i>Let-</i> <i>ters</i> of St. Braulio of Zaragoza	255

Susan CREMIN	
Bede's Interpretative Practice in his Homilies on the Gospels.....	265

NACHLEBEN

Bronwen NEIL	
Reception of Late-Antique Popes in the Medieval Byzantine Tradition.....	283
Ken PARRY	
Providence, Resurrection, and Restoration in Byzantine Thought, Eighth to Ninth Centuries	295
Eiji HISAMATSU	
Spätbyzantinische Übernahme der Vorstellung von der Lichtvision des Euagrius Pontikos, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites .	305
Catherine KAVANAGH	
Eriugena's Trinity: A Framework for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.....	311
Tobias GEORGES	
The <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i> in the Context of the Occidental Reformation of Monastic Life during the 11 th and 12 th Centuries. The Case of Peter Abelard	323
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
Augustine and the Dissolution of Polarity. Some Thoughts on Augustine Reception in the Late 13 th and Early 14 th Centuries According to Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart	329
Marie-Anne VANNIER	
Origen, a Source of Meister Eckhart's Thinking	345
Lavinia CERIONI	
The Patristic Sources of Eriugena's Exegesis of the Parable of the Bridesmaids	355
Thomas F. HEYNE	
A Polemicist rather than a Patrologist: Calvin's Attitude to and Use of the Early Church Fathers	367

Volume 24

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVIII

ST AUGUSTINE AND HIS OPPONENTS

Susanna ELM	
Sold to Sin Through <i>Origo</i> : Augustine of Hippo and the Late Roman Slave Trade.....	1
Michael J. THATE	
Augustine and the Economics of Libido	23
Willemien OTTEN	
The Fate of Augustine's <i>Genesis</i> Exegesis in Medieval Hexaemeral Commentaries: The Cases of John Scottus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste.....	51
Midori E. HARTMAN	
Beginning Again, Becoming Animal: Augustine's Theology, Animality, and Physical Pain in <i>Genesis</i>	71
Sarah STEWART-KROEKER	
Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i>	81
Marie PAULIAT	
<i>Non inueni tantam fidem in Israel</i> : la péricope de l'acte de foi du centurion (<i>Matt. 8:5-13</i>) interprétée dans les <i>Sermones in Matthaëum</i> d'Augustin d'Hippone	91
Joseph L. GRABAU	
Christology and Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo's XV th Tractate <i>In Iohannis Euangelium</i>	103
Teppeï KATO	
Greek or Hebrew? Augustine and Jerome on Biblical Translation...	109
Rebekka SCHIRNER	
Augustine's Theory of Signs – A Hermeneutical Key to his Practice of Dealing with Different Biblical Versions?	121
Erika KIDD	
The Drama of <i>De magistro</i>	133

Douglas FINN	
The Holy Spirit and the Church in the Earliest Augustine: An Analysis of the Character of Monnica in the Cassiciacum Dialogues.....	141
John Peter KENNEY	
<i>Nondum me esse</i> : Augustine's Early Ontology.....	167
Maureen A. TILLEY	
Pseudo-Cyprian and the Rebaptism Controversy in Africa	173
Heather BARKMAN	
'Stubborn and Insolent' or 'Enfeebled by Riches'? The Construction of Crispina's Identity.....	181
David E. WILHITE	
Were the 'Donatists' a National or Social Movement in Disguise? Reframing the Question	191
Naoki KAMIMURA	
The Relation of the Identity of North African Christians to the Spir- itual Training in the Letters of Augustine	221
Edward Arthur NAUMANN	
The Damnation of Baptized Infants according to Augustine.....	239
Jane MERDINGER	
Defying Donatism Subtly: Augustine's and Aurelius' Liturgical Canons at the Council of Hippo	273
Marius Anton VAN WILLIGEN	
Did Augustine Change or Broaden his Perspective on Baptism?	287
Jesse A. HOOVER	
'They Agreed with the Followers of Arius': The 'Arianization' of the Donatist Church in Late Antique Heresiology	295
Joshua M. BRUCE	
The Necessities of Judgment: Augustine's Juridical Response to the Donatists	307
Carles BUENACASA PÉREZ	
Why Suicides Instead of Martyrs? Augustine and the Persecution of Donatists	315

Colten Cheuk-Yin YAM	
Augustine's Intention in Proceeding from ' <i>mens, notitia, amor</i> ' to ' <i>memoria, intelligentia, voluntas</i> '	327
Robert PARKS	
Augustine and Proba on the Renewed Union of Man and Woman in Christ's Humanity and the Church	341
Victor YUDIN	
Augustine on Omnipotence versus Porphyry Based on Appropriation of Plato's <i>Timaeus</i> 41ab	353
Johanna RÁKOS-ZICHY	
The Resurrection Body in Augustine.....	373
Pierre DESCOTES	
Une demande d'intercession bien maladroite : la correspondance entre Augustin d'Hippone et Nectarius	385
Giulio MALAVASI	
John of Jerusalem's Profession of Faith (CPG 3621) and the Pelagian Controversy	399
Katherine CHAMBERS	
The Meaning of 'Good Works' in Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Writings	409
Kenneth M. WILSON	
Re-dating Augustine's <i>Ad Simplicianum</i> 1.2 to the Pelagian Controversy.....	431
Nozomu YAMADA	
Pelagius' Narrative Techniques, their Rhetorical Influences and Negative Responses from Opponents Concerning the Acts of the Synod of Diospolis	451
Piotr M. PACIOREK	
The Controversy between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum: On Law and Grace	463
Timo NISULA	
'This Three-Headed Hellhound' – Evil Desire as the Root (<i>radix</i>) of All Sins in Augustine's Sermons	483

Jonathan Martin CIRAULO Sacramental Hermeneutics: Augustine's <i>De doctrina Christiana</i> in the Berengarian Controversy.....	495
Elizabeth KLEIN The Silent Word: Speech in the <i>Confessions</i>	509
Christian COPPA The Creatureliness of Time and the Goodness of Narrative in Augus- tine's <i>Confessions</i>	517
D.L. DUSENBURY New Light on Time in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>	529
Math OSSEFORTH Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> : A Discourse Analysis.....	545
Sean HANNAN Demonic Historiography and the Historical Sublime in Augustine's <i>City of God</i>	553
Jimmy CHAN The Restoration Word Group in <i>De civitate Dei</i> , Books XI-XXII: A Study of an Important Backbone of Augustine's Theology of His- tory.....	561
Michael L. CARREKER <i>Sapientia</i> as Dialectic in Book XV of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i>	569
Augustine M. REISENAUER Wonder and Significance in Augustine's Theology of Miracles.....	577
Makiko SATO Confession of a Human Being as Darkness in Augustine.....	589
Rowena PAILING Does Death Sting? Some Thoughts from the Mature Augustine.....	599
Kitty BOUWMAN Wisdom Christology in the Works of St. Augustine.....	607
Mark G. VAILLANCOURT The Predestinarian Gottschalk of Orbais: Faithful Augustinian or Heretic?: The Ninth Century Carolingian Debate Revisited.....	621

Matthew DREVER	
Speaking from the Depths: Augustine and Luther's Christological Reading of <i>Substantia</i> in <i>Psalm 69</i>	629
Cassandra M.M. CASIAS	
The Vulnerable Slave-Owner in Augustine's Sermons.....	641
Kyle HURLEY	
Kenoticism in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> and <i>Confessions</i> : Descending to Ascend.....	653
Elizabeth A. CLARK	
Augustine and American Professors in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: From Adulation to Critique.....	667
Shane M. OWENS	
Christoecclesial Participation: Augustine, Zizioulas, and Contemporary Ecumenism	675
Dongsun CHO	
The Eternal Relational Submission of the Son to the Father: A Critical Reading of a Contemporary Evangelical Trinitarian Controversy on Augustine.....	683