

Today Reception of Corpus Dionysiacum and its Contexts

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The papers forming the *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* were delivered at a conference on the Corpus Dionysiacum, organized by Dimitrios Pallis, the volume being intended as a comprehensive collection of studies on sources, origin, and the reception of the Corpus. The compendium represents the actual stage achieved in this art of deepening the research about Dionysius, a very useful tool in grasping on how is seen Dionysius and his legacy today. So, it is not just for specialists but also for the public at large, for anyone wishing to have a better understanding of how Dionysian writings got to have such a tremendous impact on the history of European mind and ethos in its multifaced identities, Western vs. Eastern, Older vs. Modern This is excellent as well for the comprehension of causes underlying the persistence of cultural and spiritual boundaries in the European ethos. The way that the Oxford Handbook on Dionysius was made, dedicating separate sections on the reception of Dionysius in the East, in the West, after Reformation, is a clear proof that such reality requires different approaches in the reception of Dionysius. I will resume in what follows some of the relevant critique on different aspects relating to the history of the reception of the Corpus Dionysiacum as it was accomplished by

distinguished scholars in exquisite contributions, by following the rationale that decided the volume content.

The history, formal analysis, the exposition of its structure and the composition of the Areopagite Corpus are included in the first section. The Dionysian texts are put to analysis, their uniform and autonomous style confirming the homogeneity of the entire Dionysian collection. It is argued that the composition of the corpus, both in the early Syriac tradition as in the Greek manuscripts, follows a similar pattern, proving the fact that the arrangement of the collection's works could not have been a random one. For example, the *Epistles* of Dionysius do not follow the epistolary model of the New Testament because although they have an addressee, they do not present that greeting formula at the beginning and end of the epistles, which is a hallmark, for example, of the Letters of Paul.

The works that make up the Areopagite Corpus were read intensely in the learned circles of Christian theology since the first centuries, and this is why, from the late 6th century, the author of these mystical works has been considered an important theologian. Currently, more than 540 Greek manuscripts are known, dating from the 9th to the 17th century, this impressive volume being comparable to that of Platonic works. However, there are also around ten works that have reached us, attributed to the same author, but not part of the Corpus. It has been concluded that not all these works are, however, genuine. Dionysius used Neoplatonic philosophy to make Christian teaching sound as intelligible as possible to his readers, thus operating with notions and concepts such as the *causal cycle* taken from Proclus. In Plotinus and in his Neoplatonic successors, the apophatic ideas are not in the same register as the cataphatic vocabulary present in poets or prophets. Proclus and Damascius warned that even axiomatic statements of an apophatic nature can deceive us if we see them as propositional truths superior to the class to which they belong. At the antipode, Christian apophatism involves the conviction that we speak the truth when we affirm that God exists, that He brought all things into being by His divine will, and that He loves His creation. Both in Greek and Latin literature after Origen, we see this tradition fully expounded.

Dionysius was tributary in his thinking not only to Platonic pagans like Plotinus and, in particular, Proclus, but also to Christians like Origen and Evagrius. Like Origen, the author of the Corpus tends to interweave Plato's philosophy with the revelation of Holy Scripture. For example, he applies the term

ἀνάμνησις both to the Eucharistic Jesus Christ and to the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence. Dionysius is, in fact, a follower of Origen's theology, and not just a thinker partly influenced by Origenism. That is why he can be compared with the Syrian writer of the late fifth century, Stephen Bar Sudhaili, whose writing, the *Book of Hierotheus*, is the basis of the Origenism of Dionysius (which we can also look at as extreme Evagrianism). Dionysius also appropriates the concept of the Resurrection, so important to Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, as Apocatastasis, describing the Resurrection as a holistic restoration, so not only physical, but also spiritual. Here the influence of Evagrius on the Areopagite is felt with his conception of salvation in which he simply presents Origen's thought, including the apocatastasis, as the true Christian philosophy, not professing though a radical Origenism as we see in Sudhaili or post-Evagrian thought.

Another aspect discussed in the first section of the volume is the influence that Gregory of Nyssa theology had on Dionysian thought. Theological language is for Gregory like navigation, for to steer a ship by no means makes a man master of the sea, but it nevertheless gives him the direct experience of the sea, and thus of the exploration of the unknown. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to figure out how much Dionysius read from the work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. While Gregory highlights the mutability of man, seeing it as that constant tension that arises from the connection with the infinite God, Dionysius finds the same thing in the state of ecstasy and in what he calls the 'unknown'. In Gregory's vision Moses, when climbing the mountain, becomes unknown to himself, a process which, however, in Dionysius takes place in a slightly different way. For Dionysius, the Christian who follows Moses does not reach a more expansive version of himself (à la Gregory) but ends up through ecstasy being 'neither himself nor someone else'. In Dionysius, it is precisely that unbridled desire of man that causes the ecstatic rupture, so people become fuller of their being only when they step outside of their being.

The second part, *Dionysius in the East*, starts by investigating the Earliest Greco-Syriac Reception of the Dionysian Corpus, offering a perspective that sharply opposes the usual approach of treating the reception of the Dionysian work in Greek separately from the reception of the same work in Syriac, on the grounds that these two languages are, in this respect, inseparable. After its emergence in the Hellenic world, it was immediately translated into Syriac. Moreover, many of the testimonies related to the first Greek reception of the work are preserved in Syriac,

and this is certainly due to the fact that the environment in which the Corpus was launched was a bilingual one. This determined the historical course of the two 'Dionysian traditions', which for a long time were intimately interwoven, only to separate later, each of them taking its own path. The work of Dionysius is, for the first time, mentioned by Severus of Antioch (459-538), from whom three quotations have been preserved to this day. Almost at the same time as the appearance of the Dionysian Corpus in Severus' literati circle, the first Syriac translation was made by the most prominent translator of medical and philosophical texts of those times, Serghie de Resh'ayna. John of Scythopolis was the first scholar to have a coherent approach to the defense and appreciation of the Areopagite writings, which at the time had sparked a strong controversy. That is why it can be said that he is at the head of the line of the most important commentators and interpreters of the Dionysian work, from Maxim the Confessor in the East to Thomas Aquinas in the West. John sought through his scholia to prevent any dispute regarding the writings of Dionysius, to avoid any accusations of heresy, and to reject an overdependence of the Areopagite's thought on Greek philosophy.

Maximus the Confessor although shows himself to be as receptive as possible to Christian Dionysian Neoplatonism, appropriating much of the Areopagite's vocabulary and specific conceptual structures in full agreement with the tradition of patristic theology. Even if he puts his mark on some distinctive features of the Athenian's philosophy, he sees him as a 'teacher inspired by God'. The distinguishing consideration is that while the Dionysian work fully reflects the author's belonging to the Athenian and Alexandrian Neoplatonist philosophy of the 6th century, it is difficult to link his thought to a certain philosophical tradition. Maximus' Neoplatonism has its origins mainly in the Dionysian philosophy even though it was undoubtedly influenced by many other intermediaries as well. It is easy to identify Dionysian resonances in Maximus' work, but at the same time there are also dissonances showing that the encounter between his vision and that of the Areopagite was creative, among other things, due to the effort of receiving the Dionysian tradition from the perspective of the opposition he had to the Origenist doctrine.

John Damascene represents the last link between Eastern and Western Christianity, as the last Greek regularly cited by scholastic theologians. In his theological approach to a better definition of the Christological and Trinitarian doctrine, he openly declares that the foundation of his theses is given by the Areopagite work *On the Divine Name*, and in another place

regarding the heavenly and incorporeal powers, he quotes from the *Heavenly Hierarchy*. The Damascene refers to Dionysius in his most innovative treatise, *In Defense of the Holy Icons*, insisting on the paradigm of human understanding, which is essentially analogical, giving form to the inconceivable. The appurtenance of the Damascene to the theological and philosophical system of the Areopagite is supported, even if this is more obvious precisely where John does not openly mention the name of the Athenian, for where he mentions it he does so rather to show how unfounded this or that is a heterodox cause for which Dionysius is judged or to give greater authority to an innovative teaching.

Gregory Palamas has made full use of the Dionysian heritage in the development of his own theology, being particularly known for his vehement defense of Hesychastic spirituality in the context of the 14th century controversy. This influence can be viewed through the lens his ontological doctrine of divine being/essence (οὐσία) and energy (ἐνέργεια), and his ideas concerning the mystical experience related to this phenomenon. Palamas sees himself as related in thought and spirit to the Athenian, and when he invokes his authority, he truly engages in theological and philosophical dialogue with him. He chooses to translate οὐσία by 'essence' and ἐνέργεια by 'activity' instead of 'energy' starting from the idea that some hesychasts enter a certain state when they have the vivid and direct experience of the uncreated light. When Gregory repeatedly insists that such an experience is possible only when we make certain distinctions about the being of God, it is obvious that he is strongly influenced by the writings of Dionysius. In his theological doctrine, he uses everything from the patristic tradition in order to defend the living hesychast experience, that is why turning to a whole series of authorities of the Holy Tradition, he sees Dionysius worthy of sitting next to the Apostles.

Dionysius in the West, the third part of this volume, begins with a discussion on Bonaventure's Dionysius. As the most Dionysian mind of the Middle Ages, his honorific title of *Seraphic Doctor* reflects the centrality to his thought of the burning love he associated with the Dionysian Seraphim. Areopagite's emphasis on dynamic, ecstatic, ordered love as the ground of creation and summit of the Christian life was perfectly suited to Bonaventure's project of forging a distinctively his Franciscan theological and spiritual synthesis. Bonaventure's ecstatic reading of the Areopagite owes more to his previous Latin interpreters than to the authentic Dionysian doctrine. For Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, both Aristotle and Dionysius must be negative

theologians, as they are themselves, but the differences are signaled by the linguistic fact that Albertus uses the language of theophany prolifically, while Aquinas uses it once in his entire oeuvre, early in his *Sentences Commentary*, then never again. Although Albertus establishes the foundation upon which Aquinas would build his system, the weight they give to the knowledge and ignorance of God is different: Albertus displays a stronger tendency towards apophatism, Aquinas drops the language but maintains the radically new doctrine Albertus had developed. The Latin texts of the Dionysian corpus were to influence the Victorines authors and their Parisian associates. By the late thirteenth century any text of Dionysius would come accompanied not only by varying translations, such as those of Eriugena or Sarracenus, but also with the commentaries and glosses from Hilduin, Anastasius, Hugh of St Victor, Sarracenus, Thomas Gallus, and Eriugena. Then the nascent Middle-English vernacular will introduce new world pictures, tropes, and images to the spiritual search, and that will long influence the spiritual vocabulary of the English language. Middle English would thus prove to be a remarkably robust medium for the transmission of the thought of Dionysius to a new culture and age. A new wave of Dionysian interpretation will emerge in the pre-Reformation British spirituality via writers such as Augustine Baker and later Justin McCann, William Johnston, and Evelyn Underhill, to influence contemporary English spiritual writing up to the present day. The close affinity between Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa is illustrated with regard to three important doctrines: *Complicatio and explicatio*, *Docta ignorantia* and *Non-aliud*. In Cusa a deep radicalization of Neoplatonism is the source of all his major ideas: he recognized the proximity that Dionysian writings had to the thought of Proclus; he recognized Proclus as a follower of Dionysius. A strong reason as for Nicholas of Cusa there is no separation between philosophy and revealed theology: in this respect he continues a long tradition which encompasses the Christian philosophy of the first twelve centuries after Christ, and the thought of Meister Eckhart.

A complex and multifaceted discussion is then contained in the contributions of the last part *Dionysius after the Western European Reformation*. In his scholia on the Corpus, Erasmus reoriented from the Platonic preoccupations towards new critical questions about biblical and patristic evidence, as well as historical research into anachronistic terminology and into early Christianity. However, while Humanists such as Valla and Erasmus seemed to ignore the question of the Corpus

Dionysiaticum's Platonism, Marsilio Ficino completed a prodigious commentary, also translating the *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, that explains the Platonism in these works at length. In opposition to Ficino's opinion that Dionysius was first a Platonist and then a Christian, Lefèvre d'Étaples argued that the Corpus Dionysiaticum was not Platonic, while Protestants such as Luther dismissed it because of its Platonizing.

After the 1960s, in the modern Greek theology and scholarship the content and orientation of Orthodox thought motivated some Greek theological thinkers to adopt a particular attitude to Dionysius that was mostly positive, even if not always. The complexities of this cultural scene may help to explain the considerable diversity often found in the way the ancient author is handled by the [modern] Greek theologians. After the '60s a few intellectuals were greatly influenced by developments and doctrinal debates in the philosophical theology and scholarship of the Russian Diaspora in France and the United States, and that proved to be a creative transplantation of topics to the Greek scene. As with many modern interpretations of Dionysian Corpus, those of French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, suffer from a misunderstanding of what divine names are and what they do. In the Derridean deconstruction and Dionysian negative theology, there are two key issues in the interpretation of the Dionysian corpus: whether Dionysian de-negation and Dionysian prayer yield a determinate, superessential God, or whether they lead beyond all determinations and predications of being. Marion's *immediate mediation* turns to the Dionysian notion of *hierarchy*, which Marion sees as Dionysius' answer to the question about how to traverse distance. For Marion, Dionysian hierarchy is not to be understood as 'a nonreciprocal relation between two symmetrical terms', one superior, the other one inferior, but he claims that this hierarchical process mediates the immediate: although each act is hierarchically mediated, it is an immediate relationship between the giver and the receiver. Dionysian divine names are not mere metaphors or arbitrary signifiers; they are not even names as we moderns tend to think of names. Each divine name is rather a *divine cause* or *procession* or *source* or *power* by which properties are made available to participating beings. When Dionysius is at his highest level of thoroughness, he auto-prefixes divine names to distinguish between them and the properties that they process. Life itself, for example, is the cause of life in things that live.

The Corpus Dionysiaticum is suffused with seductive enigmas cast in a highly artificial language saturated with the

complex terminology of contemporary philosophical jargon. Scholars of the texts encounter a wide variety of puzzles, ranging from the unsolved question of authorship, the time of its composition, its provenance, going as far as the reliability of the textual tradition, to a problem highlighted in the recent scholarship. No less mysterious is its historical context and purported audience, and lastly, its doctrinal content or theological programme. The intention of the author of the Corpus remains, more than anything, a mystery. No convincing explanation has been given so far for the complicated nature of these writings. However, he seems to have been intent on offering a salvation-historical corrective to his otherwise predominantly metaphysical view of the divinely created and providentially directed world.

The reader of these excellent contributions included in the book can better understand a fundamental legacy that had an impact in establishing the European cultural and spiritual background. The volume provides solid arguments in demonstrating that the Corpus Dionysiaticum was not only the *explicit* paradigm that modeled the ways of conceiving the human, the reality, or the otherworldliness, in various epochs of time and contexts, but to the same extent the *implicit* paradigm that even though, for many times, was nevertheless recognizable through its significant influence. The major merit of this book, offering a different picture of what can be described as a spiritual, philosophical, and cultural legacy, is due mostly to the new exegetical and hermeneutical research instruments. The reception of Dionysius through the lenses provided by the volume shows that we have to revise many aspects in grasping the paradigms articulated in the Corpus Dionysiaticum. There is more to be uncovered, so the *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* should be seen as a hallmark for the future reassessments in approaching philosophizing patterns of the Christian West vs. the Christian East, as of Medieval vs. Modern mind.

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