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The Many Faces of Dionysius Reflections on *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*

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1. Introduction; 2. The Platonic Heritage; 3. Dionysius' Metamorphoses; 4. Beyond the Pseudonymity

1. Introduction

The *Corpus Dionysiacum*, written between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century, is known to be one of the most important texts of all Christian Theology. Not only for its theological and philosophical content, but also for its massive influence in the subsequent history of theology and philosophy. The newly published *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*,¹ in which the various sources of Dionysius' thought are also reconstructed, is undoubtedly an indispensable work tool for those who want to understand the crucial historical value of the Dionysian thought.²

1 Mark Edwards – Dimitrios Pallis – Georgios Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford University Press, New York 2022.

2 On Dionysius' *Wirkungsgeschichte* see also Ysabel De Andia (ed.), *Denys L'Aréopagite Et Sa Postérité En Orient Et En Occident: Actes du colloque international de Paris, 21 – 24 septembre 1994*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 151, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1997, and Sarah Coakley – Charles Stang (eds.), *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, Directions in Modern Theology 7, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2009.

As is well known, the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is claimed to be the Dionysius converted by Paul at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:34). In this way, he was able to have an enormous influence on the later theological tradition. In fact, it was just with Lorenzo Valla, during the Italian Renaissance, that for the first time was clearly stated and demonstrated that the real Dionysius, who lived in the first century, was not the author of the *Corpus*.³ Before this moment, theologians used the *Corpus Dionysiacum* giving it something like an apostolic authority – although sometimes, starting even from the sixth century, the doubt was raised about the identity of Dionysius.⁴ Because of this authority, his influence was huge, even in contexts so different from one another, from Late Antiquity to the Medieval Period or the Renaissance. Moreover, as is also shown in the *Handbook*, his influence did not end with the discovery of the pseudepigraphic character of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, arriving both to contemporary theology and philosophy.⁵ In this regard, what is interesting in the idea that lies behind the *Handbook*, is the fact that it makes us see concretely the hermeneutical power that emerged from the *Corpus* during the history of thought – at the same time also reflecting on the different sources that merged in Dionysius' work. Therefore, Dionysius' *Handbook* is a way of reading many of the crucial moments of the entire philosophical and theological tradition through

3 See Denis Jean-Jacques Robichaud, *Valla and Erasmus on the Dionysian Question*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 491-514.

4 Carlo Mazzucchi, "Damascio, autore del *Corpus Dionysiacum*, e il dialogo Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης", in *Aevum* 80 (2006), 299-334, 309-312.

5 Cf. Mark Edwards, *Three Theologians: Dean Inge, Vladimir Lossky, and Von Balthasar*, in M. Edwards, D. Pallis and G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 584-603; Dimitrios Pallis, *The Reception of Dionysius in Modern Greek Theology and Scholarship*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 604-637; Timothy Knepper, *Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 653-669.

the hermeneutical keys of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Moreover, at the same time, it is an attempt of trying to show concretely why the philosophical-theological tradition could not be what it is without the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. With Dionysius, the treasure of ancient thought, both Pagan and Christian, finds one of its most decisive syntheses, passing through the entire history of our culture. This is why this *Handbook* is so important: without the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, our metaphysical and theological cultures would not be what they are.

Since the *Handbook* is so massive, covering a period that goes from the Gospels to Jean-Luc Marion, it will not be possible in this contribution to deal with all the different authors on which it is focused. Resuming such a philosophical path would be impossible: what I will try to do in the following – before reflecting on the general image of Dionysius that emerges from the *Handbook* – is to reflect on some crucial aspects of Dionysius' reception analyzed in the volume. First, I will consider the problem of his Platonic sources – both Patristic and Pagan – also discussing some of the thesis affirmed in the *Handbook*. Then I will go through the problem of Dionysius' reception through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, trying to look critically at some of the aspects of rupture in the interpretation of Dionysius among some of his most important interpreters.

2. *The Platonic heritage*

The analysis of Dionysius' sources is the task achieved by the first part of the *Handbook*.⁶ Many of the contributions of this section deal with the Platonic tradition – both Patristic and Pagan. In the following, I will consider some of the most important of these sources.

For what concerns the Patristic tradition, the *Handbook* deals in particular with Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa.

6 Cf. *Section I: The Corpus in its Historical Setting*, 13-154.

Regarding Clement, an aspect on which he may have influenced the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is the initiatory conception of theology as something secret, to be hidden from the ignorance of the many – and, also, to be transmitted orally, since “secret things are entrusted to speech, not to writing [...] the mysteries are delivered mystically”.⁷ In order to broaden the mapping of Dionysius’ influences on this topic, it may also be added that this way of conceiving theology as something secret and initiatory can also be found in the Pagan Platonic tradition – as we can see, for example, looking at Proclus.⁸ Also, it is obvious how the assertion of the superiority of orality over writing has its primal source in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, amply analyzed in this regard by scholars within the debate on the unwritten doctrines.⁹

Analyzing the Origenian influence, which also passes through Evagrius, Ilaria Ramelli immediately points out that her goal is to show “that Dionysius is a true Origenian, deeply indebted to the actual teaching of Origen, rather than an «Origenist», holding doctrines that were denounced as heresies in the sixth century”.¹⁰ This link

7 *Strom.* I,1,13,2,4. This way of conceiving theology was inherited by Clement from Philo of Alexandria (Bogdan Bucur, *Philo and Clement of Alexandria*, 78-93, 89-90). We do not have enough information in order to affirm that Dionysius read Philo; at least, what we can say is that – since it is very likely that he read Clement (being him a Church Father) – it can be argued that he was indirectly influenced also by Philo, through his influence on Clement (cf. 78).

8 As Salvatore Lilla points out, “l’idea della tradizione segreta lega strettamente ps. Dionigi sia a Proclo che a Clemente” (Salvatore Lilla, *Dionigi l’areopagita e il platonismo cristiano*, Letteratura cristiana antica 4, Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, 183).

9 Cf. Plato, *Phaedr.* 274b-275d. Regarding this topic and the “unwritten doctrines”, cf., for example, Giovanni Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone*, Metafisica del Platonismo nel suo sviluppo storico e nella filosofia patristica. Studi e testi 3, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1987, 89-113.

10 Ilaria Ramelli, *Origen, Evagrius and Dionysius*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 94-108.

could be seen in different regards: first of all, an influence can be easily traced in the Dionysian idea that God can be named both as *ἀγάπη* and *ἔρωσ*, in accordance with a conception developed in particular in Origen's *Comment on the Song of Songs*.¹¹ Also, very important to prove the Origenian heritage is the idea of the *ἀποκατάστασις* – the return of everything (even the devil) in God's goodness at the End of Days.¹² In this regard, it must be noted that while it is not clear if Dionysius specifically endorses the Origenian doctrine, his use of the term "*ἀποκατάστασις*" is nonetheless remarkable.¹³ The use of this term in Dionysius is also linked to the Neoplatonic idea of *ἐπιστροφή*,

11 Cf. Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* (=DN) 156,1-158,18 (The critical edition of Dionysius' texts to which I will refer is Beate R. Suchla – Günter Heil – Adolf M. Ritter (eds.), *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Corpus Dionysiacum*, 2 vols., Patristische Texte und Studien 33, 36, De Gruyter, Berlin – New York, 1990-1991). for what concerns Origen, cf. *Commentarium in canticum canticorum*, 68-69. On this Origenian influence in Dionysius, cf. also Anders Nygren, *Eros und Agape. Gestaltwandlungen der christlichen Liebe*, Erster Teil, Studien des apologetischen Seminars 28 Bertelsmann, Gütersloh 1930, tr. it. *Eros e Agape. La nozione cristiana dell'amore e le sue trasformazioni*, a cura di Nella Gay, Economica EDB 16, Bologna 2011, 604-605.

12 The expression "*ἀποκατάστασις*" appears only in Acts 3:19-21; cf. also 1Cor 15-18, and Mt 17:11.

13 Cf. DN 146,13-22 (concerning the cyclical return of the stars to themselves); *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* (=EH) 82,13-83,10 (concerning the movement that the priest makes from the altar to the end of the church and then back to the altar); DN 160,11-15 (here the term is explicitly used in reference to the conversion of creatures to the Principle). On this topic, cf. Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. A critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements 120, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2013, 694-721.

through which every being is always connected to the Good.¹⁴ Both in Origen's ἀποκατάστασις and the Neoplatonic ἐπιστροφή there is the idea of the return of all beings in God. Of course, there is also a crucial difference: the Neoplatonic ἐπιστροφή is not in itself eschatological – it is a metaphysical property of reality – while the ἀποκατάστασις, in Christian terms, has this kind of historical connotation. As also Werner Beierwaltes noted, Dionysius does not insist very much on eschatology.¹⁵ Moreover, in fact, we can also see that he does not explicitly use ἀποκατάστασις in that sense. Nevertheless, the fact that this term is so strongly used – and the Dionysian emphasis on the idea of God as “all in all” (1Cor 15:28),¹⁶ together with the theodicy he develops in Chapter IV of the *De divinis nominibus*, so strongly influenced by the Proclian *De malorum subsistentia*, in which evil is conceived as something merely para-ipostatic¹⁷ – can make us think that his conception of eschatology could have been dependent on Origen, in agreement in this sense with the results of Ramelli's contribution. For what concerns Gregory, he can be considered as one of the most

14 In this sense, it is very interesting to note that even Proclus (because of a Stoic influence that we can also find in Dionysius) speaks precisely of ἀποκατάστασις to describe the orbits of the celestial bodies; moreover, he also speaks of the movement of the ἐπιστροφή of the whole universe to the Principle (cf. Proclus, *In Timaeum* I,87,19-30). On this topic, cf. Ilaria Ramelli, *Proclus and Apokatastasis*, in Danielle Layne – David Butorac (eds.), *Proclus and his Legacy*, Millennium-Studien / Millennium Studies 65, De Gruyter, Berlin – New York 2017, 95-122.

15 I. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. A critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, 694-721, 90-91.

16 Cf. DN 221,5-10.

17 It was specifically the strong similarity of the Dionysian arguments with the *De malorum subsistentia* that, at the end of the nineteenth century, was considered by Hugo Koch and Joseph Stiglmayr as the crucial philological proof to demonstrate the strong dependency of Dionysius on Proclus (cf. Christian Schäfer, *Hugo Koch and Joseph Stiglmayr on Dionysius and Proclus*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 568-583, 570-573).

important Christian sources for Dionysian mystical theology.¹⁸ As Dionysius, Gregory insists on the transcendence of God in respect to every language, either positive or negative, also stating God's infinity.¹⁹ Also, he uses the image of Moses climbing the Sinai to describe the image of the soul ascending to God.²⁰ At the same time, the author of the *Corpus Dionysiicum* radicalizes Gregory's apophatism, conceiving God as even beyond *οὐσία* itself.²¹ In the words used by Michael Motia in his contribution in the *Handbook*: "for Gregory, any theory of divine incomparability that kept God at a distance imposed a limit on an unlimited God";²² so that "when Dionysius writes that God must be «unknowingly» known 'beyond being', therefore, he is drawing on and radicalizing Gregory's emphasis on divine infinitude".²³

This way of conceiving God naturally depends, in Dionysius, also on the influence that the Neoplatonic tradition had on him, as shown in the *Handbook*. Without forgetting the Christian goal of the *Corpus*, scholars usually accept the idea that it should be understood starting from the broader framework of late ancient Neoplatonism.²⁴ More

18 Cf. Michael Motia, *Dionysius and Gregory of Nissa*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 109-121.

19 On this topic, cf. Ekkehard Mühlenberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 16, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1966.

20 Of course, I am referring to Gregory's *De vita moysis*: cf. 2,163; or 2,238-239; for what concerns Dionysius, cf. Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 143,17-144,15.

21 In fact, Dionysius conceives God as an "ὑπερούσιος ὑπαρξίς". As he says in DN 126,14-16: "ἐπὶ τῆς ἐνώσεως τῆς θείας ἦτοι τῆς ὑπερουσιότητος ἠνωμένον μὲν ἔστι τῇ ἐναρχικῇ τριάδι καὶ κοινὸν ἢ ὑπερούσιος ὑπαρξίς, ἢ ὑπέρθεος θεότης, ἢ ὑπεράγαθος ἀγαθότης".

22 Michael Motia, *Dionysius and Gregory of Nissa*, 118.

23 Ibid.

24 In this regard, cf., for example, the already quoted Werner Beierwaltes, *Dionysius Areopagites: Ein christlicher Proklos?*, in Idem, *Platonismus im Christentum*, and also idem, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2008.

specifically, it is a fairly accepted hypothesis that the author of the *Corpus* was probably a student of Proclus at the Neoplatonic school in Athens.²⁵ Through the contribution by Charles Stang in the *Handbook*, it is shown clearly, for example, how Dionysius takes from Iamblichus' Neoplatonism his use of the term "theurgy" – the ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ, which was strictly connected in Pagan theology with the *Chaldean Oracles* and was then inherited by the Neoplatonic tradition. Replying to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* – where he aroused doubts about theurgy – Iamblichus wrote the *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, the first systematic treatise on theurgy. In his regard, θεουργία means "the work of God", understood as a subjective genitive – in the sense that the gods work "disposing the human mind to participation [in them] (τὴν γνώμην τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπιτηδεΐαν ἀπεργαζόμεναι πρὸς τὸ μετέχειν τῶν θεῶν)".²⁶ The theurgist is something like a conduit through which the gods manifest themselves. The use of this term in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is massive: 1) on the one hand, it cannot be referred to the Pagan theological tradition; it is generally referred to God's salvific work in the world, and more specifically to the Incarnation of Christ and the texts and traditions connected to it;²⁷ 2) but, on the other hand, the *formal way* through which theurgy deifies men remains quite close with respect to Iamblichus. It is specifically from him (and also from Proclus, who is also heavily influenced by Iamblichus) that Dionysius inherits the idea of theurgy as "work of God" understood as a subjective genitive, *i.e.* an

25 Cf. Henri-Dominique Saffrey, "Un lien objectif entre lo Pseudo-Denys et Proclus", in *Studia Patristica* 9 (1966), 98-110. There are some important contributions on the problem of the relationship of the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* with the Neoplatonic School of Athens; E.S. Mainoldi, *Dietro "Dionigi Areopagita". La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiacum*, 113-142, offers a very interesting and also detailed analysis.

26 Iamblichus, *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, I,12,36-37.

27 Cf. Charles Stang, *Dionysius, Iamblichus and Proclus*, 132.

action of God in the world.²⁸

Moreover, Dionysius inherits specifically from Proclus his peculiar declination of the Neoplatonic idea of God as beyond Being. Of course, the idea that the Good is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας is a common framework of the Neoplatonic tradition, starting with a theological exegesis of *Resp.* 509b. Already Plotinus made the explicit association of the One of the *Parmenides* with the Good beyond being of the *Republic*.²⁹ But with Proclus, we can see an important shift in terminology since he often starts using the preposition ὑπέρ in adverbial and adjectival compounds.³⁰ While ἐπέκεινα means specifically “on yonder side”, “the preposition *hyper* means «above» or «beyond», and thus conveys two distinct spatial relations: being above something (on a vertical axis) and being beyond or across something (on a horizontal axis)”.³¹ In Dionysius we can precisely find this terminology, also radicalized by a tendency to repeat these kinds of terms many and many times, almost hypnotically.³²

In addition to this analysis, Mark Edwards and John Dillon show the relationship of Dionysius with respect to later Neoplatonism focusing on Proclus and also Damascius. They reflect on different aspects of this relationship, analyzing first of all the problem of theodicy – an

28 Ibid., 133. In developing the idea that both pagan and Christian Neoplatonic ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ should be understood as subjective genitives, Stang follows Gregory Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite”, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7/4 (1999), 573-599. On the influence of Proclus on Dionysius regarding theurgy, cf. Dylan Burns, “Proclus and the theurgic liturgy of Pseudo-Dionysius”, in *Dionysius* 22 (2004), 111-132.

29 Cf. for example Plotinus, *Enneades* V,4,3,38-44.

30 In this regard, I recall that Proclus uses frequently the expression “ὑπερούσιος”. Cf. for example *Elementatio Theologica* 100,28; 104,16; 106,22; 108,25; 110,2; 114,18; 120,12.

31 Cf. C. Stang, *Dionysius, Iamblichus and Proclus*, 131.

32 Cf. *ibid.*, 133.

aspect on which the Proclian influence shows itself to be very strong³³ – and also the conception of theurgy, on which, as it is rightly noted, “Proclus is a disciple of Iamblichus”.³⁴ Very suggestive, regarding the way in which Dionysius’ relationship to Late-Neoplatonists is to be conceived, are the last pages of their contribution. The main idea of the last paragraph is that Dionysius would be closer to Damascius than to Proclus in the way he thinks about the ineffability of God, thinking of Him as beyond not only affirmations but also negations. This is a crucial issue, not least because, among the hypothesis made by scholars, there is also the one – developed by Carlo Mazzucchi – for which the author of the *Corpus* should be identified with Damascius.³⁵ Although there is no space here to address the problem closely, I believe there are elements to be able to address this issue from a different perspective than the one outlined in the *Handbook*.

In fact, even though it is true that Damascius insists in a much more systematic way on God’s ineffability, developing his theology

33 Mark Edwards – John Dillon, *God in Dionysius and the Later Neoplatonists*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 136-152, 140-145.

34 *Ibid.*, 146.

35 Cf. Carlo Mazzucchi, “Damascio, autore del *Corpus Dionysiaca*, e il dialogo *Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*”. Mazzucchi’s path – but in a different way (more plausible, I would say) – has been followed also in Tuomo Lankila, The “*Corpus Areopagiticum* as a Crypto-Pagan Project”, in *Journal for Late Antiquity Religion and Culture* 5 (2011), 14-40, who also tries to show the Pagan identity of Dionysius, but not identifying him with Damascius. On the contrary, the idea that the author of the *Corpus Dionysiaca* should be of a Christian theologian – philosophically trained at the Neoplatonic School of Athens but then converted – is defended in E.S. Mainoldi, *Dietro ‘Dionigi Areopagita’. La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiaca*; cf. in particular 483-513 (Mainoldi also considers it possible that, alongside the main author, there was a team working with him, in the attempt of giving an ecumenical foundation to Christian thought also carried out by Justinian).

in an aporetic and paradoxical sense,³⁶ it must be emphasized that in Proclus we can already find the seeds of his conception of God. In fact, in his perspective, theology culminates in a negation of negative theology itself,³⁷ as it appears clearly both in the second book of the *Platonic Theology* and the sixth and seventh book of the *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*.³⁸ Dillon and Edwards argue that Damascius differs from Proclus “in holding that we approximate more closely to the truth about God not by negation alone, but by the paradox of affirming in faith what we have denied by logic”.³⁹ On the contrary, I have the impression that Proclus – not less than Dionysius – is aware of the transcendence of God over logic, as also of the necessity of transcending reason for faith.

In the *Mystical Theology*, describing the different methods of theology, Dionysius argues that apophatic theology is epistemologically higher than the cataphatic one, and at the same time that the dignity

36 As Joseph Combés suggested, that of Damascius can be defined as an aporetic theology: cf. Joseph Combés, “La théologie aporétique de Damascius”, in *Cahiers de Fontenay* 19-22 (1981), 125-139.

37 On this topic, cf. Michele Abbate, “Il linguaggio «dell’Ineffabile» in Proclo”, in *Elenchos* 22/2 (2001), 305-327; and Werner Beierwaltes, *Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik*, Philosophische Abhandlungen 24, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1965, 395-398.

38 See in particular Carlos Steel (ed.), *Proclus, In Parmenidem*, VII, 514,40–521,30, where Proclus discusses the end of the first hypothesis of Plato’s *Parmenides*, and more specifically the lines 142a6-8, where Plato would seem to conclude the hypothesis by affirming its impossibility. Proclus tries to give reason of this passage in the context of a constructive metaphysical of the first hypothesis. In this sense, he argues that – even though negations are better than affirmations while talking of God – at the end also all negation must be transcended. This is, for Proclus, what Plato is saying in *Parm.* 142a6-8, which is “a single negation which embraces all the precedent negations, and showing that the One, being none of all things, is cause of all things (nullum ens omnium, causa est omnium)” (*In Parm.* 517,17-19).

39 M. Edwards – J. Dillon, *God in Dionysius and the Later Neoplatonists*, 147.

of God, being detached from everything, is also beyond any negation (ὕπερ πάσαν ἀφαίρεσιν ἢ ὑπεροχῇ τοῦ πάντων ἀπλῶς ἀπολελυμένου).⁴⁰ To unite with the Ineffable, every word must disappear in an absolute silence. In the same way, Proclus, in *Theol. Plat.* II,10, after having exposed in the preceding paragraphs the nature of both affirmative theology and negative theology and their role in the human attempt to research the Ineffable God, says that

And having reserved such a method for the First God, one must in turn substract the latter from negations as well: for of that there could be “neither definition nor name” whatsoever, Parmenides states. But if there is no definition of that, it is evident that <there is> no negation either [...] if in fact there is not even a single discourse concerning the One, not even this very discourse of ours which undertakes to support these theses is suited to the One [...] [...] So that even if there were a speech of the ineffable, it still never ceases to self-refute and thus comes into conflict with itself.⁴¹

Not only for Dionysius and Damascius, but also for Proclus, negations are not enough in order to speak of the Ineffable God. For this reason, Proclus says that we should venerate Him in silence (moreover, he also says that there should be a psychological state beyond silence itself).⁴² Furthermore, he also thinks that this encounter with God can only take place through faith (πίστις).⁴³ As already said, there is no space in this contribution to specifically address the problem of the relationship between Proclus, Damascius and Dionysius. However, it can be reasonably argued that, looking at these aspects of the Dionysian mystical theology, there is no need to dissociate Dionysius from Proclus. On the contrary, his relationship with Proclian thought seems to be even fortified in this way.

40 Cf. MT 150,8-9.

41 *Theologia Platonica*. II,10,63,20-64,9.

42 Cf. *Theol. Plat.* II,11,65,13.

43 Cf. *Theol. Plat.* I,25,110,6-16.

3. *Dionysius' metamorphoses*

It is now time to give a look at Dionysius' influence: I will focus specifically on his relationship with the Latin tradition, using some aspects of his reception as case-studies in order to show the hermeneutical power of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. In the history of Dionysius' reception in the Latin medieval tradition the year 827 is particularly important: a manuscript of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* arrived at the Carolingian court and was then transferred to the monastery of St Denys.⁴⁴ After the translation into Latin by Abbot Halduin, there was the one by John Scotus Eriugena, which was later spread around all Western culture. It is difficult to overestimate Eriugena's role: without him, in the words of Dierdre Carabine, "I suspect the mysticism of the medieval period and beyond would have been bereft of a most singular way of speaking about the source of the all".⁴⁵ Another very important translation was the one by Robert Grossatesta. This translation was done in the XIIIth century – a period in which we can also find some of the most important medieval interpreters of Dionysian thought: above all, Bonaventure, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas (all taken into account in the *Handbook*). As Monica Tobon also points out at the beginning of his contribution, Jacques Bougerol said that Bonaventure was "sans doute l'esprit le plus dionysien du moyen âge".⁴⁶ Beyond this judgment's rightness, Dionysius' importance for Bonaventure is undisputable. For the Seraphic Doctor, the Areopagite was a crucial theological and mystical authority that he also used for his

44 Cf. Dierdre Carabine, *Occulti manifestatio: The Journey to God in Dionysius and Eriugena*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 315-327, 315.

45 *Ibid.*, 325.

46 Jacques Bougerol, *Saint Bonaventure. Études sur les sources de sa pensée*, *Variorum Collected Studies* 306, *Variorum Reprints*, Northampton 1989, 31; cf. Monica Tobon, *Bonaventure and Dionysius*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 350-366.

project of “forging a distinctively Franciscan theological and spiritual synthesis centered on the ecstatic person of St Francis”.⁴⁷ Among the different aspects of Dionysius’ influence in his theology, I mention here the importance of the Dionysian *Mystical theology* for his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. If only to give a small illustration of this influence, it would be enough to recall, for example, that in Chapter VII – entitled “De excessu mentali et mystico, in quo requies datur intellectui, affectu totaliter in Deum per excessum transeunte” – Bonaventure explicitly refers to *De mystica theologia*, 142,5-11, where Dionysius speaks of the necessity of putting aside every intellectual activity in order to unite with God. He almost paraphrases one of the most apophatic passages of Dionysius’ *Corpus*, to be found in *De mystica theologia*, 142,5-11, where Dionysius speaks about the necessity of abandoning everything, both from sensible and intellectual worlds – and also of being unaware of the self – in order to be “in a total and absolute ecstasy of a pure mind, transcending yourself and all things, [so that] you shall rise up to the superessential radiance of the divine darkness”.⁴⁸

Among the different sources of Bonaventure’s interpretation of Dionysius, as is also argued by Declan Lawell, there could also be Thomas Gallus. Gallus’ distinctive interpretation was the emphasis on the “affective” aspect of Dionysius’ mysticism – namely, the idea that it is through love and affect, and not concept, that we can unite with God.⁴⁹ In synthesizing his perspective, Lawell says that Thomas Gallus’ ideas are a “popularization” of Dionysian thought: in fact, focusing specifically on the affective aspect of mysticism, and not on the scientific one, they can arrive and be shared also by common Christians.⁵⁰

47 Ibid., 350.

48 Cf. *Itinerarium* 7,5.

49 Cf. Declan Lawell, *Thomas Gallus: Affective Dionysianism*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 379-393, 390.

50 Cf. Ibid.

Having said this, we should ask a more general problem regarding the correct way of interpreting Dionysius' thought: is the hermeneutical key of affective mysticism useful in order to understand Dionysius' conceptions? On the one hand, it is true that – affirming explicitly the necessity of transcending reason and intellect – Dionysius' thought cannot be considered as a “rationalistic” one. At the same time, it must be emphasized that, in order to achieve this goal – even just looking at the anagogical path described in the *Mystical Theology* – the Dionysian philosopher should first try to know and study the nature of *everything* that exists, from the lowest up to the highest being. Therefore, Dionysius' philosophy is not purely affective – the “scientific” phase of theology is crucial: without going through the path of all knowledge there could be no union with God. In this sense, Dionysius' mysticism cannot be considered as something “popular”. In fact, going through that initiatory conception of theology that, as we have seen, he inherits both from Patristic and Pagan sources, Dionysius firmly believes that the theological path demands the necessity of separating from the “many” and their profane culture.⁵¹ The mysteries of theology are too difficult for ordinary people to understand. In addition, we have to remember that – even though the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is written in a way that we could call “declamatory”, so that it appears easier to be read than the texts usually belonging to the Neoplatonic metaphysical tradition – regardless of its literary style, it is historically proved that Dionysius was influenced by the rigorous theoretical thought of the Neoplatonists, and particularly of Proclus, who was head of the Athenian School for half of the Vth century. In the Athenian Neoplatonic philosophical environment, mysticism is not conceived as something purely “irrational”, with which science would have nothing to do. On the contrary, the union with God is conceived as something

51 The initiatory conception of theology is omnipresent in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. By way of example, see CH 16,19–17,2.

meta-rational that the philosopher can achieve only after exercising a rigorous scientific thought, that only later will be transcended.⁵²

A very interesting chapter of the volume is then the one focusing on Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.⁵³ In particular, it is important to emphasize the fact that they interpret Dionysius through a harmonization with Aristotle. In fact, for Aquinas, “Dionysius nearly everywhere follows Aristotle as will be evident to anyone diligently examining his book”.⁵⁴ Aquinas inherits his way of conceiving the relationship of Dionysius with ancient thought from his master Albertus, who tries to reconcile the Latin Augustinian Platonism with Dionysian apophatic theology and Aristotelian philosophy mediated by Arabic philosophy.⁵⁵ Among these sources, there is also the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de causis*, which seems to be the *apex* of Aristotelian theology for him, but was, on the contrary, a crypto-Proclian text (as also Aquinas for first understands).⁵⁶ Albert tries to make a synthesis of this tradition, building the image of a “peripatetic Dionysius”. In this way, he also has the need to reduce the radical

52 Mystical silence is, in fact, the result of the pursuit of scientific inquiry into the One and the consequent awareness of its limits. Exemplary, in this sense, is the sentence with which Proclus' *In Parmenidem* closes. In discussing the last lemma of the I hypothesis of the Plato's *Parmenides* (142a6-8) – which in Proclus' view refers to the First God – he says: “silentio enim conclusit eam que de ipso theoriam” (*In Parm.* 521,25-26). On this peculiar aspect of Neoplatonic mysticism, cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Henosis*, in *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main 1985, 123-154.

53 Cf. Wayne Hankey, *Dionysius in Albertus Magnus and his Student Thomas Aquinas*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 394-416.

54 *In Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*, 2 d, 14 q, 1 a 2 co.

55 Cf. W. Hankey, *Dionysius in Albertus Magnus and his Student Thomas Aquinas*, 395.

56 Cf. *ibid.*, 396-397.

apophatism that Dionysius, as we have already seen, inherits from ancient Neoplatonism. In doing so, he understands the Dionysian perspective as one in which God is conceived as accessible to mental vision and gives less importance to the radical and aporetic conclusions of the *Mystical Theology*.⁵⁷ More than Albertus, Thomas recognizes the Platonism of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* – also because he is more familiar with the Neoplatonic tradition, with Proclus at its *apex*, than Albertus.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he remains convinced about the teaching of his Master regarding the idea that Dionysius agrees with Aristotelian thought. In fact, even though, comparing the *Liber de causis* with Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Aquinas concludes that behind the *Liber* there is a Proclian source – at the same time also recognizing the strong similarity between the *Liber* and Dionysius' philosophy⁵⁹ – he draws crucial differences between the Proclian and Dionysian conceptions. By way of example, it could be recalled that he finds a crucial difference between the two in the fact that for Proclus, God is unknowable in principle, while for Dionysius (as for Aquinas) this should not be considered true, being his unknowability determined only by the inadequacy of the creature. This occurs, for Aquinas, since “the Platonic First is unknowable because it exceeds being. In contrast, «according to the truth of things», for Dionysius, “the first cause is above existing things insofar as it is infinite actual being (*ipsum esse infinitum*)”.⁶⁰ In this Thomistic perspective, God is not ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. On the contrary, He is the Being itself of which it is spoken in Es 3:14. Through this kind of interpretation, the ineffability of God

57 Cf. *ibid.*, 396.

58 *Ibid.*, 397-398.

59 Thomas Aquinas, *Super Librum de causis expositio*, prop. 4, 33, 11-12. On this topic cf. also Wayne Hankey, “The Concord of Aristotle, Proclus, the *Liber de Causis* & Blessed Dionysius in Thomas Aquinas, Student of Albertus Magnus”, in *Dionysius* 34 (2016), 137-209.

60 W. Hankey, *Dionysius in Albertus Magnus and his Student Thomas Aquinas*, 409.

becomes weaker since it is not absolute: the cloud of darkness, of which Dionysius speaks referring to God's ineffability to us, is for Aquinas, "the way into and the place of perfect knowledge".⁶¹ God is not in himself unknowable; the ignorance depends just on our weakness in this life: "in this present life our intellect is not so joined to God as to see his essence but so that it knows of God what he is not".⁶²

In my view – and looking at the reconstruction of Dionysius' sources that we can find in the *Handbook* – the Thomist interpretation, insofar as pro-Aristotelian, is a metaphysical betrayal of Dionysius' philosophy. From an Aristotelian perspective, every knowledge is ultimately guaranteed by the principle of contradiction (POC). For Aquinas, also God's nature obeys to this principle.⁶³ As noted many

61 Ibid., Hankey is here commenting *Super I Epistulam B. Pauli ad Timotheum lectura*, cap. 6,3, where Aquinas explains that God's darkness is "darkness inasmuch as [God] is not seen, and light as much as he is seen".

62 *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio* I, XIII, 3, § 996.

63 Cf. Aquinas' *quaestio* "utrum Deus sit omnipotens", q. 25, art. 3: "Sed si quis recte consideret, cum potentia dicatur ad possibilia, cum Deus omnia posse dicitur, nihil rectius intelligitur quam quod possit omnia possibilia, et ob hoc omnipotens dicitur. Possibile autem dicitur dupliciter, secundum philosophum, in V Metaphys. Uno modo, per respectum ad aliquam potentiam, sicut quod dicitur humanae potentiae, dicitur esse possibile homini. Non autem potest dici quod Deus dicatur omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae sunt possibilia naturae creatae, quia divina potentia in plura extenditur. Si autem dicitur quod Deus sit omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae sunt possibilia suae potentiae, erit circulatio in manifestatione omnipotentiae, hoc enim non erit aliud quam dicere quod Deus est omnipotens, quia potest omnia quae potest. Relinquitur igitur quod Deus dicatur omnipotens, quia potest omnia possibilia absolute, quod est alter modus dicendi possibile. Dicitur autem aliquid possibile vel impossibile absolute, ex habitudine terminorum, possibile quidem, quia praedicatum non repugnat subiecto, ut Socratem sedere; impossibile vero absolute, quia praedicatum repugnat subiecto, ut hominem esse asinum" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, q. 25, art. 3 co.). On the crucial metaphysical role of the principle of contradiction in the Thomistic tradition see Maria Bartolomei, *Tomismo e principio di non contraddizione*, CEDAM, Padova 1973.

times by Nicholas of Cusa (on whom I will focus in a while), the God of whom Dionysius speaks precedes the POC, being beyond every opposition, and therefore, also the one between true and false, on which the Aristotelian POC itself is based.⁶⁴ Insofar as God transcends the POC – conceived in the Aristotelian tradition as the principle of reality and of our knowledge of reality itself – He is also beyond any kind of possibility of knowledge, no matter how powerful the intellect that would like to know it.⁶⁵ Moreover, in the Dionysian perspective, God is not only Being (Es 3:14), but at the same time paradoxically also “beyond beingness (ὑπερουσιότης)”.⁶⁶

In this sense, compared to the Thomist interpretation, the one of Nicholas of Cusa is much closer to Dionysius’ way of conceiving God. Cusanus gives a Dionysian hermeneutics characterized in anti-Scholastic sense, in whose respect he carries on a bitter controversy.⁶⁷ In fact – more than Aquinas and in contrast to Aquinas – he recognizes

64 *Metaph.* 1005b19-21. It will not be possible here to discuss closely the Aristotelian formulation. On the topic, see, for example, Gianluigi Pasquale, *Aristotle and the Principle of Non-Contradiction*, Academia Philosophical Studies 26, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2006, 17-67; Enrico Berti, *Il principio di non contraddizione come criterio supremo di significanza nella metafisica aristotelica*, in idem, *Studi aristotelici*, Methodos 7 Leandro Ugo Japadre Editore, L’Aquila 1975, 61-88.

65 It is no coincidence that his idea of God as *coincidentia oppositorum* provoked the harsh reaction of the scholastic theologian Johannes Wenck, who criticised Cusanus for having destroyed the principle of contradiction and, with it, science itself (cf. Edmond Vansteenbergh, “Le «De ignota litteratura» de Jean Wenck de Herrenberg contre Nicolas de Cues”, in *Beiträge z. Geschichte d. Philosophie d. Mittelalters* 8/6 (1910), 19-41,29). Cusanus answered to Wenck in the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, defending himself from the “aristotelica secta” (*Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, 7, 20).

66 Cf. DN 108,9.

67 Cf. Theo Kobusch, *Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 454-475.

the strong connection and similarity between Proclus' and Dionysius' philosophies. Therefore, thinking that Dionysius is truly the character represented in Acts 17:34, who lived in the first century, he believes that Proclus was directly influenced by his thought.⁶⁸ In this way, on the one hand, Cusanus reverses the real relationship between the two (as we have already seen, it was Dionysius who, being probably a pupil of Proclus, was influenced by him) but, on the other hand, as Theo Kobusch also points out, he shows himself close "to being one of the great historians of philosophy".⁶⁹ In this regard, it is important to mention that – even though Proclus' *Elements of Theology* had great influence in the Middle Ages – Cusanus is the first Latin author to be systematically influenced by his *Commentary on the Parmenides*. While in the *Elements of Theology* Proclus describes the structure of reality in a systematic and theorematic way, in the *In Parmenidem* – particularly in its last parts – he reflects on the grounding structures of his system in a more problematizing way. It is this Proclus – more aporetic – in whom Cusanus is more interested. And the resulting interpretation of Proclus' philosophy also has a great influence on his reading of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

Through this way of reading Dionysius, he goes through a different path with respect to the Thomistic one. Cusanus' polemic with the Scholastic tradition finds a paradigmatic expression at the end of his philosophical journey in the *De li non aliud* (1461-62). The *De li non aliud* represents Cusanus' attempt to reflect on the nature of the inexpressible God by conceiving Him as beyond any kind of distinction, radicalizing the Neoplatonic idea of a God at

68 Cf. *De li non aliud*, XX, 90.

69 Th. Kobusch, *Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa*, 454.

once transcendent and immanent,⁷⁰ particularly emphasizing the epistemological consequences of such a conception. In fact, the *non aliud* – that for Cusanus is both the principle of all being and knowledge⁷¹ – is introduced in the first instance as the principle of all definitions. Cusanus’ reasoning is the following: in order to define “p”, it has to be first of all defined as “not other than p”. For example, in order to define the sky, we must say that “it is not other than the sky” (*caelum est non aliud quam caelum*).⁷² In order to be other (*aliud*) with respect to the other beings, everything that exists must be essentially constituted by the *non aliud*. Being *non-aliud*, God is not something *aliud* with respect to the *aliud*. He is not simply something “other” than every being in the sense of something only transcendent. In fact, in this way he would not be *non-aliud*. On the contrary, to be *non aliud*, God must also be immanent to every being. Therefore, it is at the same time – from the epistemological point of view – the *definiens* and the *definiendum*, and – from the metaphysical point of view – the *creare* and the *creari*.⁷³

70 On the Cusanian idea of God characterized both by transcendence and immanence and its relationship with the Neoplatonic tradition, see Thomas Leinkauf, *Nicolaus Cusanus. Eine Einführung*, Buchreihe der Cusanus Gesellschaft 15, Aschendorff, Münster, 143-153; and Enrico Peroli, *Niccolò Cusano. La vita, l’opera, il pensiero*, Biblioteca di testi e studi 1427, Carocci, Roma 2022, 458-464.

71 “Deus igitur per ‘non aliud’ significatus essendi et cognoscendi omnibus principium est” (*De li non aliud*, 9,3-4).

72 “Quid enim responderes, si quis te «quid est aliud?» interrogaret? Nonne diceres: «non aliud quam aliud»? Sic, «quid caelum?», responderes: «non aliud quam caelum»” (*De li non aliud*, 5,1-4).

73 Cf. Davide Monaco, *Deus Trinitas. Dio come non altro nel pensiero di Nicolò Cusano*, Collana di teologia 68, Città Nuova, Roma 2010, 272-273, 302-303. The *non aliud* is “definitio, quae se et omnia definit” (114,1). The idea of God as a coincidence of *creare* and *creari* is developed by Cusanus in *De visione Dei*, 49: “Sed sine, domine piissime, ut adhuc vilis factura loquatur ad te. Si videre tuum est creare tuum et non vides aliud a te, sed tu ipse es obiectum tui ipsius, es

Hence, it is also beyond the POC, as Cusanus states, by confronting directly with the Aristotelian tradition. The cardinal firmly believes that applying the POC to what is beyond contradiction itself is wrong. The POC can be applied only where there is distinction between the opposites. However, God is “contradictionem absque contradictione”.⁷⁴ In expressing this idea, Cusanus explicitly refers also to Dionysius himself by saying that “likewise, the theologian Dionysius saw that God is the opposition of opposites without opposition (sicut Dionysius theologus Deum oppositorum vidit oppositionem sine oppositione)”.⁷⁵ Starting from his interpretation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* – conceived also in this regard as in deep harmony with Proclus’ thought⁷⁶ – Cusanus carries out a scathing attack on the Aristotelian tradition. As also Kobusch affirms,

The historical significance of the critique of Aristotle cannot be overestimated. Nicholas says here with particular emphasis, in the writing *De non aliud*, that the principle of contradiction is in no way the universal principle that Aristotle supposed it to be. If the other is an other, this is also the reason why it is nothing other than the other. The not-other is also a constituent of the otherness of the other. Thus

enim videns et visibile atque videre, quomodo tunc creas res alias a te? Videris enim creare te ipsum, sicut vides te ipsum. Sed consolaris me, vita spiritus mei, quoniam etsi occurrat murus absurditatis, qui est coincidentiae ipsius creare cum creari, quasi impossibile sit, quod creare coincidat cum creari” (49,1-7).

74 *De li non aliud*, 89,8-9,

75 *De li non aliud*, 89,12-14. Dionysius alludes to this idea in DN 185b. However, the formula Cusanus refers to does not appear explicitly in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. As it has been shown by Beierwaltes (cf. Werner Beierwaltes, “Deus oppositio oppositorum. Nicolaus Cusanus, De visione Dei. XIII”, in *Salzburger Jahrbuch für Philosophie* 8 (1964), 175-185), the expression “oppositorum oppositio” can instead be found in Eriugena (*De div. nat.* I,517a-b).

76 Cf. for example *De principio*, 26,1-13, where Cusanus quotes almost explicitly *In Parm.* 519, where Proclus speaks about the relationship between the One and the laws of logic.

for Nicholas the other and the not-other are to be distinguished, but they do not stand over against each other in the sense of the Aristotelian principle of contradiction. Under the rubric of the not-other something is cognized here that escapes the Aristotelian principle of contradiction.⁷⁷

Looking at Cusanus' critics of the Thomistic interpretation, we can say that, more generally (of course, it is a simplification but also a useful key to read this crucial cultural shift), what we can see in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is a shift in the way in which generally Dionysius is interpreted, in the sense of a radicalization. While – also because at that time many texts of Plato and the Platonic tradition could not be read⁷⁸ – the Thomistic tradition read Dionysius in a philo-Aristotelian way, in the Renaissance, starting from Pletho, Bessarion, Cusanus, and going to authors like Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, he is read in close connection with Neoplatonic sources.

There is not enough space here in order to insist specifically on the different aspects of this topic. Nevertheless, it will certainly be useful to recall the case of Ficino, in which this tendency appears in a paradigmatic way. Not only did Ficino write commentaries both on the *Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names*, but, as famously well known, he was also the first to translate Plato's entire *Corpus* into Latin. As Mark Edwards points out, the purpose of his commentaries on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was, among the other things, "to show that Dionysius had been to the Neoplatonists what Moses had been to Plato himself"⁷⁹ – and, therefore, that there was no risk in using the

77 Th. Kobusch, *Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa*, 465.

78 On the return of Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition in Renaissance philosophy, cf. James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 17, Brill, Leiden - London 1990.

79 Mark Edwards with the Assistance of Michael Allen, *Marsilio Ficino and the Dionysian Corpus*, in M. Edwards – D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 476-488, 476.

philosophical tool of the Neoplatonists in order to lead the soul towards God. Ficino was a priest; but, for sure, he conceived himself first as a philosopher with the crucial historical duty of resurrecting the Platonic wisdom. Moreover, this wisdom was conceived as in harmony not only with Christianity, but more generally with the unique golden chain of a religious tradition that holds together with Plato Zoroastrianism, Hermeticism, Orphism and Pythagoreanism.⁸⁰ For Ficino, theology was the noblest part of philosophy, but theology itself could not be reduced only to the Christian tradition. It is not something random, in this sense, that about Dionysius, Ficino said: “Platonicus primo ac deinde Christianus”.⁸¹ In other periods of the history of our culture, this would have been said as an insult; on the contrary, for Ficino, it was the result of the awareness that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was a treasure containing the metaphysical grounding structures of a unique true theological tradition, both Christian and Pagan.

To get an idea of the spread of this way of conceiving the relationship with theological traditions in the Renaissance, it is certainly useful to refer to the idea expressed by Cusanus regarding Dionysius’ relationship with Plato, which gives us a distinct view of the kind of syncretistic cultural environment peculiar to the revival of Platonism in the Renaissance. Speaking about the hunt for wisdom (*venatio sapientiae*), Cusanus traces a metaphysical-theological path that from Plato goes to Origen, Proclus and Dionysius:

Dionysius, who imitates Plato, made a similar hunt in the field of unity, and argues that negations, which are not deprivations but are excellent and abundant [negative] affirmations, are truer than affirmations. Proclus, on the other hand, who quotes Origen, is later than Dionysius.

80 On this topic cf. James Hankins, *The Development of Ficino’s “Ancient Theology”*, in idem, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols, Brill, Leiden – Boston 1991, 460-464.

81 Marsilio Ficino, *Oratio de laudibus philosophiae*, in *Opera*, ex officina Henricpetrina, Basileae, 1576, 758 (wrong pagination 768).

Following Dionysius, he denies of the First, which is wholly ineffable, the one and the good, although Plato designated the First by these names. Since I believe that we should praise and follow these extraordinary hunters, I refer those dedicated to study to the careful analyses they have transmitted to us in their writings.⁸²

4. *Beyond the Pseudonymity*

Having reconstructed the main sources of Dionysian thought and analyzed some of the most important passages in its reception, it is now time to make some concluding remarks on the *Handbook* project, which has been our guide in this reflection on the many faces of Dionysius.

As already said, the *Handbook* is, in its essence, a reception study on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Nonetheless, it is called *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*. Two elements are here important: 1) it is a volume on Dionysius, not pseudo-Dionysius; 2) it is a volume that, focusing on Dionysius' reception, claims at the same time to focus on Dionysius himself. These two closely related aspects are part of the key idea behind the book: *understanding the Corpus Dionysiacum cannot only mean identifying the "real" author*. The latter, of course, is a crucial task; but it is by no means sufficient to understand the content of the *Corpus*. The purpose of understanding the *Corpus* also involves understanding its historical power to influence – and even enable – some of the most important theological and philosophical systems of our tradition. To say it with the very words of Edwards, Pallis and Steiris,

Without the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, there would have been no Maximus the Confessor, no Eriugena, no Aquinas, no Cusanus, and no Ficino as we know them. The pejorative label "pseudo-Dionysius" belies his place

82 Cusanus, *De venatione sapientiae*, 64,11-18.

in history, for there are no authentic writings by this disciple from which his elucubration need to be distinguished [...] The name of Dionysius is synonymous with a single body of literature, just as the name of Homer is synonymous with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. His text, like that of Homer, is protean, and like Homer, he grows in stature with every new appropriation – all the more so the more appropriation departs from what we have now supposed to have been his “intent”. And just as it would have been slighting to call him pseudo-Dionysius, so it would have been needlessly pedantic to call this volume on the reception of his writings: it is indeed so, for the most part, but this is surely a case in which the reception is the man.⁸³

To study the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text is to study something that, although it is other than the text, at the same time deeply belongs to it, even in the misunderstanding. Of course, the interpretations involving the text in different eras may be very different from each other, as we can see, for example, by looking at the reception of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in Scholastic thought and in authors such as Nicholas of Cusa or Marsilio Ficino. Obviously, the fact that the same text may be involved in two conflicting interpretations does not imply that they are both true, but neither does it imply that they are both false, or that one is totally true and the other false. Although one may think that one of the two interpretations is closer to the philosophy of Dionysius than the other – and I am personally quite convinced that the Renaissance interpretations of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* are closer to its philosophical end than the Scholastic ones – what is important in showing their conflict is that it makes us understand the hermeneutic power of the text. What remains historically true – beyond any personal interpretation – is that Dionysius’ philosophy, for different reasons and in different ways, has been engaged in some

83 Mark Edwards – Dimitrios Pallis – Georgios Steiris, *Introduction*, in M. Edwards D. Pallis – G. Steiris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 1-10, 6.

of the most important moments in the theological and philosophical tradition. It has been used in different philosophical and theological contexts, even conflicting ones, in which it has been regarded as a useful hermeneutical key in seeking to investigate the nature of God.

The conception of God that we can find in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is to be conceived as a re-interpretation, in a Christian context, of the late Neoplatonic tradition. Through the revival, in a renewed form, of some of the fundamental conceptions of the Neoplatonic tradition, Dionysius has played a crucial role in the development of the tradition of Christian Platonism in its various historical expressions. For this reason, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* is certainly one of the most important texts in the entire Patristic tradition, and, certainly, the study of its influence in the theological and philosophical tradition – the task fulfilled by the *Oxford Handbook* – is crucial in order to look, from an original perspective, at the history of theology, which is also, from a Dionysian perspective, the history of philosophy. For Dionysius, no perfect theology could exist without philosophy, nor true philosophy without theology.⁸⁴ To study his influence in our tradition is to study how Christian theology absorbed the Platonic heritage as a crucial hermeneutical tool for investigating the Mystery of God.

84 This is evident firstly from the very structure of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and its strong use of the Neoplatonic heritage. But it is also confirmed by the fact that Dionysius identifies the true and perfect philosopher with the figure of the monk: “Ἡ δὲ τῶν μεριστῶν οὐ μόνον ζῶων ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ φαντασιῶν ἀποταγή τὴν τελεωτάτην ἐμφαίνει τῶν μοναχῶν φιλοσοφίαν ἐν ἐπιστήμῃ τῶν ἐνοποιῶν ἐντολῶν ἐνεργουμένην” (EH 117,23-25). This Dionysian conception of the figure of the monk is also crucial from a historical point of view, becoming very influential during the Middle Ages (cf. René Roques, *L'univers dionysien. Structure Hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys*, Théologie 29, Aubier, Paris 1954, 188-189).

Abstract

Scopo fondamentale del presente lavoro è di riflettere sulla *Wirkungsgeschichte* di Dionigi Areopagita a partire da un'analisi del recente *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*. Si coglierà l'occasione per analizzare il ruolo storico di cesura occupato dal pensiero dionisiano, avente come cifra fondamentale l'incorporazione di aspetti fondamentali della metafisica tardo-neoplatonica all'interno della tradizione teologica cristiana – per di più, al confine fra il mondo classico e la tradizione successiva. Oltre che riflettere sul problema delle fonti dionisiane, si potrà anche esplorare la questione della ricezione del *Corpus Dionysiacum*, analizzando in modo particolare il passaggio dall'ermeneutica dionisiana medievale a quella rinascimentale, con un focus specifico sul caso di Niccolò Cusano. Inoltre, guardando al complesso percorso compiuto nell'*Oxford Handbook*, si potrà riflettere sulla fecondità ermeneutica del *Corpus Dionysiacum*, oltre che sul fondamentale ruolo da esso svolto per la costituzione del canone teologico-metafisico proprio della nostra tradizione culturale.



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