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**THE HIDDEN AUTHOR
OF THE *CORPUS DIONYSIACUM* –
AUTHENTICITY, REJECTION, AND APOPHASIS
IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

SUMMARY: The following paper aims to show that explanation of Pseudo-Dionysius' identity has importance to the interpretation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* philosophy. I investigate the turn in the Dionysian issue that took place in the history of research on the author's true identity: from plain recognition of Dionysius first-century authorship, through its negation, back to acknowledgement of his relation to the times of Apostles as significant. The first part of the paper includes introduction into chosen aspects of the history of the research into the *Corpus Dionysiacum* author's identity. The closing part refers to the conception of the contemporary scholars Ch. M. Stang and W. Riordan, who have tried to understand the meaning of the unknown author's pseudonym as important to interpretation of all his writings. The scholars' assumption is to reveal that the author and his work are complementary elements, and that separation causes some loss.

KEYWORDS: Pseudo-Dionysius, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, pseudonymity

Dionysius the Areopagite is mentioned in Acts of the Apostles (17, 3). As the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* he made his first public appearance at the turn of the 5th century AD, and at that time his writings were

quoted by Severus of Antioch.¹ Until the end of 19th century, it was generally believed that St. Paul's disciple, who converted to Christianity after hearing the apostle's teaching at the Athenian Areopagus, was in fact the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. However, two German scholars, Koch and Stilgmayr, who each researched independently, finally demonstrated the author's dependence on Neoplatonist Proclus, and convincingly established the much later dating for Dionysian writings. Their finding was that he obviously could not have lived in the 1st century. Since then Dionysius has been referred to using the prefix "pseudo" to distinguish him from Dionysius of the Acts of Apostles.² Since the late nineteenth century, many have tried to investigate to what degree Neoplatonism and Christianity had influenced his writings. Many have sought to discover who the author might be. Moreover, his thought was reinterpreted, and the scholars started to discuss the pseudonymous authorship in many ways. For these reasons many works of literature on the concealed true identity of the author were created over the period of about one century.

According to the latest research, this unknown author was presumably a Syrian monk writing in Greek, who belongs to the end of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century. We also know he was most probably educated in the studies of the Athenian Academy in times of Proclus, so he was thoroughly acquainted with the Platonic system. For some reasons he introduced himself as Dionysius the Areopagite of the Acts of the Apostles, gaining the authority of St. Paul's disciple, and this fact supposedly had real impact on the popularity of his works and their influence on Christian philosophy and theology.

Reading the *Corpus Dionysiacum* seems to be a great challenge. First and foremost, the reading itself generates many problems. The language is incomprehensible to the laymen not familiar with Neoplatonic philosophy some concepts of which are involved. What is more, there are many complexities of syntax, grammatical structures, and vocabulary. Also, the writings are neither a systematic lecture of some

¹ On Pseudo-Dionysius see for example: Copleston 2000: 86-94; Perl 2005: 540-549.

² There are several ways to refer to the author in English: 1) with the prefix "Pseudo": Pseudo-Dionysius, Pseudo-Denys (or Pseudo-Denis); 2) without the prefix: Dionysius, Denys (or Denis).

doctrine, nor an organized treatise. This had already been noticed in the Middle Ages. For example, Johannes Scotus Eriugena, the commentator and translator of the *Corpus Dionysiicum*, made the observation that, because of its intricate and excessive style, the writings were mostly concealed and difficult to understand.³ In a similar way St. Thomas Aquinas, while writing the commentary on The Divine Names noticed that *the blessed Dionysius used an obscure style in all his books and did this from diligence so that the sacred and divine teachings might be hidden from the ridicule of unbelievers*.⁴ Another difficulty is that the reading requires patience, diligent consideration, and *repeated contemplation of the same material* (Rorem 1993: 6). The reader *must alternate between patient attention to minute detail and sweeping overview of the entire work in question* (Rorem 1993: 6). Contemporary scholar, Father T. Stepień affirms that in the case of Dionysius, the theology is itself an exercise in the spiritual way to God. In other words, he invites us inside his inner life, and we cannot separate the practice from the theory (Stepień 2012). For H. U. von Balthasar, in turn, the whole Dionysian theology is the simple and holy liturgical act (Balthasar 1995: 153). By and large we have to face some other difficulties connected with our own reading experiences. Anyone who has ever discussed the subject of the *Corpus Dionysiicum* author's pseudonymous identity did it from his own point of view that was affected by their inner convictions on the question whether the author was in his theology more Neoplatonist than Christian or not. All of this has a profound impact on the understanding of the *Corpus Dionysiicum* philosophy.

The following paper aims to show the great importance of the Pseudo-Dionysius' authorial authenticity – not only to the popularization of the writings through the centuries, but also to perception and interpretation of his philosophy. I attempt to investigate the turn in the Dionysian issue that took place in the history of research on the author's

³ Johannes Scotus Eriugena, *De divisione naturae*, 1, 64, PL, 122, 509C: *Ast quia more suo perplexe hyperbaticeque disputat, ideoque valde abstrusus, difficilisque ad intellegendum multis videatur.*

⁴ Thomas Aquinas 1950: 1-2: *Est autem considerandum quod beatus Dionysius in omnibus suis libris obscuro utitur stylo. Quod quidem non ex imperitia fecit, sed ex industria sacra et divina dogmata ab irrisione infidelium occultaret.*

true identity: from plain recognition of Dionysius first-century authorship, through its negation, back to acknowledgement of his relation to the times of Apostles as significant, which Ch. M. Stang has defined as an “apophatic anthropology”. While other scholars referred to that issue as “mystical relation”, or called it “trans-temporality” (Riordan 2008: 31-32; Balthasar 1995: 151).

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE DIONYSIAN QUESTIONS

As already noticed, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite was not the figure mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17, 34), even though through the ages it was generally believed that he was the first-century author. His apparent intention was that the writings were treated as though they came from the first century. Besides the pseudonymous authorship of the corpus, often called *Corpus Dionysiacum* or *Corpus Areopagiticum*, the author quotes St. Paul many times as the mentor of his doctrine (DN IV13 712A; Ep IX4 1112A; DN III2 681A). Moreover, he addresses his letters and treatises to addressee of St. Paul’s letters, well known from the New Testament.⁵ He also mentioned in the letter to Polycarp, the Hierarch, that while at Heliopolis, he was a witness of the eclipse, *which took place at the time of the saving Cross* (Ep VII2 1081A-B). He brought comfort to John imprisoned in the Isle of Patmos (Ep X 1120A). Some think, basing on his evidence of third chapter of treatise on The Divine Names, that he was present at the death of Mary, Mother of Jesus (DN III2 681D).

There are few legends connected with the author. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Dionysius was later the bishop of Athens. By tradition he was also conflated with Denis the Apostle to the Gauls, the first bishop and patron of Paris, who died in the third century as a martyr, beheaded on what is now Montmartre (Riordan 2008: 25; Rorem 2005: 1-15). His body is buried at the Basilica of Saint-Denis, which is now in the suburb of Paris, and his grave is located in the Saint-Denis Abbey, as was handed down by Abbot Hilduin (9th century author and the Saint

⁵ For example he addressed the treatises to Timothy, the letter IX to Titus, and the letter X to John, Apostle and Evangelist imprisoned in the Isle of Patmos.

Denis' abbot, who translated the Dionysian writings to Latin) in *Passio sanctissimi Dionysii* (Hilduin, PL: 106, 23-50).

Even though the question of the author's authenticity was raised at the time of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* initial reception, it was subsequently accepted without doubts. The first public appearance took place during the controversy between Orthodox bishops and the opposed group, known as the monophysites, who gathered themselves around Severus, the patriarch of Antioch (Riordan 2008: 23). Both parties debated on the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon (451) in Constantinople in AD 532.⁶ The nature of the Person of Christ in the Trinity was under discussion.⁷ The party of Monophysites was represented among the others by Severus of Antioch, who presented the passage from the fourth Epistle and called the authority of a certain Dionysius the Areopagite in support of his view (Ep IV 1072A-B). During this debate, one of the orthodox, Hypatius of Ephesus, brought the authenticity of the writings into question because they had not been previously known by Fathers of the Church, and rejected the Monophysites' means of the defence. However, these initial hesitations had minimal impact on popularity and warm acceptance of the writings.

Severus cited the Dionysian materials in his several earlier works: The Third Letter to John Grammaticus (510), adherent of Chalcedon, and in the treatises *Adversus apologiam Juliani* and *Contra Additiones Juliani*, which were created about years 518 and 528.⁸ Based on that, it is probable that the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was created before AD 525.

Furthermore, that first mention of the writings, misquoted in support of the Monophysite position, impacted their Monophysite interpretation.

⁶ Louth noticed: *The Council of Chalcedon (451) is seen as settling the great Christological controversy of the patristic period which had begun almost two centuries earlier with the condemnation of Paul of Samosata at Antioch (268) and then the condemnation of Arius at Nicea (325) – both for having questioned in different ways the full divinity of Christ – and continued through the heresy of Apollinaris (c. 310 – c. 390), who compromised Christ's full humanity by denying him a human soul and was condemned at Constantinople (381), to culminate in the great Christological controversy between Alexandria and Antioch* (Louth 2001: 2-3).

⁷ See more on the issue, for example: Louth 2001: 2-10; Manikowski 2006: 32-41.

⁸ The year 528 is the final date, when the writings had been translated into Syrian. About Syrian translation see more, see e.g. Perczel 2009: 27-42.

This, in turn, initiated the commentators' work, who had to redeem the author as the orthodox theologian. John of Scythopolis (c. 500-550) was the first scholiast and redactor of the Dionysian materials, whose "scholia" (commentaries) were used by Maximus The Confessor (d. 662), the great defender of their orthodoxy, who was, by far, the most significant person in spreading the writings in the West and in the East. During the Lateran Council of 649 the latter contributed to the conformity of the Corpus with the orthodox teaching of the Church by explanation for the activity of the God-man (θεανδρική ἐνέργεια). Since that time, our author gained general acceptance in both the Western and Eastern theological traditions.⁹ The Dionysian writing's early Syrian translations were made by Sergius of Reshaina (d. 538) and Phocas (c. 7th/8th). Later translations and commentaries followed.¹⁰ The first translation into Latin in its entirety was made in the 9th century by Abbot Hilduin.¹¹ Another, much more readable, was done by John Scot Eriugena (852), with the author's commentaries and also Maximus'. The Dionysian doctrine exercised enormous influence on theological and philosophical speculations of Church writers throughout the centuries since the appearance of the writings (Riordan 2008: 55). Its impact on the mystical tradition of the medieval West was profound. The considerable effect lasted approximately until the times of renaissance, when questions about their authenticity were revived.

DISMANTLING THE TRADITION

The abovementioned tradition was opened to doubts as far back as Middle Ages by Peter Abelard (1079-1142) who questioned the theory that the martyr of Paris was the *Corpus Dionysiacum* author. By and large scholars from the time of the Renaissance onwards seriously raised the ancient doubts about the writing's dating from the first century. The first was Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) in his work entitled *Collatio Novi*

⁹ On the influence of the Dionysian Writings see for example: Riordan 2008: 54-70.

¹⁰ E.g. translations into Armenian and Arabic. Cf. Sherwood 1957: 296-297.

¹¹ The translation is available in Théry 1932.

Testamenti and later, in the beginning of 16th century, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) began raising questions as to whether the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* was Dionysius known from the Acts of the Apostles. However, since Jean Daillé (1594-1670) noticed that there was no mention of *Corpus Dionysiacum* before the beginning of 6th century, the question about its authenticity started to be really problematic (Daillé 1666). As a result, the interest in the writings declined, but not for long. Johann Georg Veit Engelhardt was the first who proved the dependence of *Corpus* on the Neoplatonism of 5th century (Engelhardt 1820). F. Creuzer pointed out the great significance of Platonist *Alcibiades* for the writings (Creuzer 1822). A later analysis (L. Montet 1848; E. Vacherot 1851) strengthened the belief that the Christian theology of *Corpus* had been absorbed by Neoplatonism. However, the great turning point in the question of authenticity were the findings of two German scholars, Hugo Koch and Joseph Stilgmayer. Their research into Dionysian materials, that was conducted by each independently, showed beyond any reasonable doubt its connections with the writings of Proclus. However, they passed over every originality of the corpus in silence.¹²

The consequence of their findings was that some scholars resumed the attempts to solve the problem as to who exactly he was. The investigation into that issue pointed out about twenty two possible personas spread over the period of around two hundred and twenty years.¹³ However, the interest in Pseudo-Dionysian writings, as the time of disappointment wore on, could not lapse for long, and then even increased (Louth 2001: 2). A. Louth, who has written on Pseudo-Dionysius, sketched out the problem in a neat way: *Denys veiled himself in the folds of lightly-worn pseudonymity. The curiosity of modern scholarship has stripped off from him the veil he chose to wear, but has hardly come much closer to discovering his own true identity* (Louth 2001: 2). Even the general agreement that the author of *Corpus Dionysiacum* lived towards the end

¹² Stilgmayer analysed connections between CD and the writings of Proclus in the issue of evil, while Koch proved dependence of the fourth chapter of *The Divine Names* on *De malorum subsistentia* of Proclus. Main works: Koch 1895: 438-454; Stilgmayer 1895: 253-273; 721-748; Stilgmayer 1894: 3-96.

¹³ The full list of the proposed persons you can find in Hathaway 1969. See also: Manikowski 2006: 42-43.

of the 5th century AD – gains very little. First, because the author is situated in the obscure period of the Church’s history, and like Louth writes *is little known and much misunderstood – the ideal hiding-place for one such as our author* (Louth 2001: 2). There are some particular details that seem to place him firmly at that time and in this world.¹⁴ In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* he considers something as singing of the Creed in the middle of liturgy. If the term which occurs at that place, precisely the *hymnologia* (ὑμνολογία) really means the Creed introduced into liturgy by Peter the Fuller at Antioch, probably in 476, then this confirms our conjectures (EH III7 436C-D). The other detail concerns the notion of *theuria* (θεουργία), frequently used in the writings and strongly connected with the Neoplatonic philosophy.

From then on the focus of scholars’ attention became the question about the Neoplatonic influences on the Corpus, the role of Paul’s speech, and the pseudonymous identity of the author.

THE TRADITION REVISITED

First and foremost, the question was put to the modern scholars concerning the extent of undeniable Neoplatonic influences on Dionysian materials in relation to the late antique Eastern Christianity. When it became obvious that the philosophical vision of Pseudo-Dionysius was in deep sympathy with Neoplatonist view of Proclus, many tried to investigate these relations. The dilemma during the following centuries, in which the scholars were put, was if the author could be counted as a Christian theologian or as just a Neoplatonist. However, most of contemporary scholars agree with the Christian roots of his doctrine, even though influenced by Platonism. One of them, W. Beierwaltes, in his book on that issue, entitled *Platonismus in Christentum*, quoted the expression of Marsilio Ficino – *Platonicus primo ac deinde Christianus* – but he shifted the emphasis – *Dionysius: Christianus simulatque vere Platonicus* (Beierwaltes

¹⁴ See on Creed: Manikowski 2006: 38-39; Louth 2001: 14; on theurgy: Manikowski 2006: 39-41; Stepień 2010: 34-37.

2003: 76). He meant that the synthesis was made in complete agreement with the author's Christian faith, because the intentions of both Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius were different. For the abovementioned scholar, A. Louth, Pseudo-Dionysius became the Athenian convert who *stands at the point where Christ and Plato meet* (Louth 2001: 11). The author's pseudonym is suggestive of expressing his conviction that *the truths that Plato grasped belong to Christ, and are not abandoned by embracing faith in Christ* (Louth 2001: 11). Dionysius, as the first of Paul's converts in Athens, refers to Plato in Athens, to his philosophy, and to the founded Academy. When Sulla had captured Athens in 86 BC this place became the sign of the Plato's philosophy past glory (Cicero, *De finibus*, V 1, 1-2; Reale 1999: 326-328). However, at the turn of the 5th and 6th centuries the school had been reorganized again by Plutarch of Athens, and remained there until the Emperor Justinian closed it in 529. For much of the fifth century the heads of the Academy were great philosophers, among whose from c. 476 the successor (*diadochus*) of Plato was Proclus. Undoubtedly, Pseudo-Dionysius would have frequented his lectures. At that time the students of Academy came from widely varied backgrounds. The introduction to Proclus' lectures on Plato would have been two-year studies on Aristotle. But the scholars could also see in the *Corpus Dionysiicum* some influences of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers (Riordan 2008: 27).

The next question was raised about the meaning of the pseudonym. By and large, many scholars tended to interpret its sense as *either to win a wider readership for Corpus Dionysiicum or to safeguard the author from the censorship and persecution in the age of anxious orthodoxies* (Stang 2009: 11). On the whole, we can see very few scholars regarding the pseudonym and the corresponding influence of Paul's speech on the Athenian Areopagus in 50 AD *as at all relevant, never mind crucial, to a proper understanding of this author and his perplexing corpus* (Stang 2009: 11). The Athenian Areopagus could stand as the sign of the first confrontation between Christianity and pagan philosophy, and as a model of their relations. Books of two contemporary scholars have been published recently filling that gap, one in Poland by Fr. T. Stepień, *Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – Christian and Platonist. Polemical Aspects of the*

Corpus Dionysiacum Within the Context of St. Paul's Discourse at the Areopagus (17, 22-31), and another in the United States by Ch. M. Stang, *Apophysis and pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No longer I"* (Stang 2012).¹⁵

Finally, the most interesting issue in the discussions of modern scholars is a recent attempt to see the Dionysian pseudonym as a sort of his mystical theology. H. U. von Balthasar noticed that behind St. Thomas' words placed in his commentary: *hanc autem positionem (Proculi) corrigi Dionysius* (Thomas de Aquino, *Super librum De causis expositio*, I 3) is concealed full consciousness of Dionysius' way of references, his "mystical relationship" between himself and the times of Apostles (Balthasar 1995: 151). By that he means "new vantage point" (Riordan 2008: 30), the specific task "as the context for his veracity" (Balthasar 1995: 149). This leads him to the conclusion that talking about the author by using "pseudo-" puts him improperly in pejorative connotations associated with pseudonymity (Stang 2012: 37). And so he refused the standard scholarly prefix. Von Balthasar writes:

On the level that is, of the specifically Dionysian humility and mysticism which must and will utterly vanish as a person so that it lives purely as the divine task and lets the person be absorbed (as in the Dionysian hierarchies) in »taxis« and function, so that in this way the divine light, through ecclesially transmitted, is received and passed on as immediately (a)me/swv) and transparently as possible? (Balthasar 1995: 148).

Ch. M. Stang has noticed von Balthasar was the first who suggested that *pseudonymity is somehow integral to mystical enterprise of the Corpus Dionysiacum* (Stang 2012: 39). Continuing this way of thinking, Stang made an attempt to explain the Dionysian philosophy in terms of "apophatic anthropology", the peculiar understanding of the mystical theology.¹⁶ On the one hand he is inspired by the passage of the

¹⁵ The book is based on Ch. M. Stang's doctoral thesis of 2008: *"No longer I": Paul, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the Apophysis of the Self* (Stang 2008). The thesis is cited in Stang 2009: 11-25

¹⁶ Stang borrows the expression from Bernard McGinn and Denys Turner, who used it to describe the human self's union with the divine in some prominent Dionysian descendants: John Scottus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross (Stang 2012: 153).

Acts (17, 23), on the other by Hadot's notion of philosophy as a "spiritual exercise"¹⁷ (Stang 2012: 155). This approach insists upon the primary program of "*spiritual exercises*" whose aim is to reconstitute the self (Stang 2012: 155). Therefore, Stang aims to present the Dionysian philosophy in terms of the self "unknowing" – the one who is united to the "unknown God".

Pseudo-Dionysius assumes fourfold theological ways or methods of knowing God. There are four steps on the ladder of soul's ascent: symbolic, affirmative (cataphatic), negative (apophatic), and superlative (mystical). According to the symbolic theology, God is known in every contact and sensation. God is known in all being, because all creatures are His "analogous": *it is, therefore, analogically that we know God* (Riordan 2008: 183). The soul, in turn, has to ascend from the senses to intelligible names through which she knows God. The affirmative method turns to negative (apophatic) according to the twofold Neoplatonic movement (*proodos*, πρόοδος – *epistrophe*, ἐπιστροφή). The apophasis has to be applied not only to theological discourse about God during the affirmation and negation of the divine names, but also engages the whole human self. *Dionysius insists that there exists a rarefied state of "unknowing" (ἀγνωσία) – not ignorance, but a sort of hyper-knowledge* (Stang 2009: 15). He stresses God's ultimately "unknown" or "unknowable" quality. *We suffer this "unknowing", when we solicit the descent of the unknown God through contemplative practice* (Stang 2009: 15). That takes place when the self is progressively unsaid, becomes unknown, and suffers *an absolute abandonment of [oneself] and everything, shedding all and freed from all* (MT II 1000A) – in short: "cleared away" (from a0faire/w) (Stang 2012: 159-160). This way of negation is a sort of asceticism (what means: freeing the self), such a transformation of the human self to be able to pursue union with the "unknown God". This effort figures in the *Mystical Theology* as a liturgical event (MT II 997B-1000A; Stang 2012: 158). The changeable power of that best solicit

¹⁷ The title of Hadot's book is: *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Hadot 1987). Polish translation: *Filozofia jako ćwiczenie duchowe*, trans. P. Domański, Warszawa 2003.

union helps the human subject to conform to God beyond being. During this way of negation Dionysius draws the reader's attention to be concerned with the insoluble problems inherent in language: *according to Dionysius, then, making appropriate use of language – specifically the divine names – change the user* (Stang 2012: 156). The transformation of “the contemplative, ascetic subject” is itself in Hadot's words “spiritual exercise”, on which Stang's “apophatic anthropology” is based (Stang 2009: 16).

CONCLUSION

The following explanation of Dionysian pseudonym intended the existence of inseparable, complementary mystical paths of unknowing God and self. In fact, few scholars have noticed that writing under pseudonym could be something more than just an attempt to gain a sub-apostolic authority or wider readership. As we have noticed, Stang argues that *the twin practices of apophasis – of God and of self* (Stang 2012: 194) – is binding the whole *Corpus Dionysiacum* together. What is in fact a real *ecstatic devotional practice in the service of an apophatic anthropology, and thereby of soliciting deifying union with the unknown God* (Stang 2009: 11) should not be separate. However, after the crucial discovery of the pseudonymous identity of the author the scholars made attempts to interpret the writings in isolation from what the author said and what did not say about himself. What remained for them was Dionysius' clear debt to late Neoplatonism. As we have seen, the research on Dionysian author had led scholars during centuries from negation to affirmation of the pseudonymous authorship as the integral task of understanding the treatises' content. Who knows if the primal broad reception, given by medieval philosophers, did not comprise much more wisdom than we expected. After all, what we could conclude from the findings of scholars is our better understanding of integral mystic associations with the author and his writings – the thing was perhaps unattainable without these historical vicissitudes of *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

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