

**"LUCIAN BLAGA" UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU
FACULTY OF THEOLOGY "ANDREI ŞAGUNA"**

Ph.D. THESIS SUMMARY

**Saint Dionysius the Areopagite
in the Twentieth Century Theological and Philosophical
Debate**

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Ph.D. THESIS SUMMARY

Saint Dionysius the Areopagite in 20th Century Theological and Philosophical Debate

The doctoral thesis entitled "Saint Dionysius the Areopagite in 20th Century Theological and Philosophical Debate" is developed within the PhD School of "Andrei Șaguna" Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Sibiu, under the guidance of Arhid. Prof. Ioan I. Ică jr. Ph.D.

The thesis contains an introduction, four chapters and conclusions and it is mainly developed with the aid of and foreign bibliography, exploited with studies in the country, and abroad, too, during bursary time periods.

For the elaboration of this thesis, I consulted a methodology which frames the study into two parts: in the first part I cover the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, being necessary for the elucidation of the general European context in which the major changes of theology and philosophy took place, in this background the writings that form the Corpus Dionysiacum drew again the attention of the theologs, but the character of the confidential author behind them, too. In the second part I realise an analysis of the newly created scenery after the patristic rebirth, of the French phenomenology linguistic tournament but after the linguistic tournament shaped towards the end of the 20th century, too.

In a broad Introduction I try to intercept the scenery in which the new movement began to shape. Beginning with the 19th century, the conception of mankind and of the human changes, influenced by Kantianism, Hegel's Philosophy and Marxian Philosophy. The French revolution and the Cartesian thinking accompany a stage of man's development, joined by many beneficial scientific discoveries. Thus, I don't identify an original point of what we call metaphysics thinking or rational stereotype, neither for the dialectic theology, nor for faithlessness. Mankind's way expands by degrees in a certain direction, letting almost no place to transcendental, spiritual, poetic language, metaphors etc.

What is remarkable to highlight in this scenery is the man's change-over, in a double sense: on the one hand he embodies technique, imitates accuracy, violence and the coldness of the fascinating better and better shaped physicochemical systems, and on the other hand he finds a hiding in rationalist thinking, in exact patterns of thinking, in causality relationships in which he sees himself caught to bear away any sin, sacrament or divine idea, all these causing disturbance. The scientific thinking and ideas reception denote a different man at the beginning of the 20th century. This one will be capable of provoking history and of facing any antecedent in his behaviour, driving human act into nowhere.

At the beginning I emphasize the obvious fact that nowadays, willing or not, people destroy the human judgment and inculcates upon an artificial feeling, "suitable" to man's desires. The human behaviour becomes a vulnerable one because of the rightness and uprightness he is caught into, due to many centuries of constraint and prorating, having a technical or metaphysical origin.

This is the background where a surprising but extremely beneficial fact appears to answer the created questions, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, the preserved work of Dionysius the Areopagite, the mystic author of the 5th and 6th centuries, who had a great influence in the past of the universal theological thinking. Not by mistake, Dionysius is the one that places him in the background of some extremely important works. His theology contains, as central point, the encounter between those times' philosophy and theology, and the author is but a product of the environment, one that has lectured the writs, the Forerunner Fathers and the contemporary Neo-platonic philosophy. The contemporary discussions settle right on the ground of this particularity of the Dionysian production, and they recapture here a paradigm of the dialogue and a pattern of possible result.

Thus, in Introduction, I shape a state of things in which discussions having language as essential, turn up, meaning theological and philosophical language and their legitimacy. Since the metaphysics that began with Plato or Aristotle had a solid tradition, which the closing of Athenian School, by Emperor Justinian couldn't stop, immortalizing in philosophical writings of all ages, theology didn't remain untouched either by a disequilibrium that fudged its essence. This last one becomes influenced by philosophy, and by fallacy, amply present in the first Christian centuries. In other words, the writer of the 20th century is placed in front of a dilemma due to the nature of thinking, of the writer, of the word, of the formulating definition. The work of Saint Dionysius appears here to clearly expose his problem, which now appears again, and its own way solving.

As Martin Heidegger states in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, there used to be a period before Plato or Aristotle when people used to think differently, the sense of philosophical terms was fundamentally another one. He ends up his work showing that the question about humans is strongly bounded to the question "Who is the man?"¹, and this is the start to a necessary waiting "for a life time, if it is necessary"², however in a "strange to reality" age in which "a real thing is only that which can be grasped with both hands"³. At this level, the question is whether Heidegger, the human's philosopher opens himself to reality or not, what is the immediate necessity, and that is the spiritual one. So, he places next to philosophers which develop new ways, like Husserl, Nietzsche contemporary philosophers, too. This is the situation of philosophy, considering that it contributes through the new manner of self-questioning to letting place to transcendental and to human's necessary spirit.

Theology gloats over the presence of some personalities like Stăniloae, Florovsky, Yannaras in the oriental space and in the occidental place we have the protagonists of the spiritual and patristic renaissance different from the imposed hardness and stereotypes, like van Balthasar, de Lubac and Danielou and the Dionysian Rocques, Lossky. The described scenery sets down to Marin's appearance. Manousakis, Hart and Golitzin follow with a clear discernment of the whole existent Dionysian phenomenon, this time at a world level.

The neo-patristic thinking is prepared to undertake the theological schools' mistakes. At the moment the discussion about theology and the legitimacy of discourse hides questions that refer to divine, love, ethic, beauty, surreal. But, having these discussions as background appears the one that realised these themes very well and synthetically displayed them in an absolute way liturgically holistic: Dionysius the Areopagite. Between Christian discourse and philosophical discourse, echoes, but in a synthesis a work which gives a summary account of both modes of being: the rational and the over-rational, spiritual.

In introduction I try to discern the imperative emerged both from Dionysian writing and from the existing criticism on it, too: a phenomenological reading of spirituality, to the extent that it meant over coming classical phenomenology and borrowing new manner of letting new phenomenon speak alone, from leaving icon to watch, to letting the gift to perform.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Introducere în metafizică*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2011, p. 283.

² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

³ *Ibid.*

Amid these disputes between theology and philosophy, having a metaphysical age, in Chapter 1 I propose the idea of "non-setting", found in the title of this part of the study. Considering that philosophical thinking specifically of the threshold of the nineteenth and twentieth century, namely the "death of God" I debate in the backside the origin of grand change phenomenon which is discussed in the background of this work. The interpretation of this "incident" described by Nietzsche, often misunderstood by his readers, brings us into the very heart of the matter: the human situation in the world out angles its location at the edge of it. Placing and human receiving means the desire to grab everything with reason, by covering the incomprehensible and dominating not only the Earth but its Creator, too.

Everything arises due to question and answer, namely, due to their desire. Due to question and desire behind it, but due to the interest on the response, too in other words, due to the occurrence of definition a behaviour arises which closes spiritual possibilities of the human person. By theorizing question and answer it does not mean the simple manifestation of a dialectic, but the need for definition and hence for location, for settlement, for holding, for having control. Another key term is the motivation, one that captures the human person in the middle of a deployment of own forces without taking into account aprioristic good or bad, what is "right" with its stature. Forces held as "will to power" do nothing but lead to a possible cooling of its whole spiritual force.

"Theology has betrayed itself trying to become scientific" says Andrew Louth.⁴ The desire to own something theologically, to ask questions and give answers is in the same unsuitable location to its nature. Discussing the nature of theology the cited author explains this problem of its dropping and pilgrimage on the road of science and of pleasure to define through concepts. But the edifice of theology is given precisely by the Gospel and Scripture, without adding anything, as Dionysius himself says⁵. It just has to be defended, and therefore the theological discourse appears, but it must be impregnated with a liturgical holistic thinking, which alone can protect against definitions, as we can see in *Corpus Dionysiacum*'s author. From here we come to talk about a liturgical and ecclesial experience imperative. I propose and integrate into question such terms as place, dwelling, staying and non-placing, trying to reason that imperative. If seemingly it creates an antinomy juxtaposing living and staying with non

⁴ Andrew Louth, *Deslușirea Tainei. Despre natura teologiei*, Deisis. Sibiu, 1999, p. 205-206.

⁵ *Divine Names* I, 2.

location, in the background I talk about liturgical living portrayed and proposed in the event of the Church and that of Pentecost in Mass event.

Only an impregnated liturgical theology can answer to the challenge of modern world, where everything is liturgically explained and combined. Trying answers in a dialectic manner does not lead to any suitable construction phenomenologically appearing in the Scriptures, in the Saviour's life and His miracles. When trying to find truths one should consider removing from oblivion, the Greek original ἀλήθεια, meaning to recognize - if it's forgotten - that was one known, but is forgotten. The taken record time, entered into obscurity was not the definition-evidence searched today, but it was not detained (being given the prospect of the concept⁶ and the change in its meaning) and allowed to occur in the left free event, in its manifestation.

We thus introduce with the first chapter approaches the landscape of a newly perspective which opens after finding historical situation, but also the structures of reached thought. During manner of doing theology showed as well as it could a close connection between a possible understanding of its nature and results of speech, which directly affected the ability to do theology, with all the implications of this thing. Revelation, spirituality, praise are those whose possibility opens after new discussed and planned developments, the new writings of the late twentieth century and the beginning of 21st century. Two notions are critical to the argument of exactly what exceeding concept means: the "experience of the Sacrament" and the "speech of praise". Both are as synthesizers, as renewing, so the overtaking that both offer showing that, they not only provide a summary and a closing of what was said, but in a totally new way and reiterating an authentic-mystical spirituality of the parents, exceeding the idea of "way" and the one of "saying", the "way" now attracting revelation, and "saying", "praise". They do not think in isolation, but together because mystery causes speech and it causes praise, or otherwise, mystery incites the desire of "catching", but it permanently escapes through fingers, because otherwise it wouldn't be what is: the Sacrament.

Dionysius takes part behind crossing phenomenon of modernity to post modernity and beyond, by his plea in relation to discourse, word and, why not, with understanding. Since for centuries theology was built at different times by fragments of its writings, this time the

⁶ The discussion on the term *capax* is well elaborated by Jean-Luc Marion in "*De la divinisation à la domination : Étude sur la sémantique de capable/capax chez Descartes*", in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, volume 73, nr. 18/1975, pp. 263-293.

possibility to feed with Dionysian accents to argue its own ideas, it comes into question whether taken to.

If we speak about a theological tournament of French phenomenology we mention it in a necessary and obvious connection of philosophy and theology, which is in the first role of Areopagitic writings; if we talk about a linguistic tournament and about protagonists who made an analysis of the word and meaning, Dionysius was the who first realized it as well as he could. "Philosophy has no authority or power to say more, but it leaves the right to appeal to theologs. They must cease to will reduce external data of Revelation objective models, more or less exactly repeated by human sciences"⁷ So, the data of the problem are ambivalently observed by the French philosopher.

The simplicity of Christian Dionysian "society" is matched to the world and thinking complexity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where the hierarchies dynamic divine hides behind silence of divine, whose footprint carries. The possibility that opens, through analyzed unrests and mainly by the so-called "event" "the death of God" can be set in Dionysian clichés and their way of understanding life, creation and the divine.

In the second chapter I realize a not very exhaustive surprising of the era landscape in which the mysterious author writes his corpus. I refer to both the author's framing his time - just this framing managing to identify itself in the era writings' appearance - and the influence of sustained, transparent work.

Research done on this "mysterious author", as it is called by many revealed a possible dating of writings, the late 5th century - the beginning of the 6th century. Moreover, he can be a Syrian monk, or, more recently he is identified with a monk in Thrace⁸. His identification was more than making a simple insight on the origins and real name of the author and reveals other extremely important things in researching his work, its contents. Charles M. Stang, sees in his "No Longer Y. Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite"⁹, the very secret key of work-disclosure. Following the words of St. Paul to the Galatians in the second chapter of the epistle sent to them, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me", Dionysius give a free place instead of signing his work, hiding under the name of Dionysius, the convert from Areopagus of Athens,

⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *În plus. Studii asupra fenomenelor saturate*, p. 66.

⁸ P. Tzamalikos, *A Newly Discovered Greek Father. Cassian the Sabaite Eclipsed by John Cassian of Marseilles*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2012, pp.716.

⁹ Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, 236 p.

a name known and awarded by his friends. His conversion, as one who had probably been the Neo-platonic philosophers, because he knew very well their teaching, especially those taught by Proclus or Iamblichus, shows once again the accomplished work of St. Paul, this time in his person. What Dionysius fully succeeds is a triple suppression: that of the space, because it doesn't belong to his era, the one of time because he is contemporary to the beginnings of Christianity and that of his person, which was left to dress the monastic, remaining far away from the world. This triple suppression is what he wants to show through his work, a liturgical-mystical initiative, challenging for anyone who wants to "live" through his work. The suppressing of word, speech, description and of naming follows after these suppressions, leaving room for the mystical contemplation where ecstasy is not of "the single by the single", but a sacramental liturgical and ecclesial one.

In this chapter I talk again about the influences suffered by Dionysius, and those he had on posteriority, too. The problem of the schools made on his work is already known and attributed to Maximus the Confessor, but which actually belongs to John of Scythopolis. His influence, both in eastern and western part determined his work to be much appreciated and useful in many controversies. But what we want to emphasize is precisely why his work has gained such importance. His composition from a holistically-mystagogical plan and combining theology with philosophy, and supporting an assiduously questioning of the terms, names, and of the language itself, gave the work prestige and raised it to the level of the reference point many areas of thought and for many authors. In the contemporary period Dionysius it appears as a reference for clarification of disputes, supported by the monophysites, and in the 14th century, decisive for Orthodox theology, Dionysius is testified by Gregory Palamas to justify his theology.

At this level of research I just mention only the first impact of his work, although it extends throughout the whole mentioned period. The impact to the patristic revival in the twentieth century, but also by increasing interest for his person in Western Europe is caught separately, being decisive in the argumentation of this thesis, the presence of Dionysius in the background of an entire renewal movement.

The third chapter, "Theology and Phenomenology – perspective" represents the central part of the paper and contains five smaller chapters that want to capture the following: Dionysius's presence in twentieth century theology, that is a foray into the work of Vladimir

Lossky and works of other authors, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, but a surprising of his in Romanian theology, particularly in the works of Nichifor Crainic, and priest Dumitru Stăniloae's research, too; I capture the phenomenology of Husserl road and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Derrida showing the background transformation of philosophy and creating a new environment where they can formulate different questions; Jean-Luc Marion will appear as the one who has used Dionysian work in philosophical space and placed it among the key works since 1977, to better overcome both the idols and metaphysics; Michel Henry and Emmanuel Levinas are considered to be gone beyond philosophy, although they are from different backgrounds: Henry as the one that surprised the severity of life and its whole disorder in the situation of new human behaviour in which life is a phenomenon and Levinas is the one who referred to "beyond" God, tout autre and to a place beyond essence, arguing pure transcendent; protagonists of this movement will be in the American space, but not only there, John Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, Richard Kearney and JP Manousakis, but DB Hart, too, who still say more about what is new and the possibility of understanding the new world.

In the central plane of this chapter, but also throughout the whole Dionysius capture study in contemporary thinking, Jean-Luc Marion appears as outstanding and reference authority to figure today - as Dionysius gave his time - meeting philosophy with theology. Since *L'Idole et la distance* (1977), dedicated to Dionysius he captures the event represented by this author the opportunity presented to him: to talk differently about God. Following von Balthasar, Marion makes a plea for the renewal of concepts related to concept and discourse. He proposes overcoming metaphysics idols and overcoming the "death of God" moment, symptom of the death of the man who created a "God" in quotation marks. In the same paper he shows and exemplifies with names of the world culture history, Nietzsche and Hölderlin, how a concept must be overcome and left room for the divine manifestation in Christ to be revealed. "The speech of praise" is the solution proposed by Marion at this stage of his detour through the history of culture; his work is imbued in future studies about Descartes, but about how could phenomenology realize a found theology that got beyond idols. He will elaborate more phenomenology expected by the readership: a phenomenology of gift and donation, a phenomenology of the visible and the Cross, a phenomenology of Eros. He will bring into question the saturated phenomenon, the primacy of the intuition on concept, and more recently,

the negative certainty, bringing a final assault to the positive certainties' privilege and closing the world that they proposed.

Jean-Yves Lacoste will speak phenomenological manner, too, but bringing a rich intake to liturgical experience, making a theological phenomenology of time talking about the phenomenology of God and about a "liturgical phenomenology of human humanity".¹⁰ He thus shows how deep discussions that combine theology with philosophy may be, namely phenomenology, proposing a special attention to every theological detail that can be thought.

There is a not surprising fact anymore the consideration of such issues as mystical, transcendent, love, gift or divine in philosophical works of renowned authors. The studied bibliography in finding Dionysius's presence in contemporary thinking highlighted his quoting many times and appeal to his work when required recourse to authority theological. Although not fully accepted the theses of university authors when it comes to theology and its nature, they are taken into account because they all signal in the same sense, that of the recovery of a lost time, the delivery of a new discourse that escapes the old rigidity and clichés of traditional metaphysics.

Thus, this chapter brings the novelty of a passed threshold like a single phrase of the work of Marion. As the French philosophical theologian resorted to Dionysius in order to carry through an argument that involves overcoming "metaphysics marks" and idols, helped by the work of the a mystical author, in the background of this new found major change in the European and American space, one can find an excess and a return at the same time. If theological turn of French phenomenology betrayed the expectations of many theologs or philosophers limited in traditional bibliographies asking for biblical and liturgical theology if linguistic turn supports the writing word boundaries instead leaving its sense and intuition, theology, in the same way, is built in a new plan, the retrieval of its nature, of the discourse and of the only possibility, described by Dionysius in his work's substrate.

The fourth chapter argues that only exceeded concepts are not enough to replace a discourse with another one, but, according to Dionysius, the overcome of any speech is necessary. This does not mean the lack of it, but the very transforming of its essential, his way of being and being used.

¹⁰ Jean Yves Lacoste: *Timpul – o fenomenologie teologică*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2005, *Experiență și absolut. Pentru o fenomenologie liturgică a umanității omului*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, *Fenomenalitatea lui Dumnezeu*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2011.

We appeal to both Dionysius, and to Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida, as some who have debated the meaning and possibility of words to express a speaker's intention. We can see in Dionysius a clear intention to limit the language; a return of the meaning of language by Dionysius: language against language, voice, as Derrida would say, against the language. Language refers to name, the divine name in particular because the weight of speaking and speech starts here: "If what is above every word and every note and is generally placed above every mind and every being keeps them connected and gathered and precedes them all, it is itself altogether boundless and there's no feeling of it, no idea, no opinion, no name, no word, no touch, no science, as we form this divine study about Godly names, once the deity showed unnamed deity and above appointments."¹¹ If you need to cross a road to the divine names and encounter the divine itself, this is impossible, because the name does nothing but denote, it doesn't bring closer, but produces a distance over which it receives just coming and not he who comes: "As for Dionysius [...] the theolog himself insists that his appointment keep God out of any proper name, without falling into the presence: «God is known in all things and beyond all things, and ignorance, too. [...] And the most divine knowledge of God is the one who knows Him through ignorance»".¹² The most common experience in humans, the one of pronouncing the name and the reception of a person, object by that name, following the signified-signifier correspondence changes to divine where pronunciation has the effect of calling in praise in order to receive something. Even if, in main part "the experience of surname - received or given - is never enough to fix in presence the essence of the individual, but only to always mark the fact that the latter one does not coincide, in principle, with its essence, or that his presence remains anonymous to the extent that the name is more present "¹³ The principle problem occurs, which means that when deciding the name, one receives nothing but the very object concerned. Metaphysics and "catching" theology in this game did the same thing when it pronounced the divine name, bringing to the fore and proposing as satisfactory an idol, or a "God" placed in quotation marks.

The conclusions emerging from the undertaken study shape the two phases of the study, and its dual intention behind the research. On one side I drew a historical discussion, bringing into context the recurrence of Dionysius in discussions of the most important theological and

¹¹ *DN*, I, 5.

¹² Jean-Luc Marion, *În plus...*, p. 172, quote from *DN*, VII, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

philosophical writing authors of the twentieth century, and the achieved impact in different backgrounds and ages. On the other hand, I have structured an analysis of what may be the presence of a mystical author in contemporary thinking, what symptom does this represent and possible direct results on understanding the nature of theology and discourse. The practical intention of the research addresses the requirement to have a theology whose nature is suitable with the Scriptures from which it springs, whose speech is not delivered in a laudatory manner and whose stake is the unfathomable mystery of the divine which it proclaims and liturgical permanent awaits.

The most important conclusion that can be extracted at the end of this approach is that Dionysius the Areopagite returns in theological actuality and contemporary philosophical, too, as one of the most important patristic authors for his credit of being integrated into a single whole universe, creation seen and unseen, heaven and earth, angels and men in a structured dynamic actually living in Holy Mass with Christ, the one who one can not say many words about, and is only glorified in the midst of it is truly Eucharistic assembly, where he is substantially, but mysteriously present.