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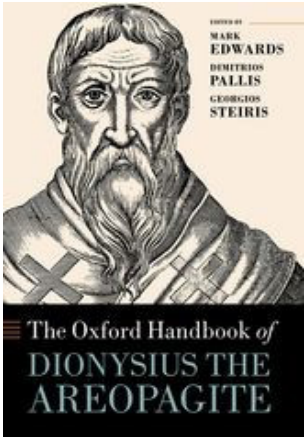
Book Review:

EDWARDS Mark, PALLIS Dimitrios and STEIRIS Georgios (eds.), *The Orthodox Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, (xiii + 737 pages), ISBN 978-0-19-881079-7



There have been a number of sustained efforts in the last decades by researchers to decipher the identity of the author of the Dionysian Corpus (*CD*), to determine the purpose of his writings and to evaluate the impact he had on Christian philosophy, theology, art and literature, politics and so on. Recent collective volumes from symposia,[1] articles in dictionaries and encyclopedias, [2] and books have proposed new avenues of research or updated what is known on this subject, reinvigorating debate and interest in this field.[3]

[1] Tzotcho BOIADJIEV, Georgi KAPRIEV, Andreas SPEER (eds.), *Die Dionysius-Rezeption im Mittelalter Internationales Kolloquium in Sofia vom 8. bis 11. April 1999*, col. "Encounters of Medieval Philosophy", 9, Turnhout: Brepols, 2000; Georgi KAPRIEV (ed.), *The Dionysian Traditions. 24th Annual Colloquium of the S.I.E.P.M., September 9-11, 2019, Varna, Bulgaria*, col. "Encounters of Medieval Philosophy", 23, Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. It is also worth mentioning here Andrei A. ORLOV (ed.), *Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism. Studies in Honor of Alexander Golitzin*, col. "Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae", 160, Leiden: Brill, 2020.

[2] Ken PARRY (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015.

[3] Alexander GOLITZIN, *Et introibo ad altare Dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita with special reference to its predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition*, Thessaloniki: Πατριαρχικόν Ίδρυμα Πατερικών Μελετών, 1994; Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI, *Dietro "Dionigi l'Areopagita". La genesi e gli scopi del Corpus Dionysiacum*, Roma: Città Nuova, 2018; Vladimir KHARLAMOV, *The Authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus: A Deliberate Forgery or Clever Literary Ploy?*, London: Routledge, 2020.

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The *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* fulfils a considerable gap in scholarly research. This project originated from a workshop held in Oxford.[4] The volume editors, however, have created a more complex working tool for the study of the "Dionysian universe", which includes many more contributions on various aspects of the *CD*'s antecedents, content, and reception.

The studies in this volume begin with the historical conjuncture and the precedents of the *CD* and give to the readers the necessary knowledge about the *CD* itself. While different points of view are seen in the volume, careful ordering of the papers by the editors ensures continuity. The editors also made the creative editorial decision to allow for a wide range of perspectives, dialogue, and occasionally debate between the participants in the project, as is reflected more or less in every section of the volume.

Following the editors' introduction, there are four lengthy sections in the volume, each of them containing between nine and eleven chapters. These sections deal with the background and content of the *CD*, its influence in the Latin West, in the Greek and oriental East, and also in modern thought. The editors' decision to use the name "Dionysius the Areopagite" in the title of the volume without the prefix "pseudo-" is justified for at least four reasons: the first reason was suggested in 1993 by the respected theologian and translator of the *CD* into Romanian, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, who argued that this is a form of respect for the author's own choice of name; the second reason is the lack of any work written by the disciple of St. Paul; the third reason is to recognize the merit of the person who was able to produce the *CD*, which is of relevance to subsequent Christian thought and was often received in a favorable manner; the fourth reason is the need to minimize suspicion regarding the author of the *CD*, which is implied by the prefix "pseudo-".

Section I of the volume serves to initiate the reader into the historical and cultural framework in which the *CD* is believed to have originated. The content of the treatises and letters of the *CD* are presented in detail and attention is also given to the biblical, patristic, and philosophical sources that were used by Dionysius.

In the first chapter B.R. Suchla presents the "intangible" structure of the *CD*, outlining the conclusions of her research into a large number of manuscripts. On the one hand, she shows how widespread the *CD* was and, on the other hand, gives us information about the chronology of the possible archetype of the *CD*. Suchla also argues that the author of the *CD* might have lived in Caesarea Maritima due to his obscure language, his description of an Antiochian rite, and the rich sources he used.

[4] Deirdre CARABINE and Dimitrios PALLIS, "Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum: Ancient and Modern Readers", *Sobornost*, 38:2 (2016), 61-67.

T. Riggs' chapter "Content of the Dionysian Corpus" begins with a question relating to the philosophical character of the *CD*. Riggs seems to leave that open to discussion, but his general view is that Dionysius was versed in Neoplatonic philosophy and used it to discuss the divine revelation of Christianity. This choice could have its origins in his conviction that the salvation of humanity can be achieved through Christ's imitation and life, which is not in contradiction with the inner and cosmic order of Proclean thought.

M. Constas invites the readers in his chapter ("Dionysius the Areopagite and the New Testament") to a novel reading, which pays attention to the biblical side of the *CD*. Constas concludes that in many respects the *CD* develops themes rooted in the heritage of St. Paul, which is a fact not stressed by much of last century's research.

M. Edwards offers us a historical study in "Christian Apophaticism before Dionysius", which does not overlook the role of the Platonic tradition for Christian thought. He shows that apophaticism was not a concept uncommon to the Jewish and Christian literature before Dionysius and that, even if Dionysius relied on Neoplatonism, he developed this concept in a distinct way.

B. Bucur, in his study "Philo and Clement of Alexandria", moves a step forward to the Christian sources of Dionysius and argues that there are many other concepts shared between Dionysius and his Jewish and Christian predecessors. Bucur explores divine transcendence and immanence, the theology of the logos, the celestial hierarchy, the theme of theosis, and other concepts, showing that the *CD* is part of a long tradition in ancient literature.

I. Ramelli studies Dionysius' debt to Origen and Evagrius and stresses that Dionysius (like Origen) conflates Plato and Scripture, while still remaining a Christian Platonist or rather an "Origenian" author. Dionysius' "Origenian" heritage means that he followed Origen's exegetical methodology and system of thought (including "apokatastasis") and understood it as the true Christian philosophy. Further to this, Ramelli argues that Dionysius' thought needs to be separated from the "Origenistic" doctrines that were condemned by the Council of 553.

"Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa" is the title of M. Motia's chapter, which focuses on three Nyssean issues that became central for Dionysius the Areopagite: the concept of theological language, the role of God in human knowledge and the relationship between God and man. Motia discusses these aspects and clarifies that Gregory was an invaluable source for the author of the *CD*.

C.M. Stang points out in "Dionysius, Iamblichus, and Proclus" two major "borrowings" of Dionysius from Iamblichus of Chalcis and Proclus Diadochus. Dionysius borrows from Iamblichus the term "theurgy" and its cognates, but he redefines their meaning. The "divine work" comes to mean Christ's Incarnation and the texts and traditions that refer to the Incarnation. When Dionysius

borrows Proclus' language of "beyond being", his use is similar to that of the philosopher. Dionysius did little to conceal his debt to him, but that can be justified if the *CD* is seen as a summa of theology and philosophy.

"God in Dionysius and the later Neoplatonists" is the title of a chapter by M. Edwards and J. Dillon, which sheds new light on Dionysius' philosophical sources and their influence on his theology and philosophy. The study starts with the recognition that there is a clear dependence of the *CD* on Greek philosophy and there are no longer scholars who maintain the genuine content of the *CD*. Nevertheless, as a Christian author, Dionysius made an important shift and led that knowledge beyond its origins.

Section II of the handbook examines how the *CD* has been edited, translated, and received in the Syriac and Greek-speaking world between the sixth and fifteenth centuries.

E. Fiori's chapter "Dionysius the Areopagite in Syriac" surveys the philological and doctrinal features of the *CD's* first Syrian translation. He suggests that there might not be a strong divergence between the Syriac translation and the Greek text as we read it, and that the view of the translation as "Origenistic" should be treated with caution.

I. Perczel deals with a similar area but offers a different perspective from Fiori and Suchla. Perczel argues that the original Greek text of the *CD* differs from the text used for the first Syriac translation of the *CD*. He also argues that the translation was initially used by an esoteric group of followers of Origenism. After the colloquium of Constantinople in 532 and in the course of the second Origenist controversy, John of Scythopolis attempted to "de-Origenize" the *CD* and to align it with the Orthodoxy of the Council of Chalcedon.

B.R. Suchla examines the editorial work of John of Scythopolis and presents her philological research on John's commentary to the *CD*. Suchla notes the value of that commentary but also the presence of various other comments added by other authors. Of particular interest are her insights on how the comments by John and Maximus the Confessor shaped the subsequent reception of the *CD* in the Greek and Latin tradition.

M. Constas focuses on Maximus the Confessor and his reception of the *CD*. This chapter is supplementary to the previous one since it helps the readers understand that John and Maximus were distinct users of the *CD*, though often with similar views on the beliefs of Dionysius. Interestingly, Constas states that Maximus developed positions that he believed were already represented in the *CD* in a seminal form.

The next chapter by M. Edwards and D. Pallis deals with the reception of Dionysius in John of Damascus, examining both passages where Dionysius' name appears in John's writings and passages where the *CD* is used but

Dionysius is not mentioned. In this light, they offer a view of John as a "Dionysian" theologian and note how John mediated the theology of the *CD* both in the Greek East and the Latin West.

The next chapter by G. Arabatzis regards the use of the *CD* in the thought of Theodore the Studite and the second phase of Iconoclasm. Arabatzis explains how Theodore's reception of Dionysius and his iconophile plan differed from the iconoclastic theory of iconicity and divine transcendence. He outlines the role of Theodore's monastic milieu for the development of the Dionysian tradition in Byzantine theology and he argues that fuller understanding of that topic requires study of its philosophical background and mostly of the Platonic tradition.

A. Rigo's wide-ranging chapter demonstrates the considerable influence of the *CD* on later Byzantine theology. Rigo focuses on Nicetas Stethatos, Gregory the Sinaite, and Gregory Palamas, as well as on other authors, and argues that Dionysius' writings frequently shaped eastern Orthodox ascetical and dogmatic theology. The Dionysian influence is seen in the ascetical language and the interpretation of eastern Orthodox religious life.

T.T. Tollefsen's paper approaches Gregory Palamas' reading of the *CD* from a philosophical standpoint. Tollefsen argues that Palamas adapted Dionysius to his own purposes and compares Maximus and Palamas on the issue of the essence–energies distinction. His paper serves to show some paths that the Dionysian tradition followed in Byzantine theological thought.

The last chapter of this section, written by G. Steiris, focuses on the possible philosophical link between Pletho and Dionysius. According to Steiris, Dionysian influence needs to be identified not just in theology but also in other types of thought, including political philosophy in late Byzantium. Steiris argues that Pletho created a complex system of thought that had room for various philosophical ideas, including the heritage of the *CD*'s Christianized Platonic philosophy.

Section III of the volume contains various types of reception of the *CD* in the Latin religious tradition. It begins from the first translations into Latin and ends with the study of significant trends of the Renaissance era.

The first chapter of Section II, contributed by D. Carabine, deals with the work of John Scotus Eriugena as both translator and interpreter of the *CD* and focuses especially on his theology and epistemology. Carabine's approach also shows also some of the differences between Dionysius and Eriugena. This chapter deals with an author who played a key role in the later reception of the *CD* in Latin theology.

In the next chapter M. Edwards examines another translation of the *CD* into Latin by John Sarracenus and points out its role in the diffusion of the Dionysian tradition in the Latin West. An interesting aspect of Edwards' study is his remarks on this translation in comparison to that of Eriugena and on the historical role of John Sarracenus' translation.

D. Lawell's chapter examines Robert Grosseteste's work as a translator and interpreter of the *CD*. Lawell discusses various theoretical aspects of Grosseteste's work and some differences from earlier attempts to translate or interpret Dionysius by Latin theologians.

M. Tobon's chapter discusses the Latin appropriation of the *CD* in Bonaventure's theological work. Tobon's study contains the necessary information so that the reader can understand the Dionysian influence on Bonaventure. According to Tobon, Bonaventure used different types of sources and combined theological trends in his reception of Dionysius and that makes his work distinctive.

P. Rorem examines Hugh of St. Victor and his relationship with the Dionysian tradition. As Rorem argues, although Hugh prepared a commentary on the Dionysian celestial hierarchy that was remarkable for the Latin tradition, it seems that he did not make a similar or even any use of the *CD* in his other writings, and that is an aspect that needs to be studied carefully by scholars. Hugh connected Dionysius with other theological trends and enriched the Dionysian tradition.

The study on Hugh of St. Victor is followed by D. Lawell's examination of Thomas Gallus' reception of the *CD*. Thomas Gallus, in Lawell's reading, used many Dionysian texts and occasionally reshaped Dionysius' thought in his works. He used texts from the *CD* relating to angels, simplicity, and the knowledge of and union with the divine, but also other aspects.

W.J. Hankey provides a nuanced story of the *CD*'s reception in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, pointing out the complexities of the reception of Dionysius in that framework. According to Hankey, these men also used other sources in their readings of Dionysius and had a developing focus on the *CD* that influenced western thought and promoted the Christian Platonic tradition.

It would have been an omission if the volume did not contain a chapter on Dante's reception of the *CD.* That topic is covered by M. Edwards. The Italian poet was influenced by Dionysian elements, which were mediated to him by different Latin sources and in this way he further developed the Dionysian tradition.

Another interesting aspect of the Latin history of the *CD* is examined by P. Tyler, who studies the Carthusians and the so-called *Cloud of Unknowing*. As Tyler shows, both of these used the Latin translation of John Sarracenus and the affective interpretation of the *CD*; in this way, these diffused a particular type of Dionysian tradition towards various directions.

The volume also contains a chapter by T. Kobusch on Nicholas of Cusa's reception of Dionysius. Kobusch argues that there are three important doctrines in Nicholas of Cusa's work—the *Complicatio et explicatio*, the *Docta ignorantia* and the *Non aliud*—which can be interpreted against the backdrop of Dionysian thought. This chapter helps the reader to understand one more path of the Christian Platonic heritage in the Western Christian tradition.

M. Edwards is the contributor of one more chapter, this time in collaboration with M. Allen, which discusses the use of the *CD* by Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was a contemporary with humanists and referred to Dionysius as an ancient Christian man and forerunner of the Platonists. According to Edwards and Allen, Ficino had a plan to reconcile philosophical and Christian knowledge. The remarks in this chapter on the critical use of Greek philosophy by Ficino and his devotion to the Christian faith are useful for that to be understood.

Section IV, entitled "Dionysius after the Western European Reformation", traces the influence exerted by the *CD* on many trends of philosophy and theology in modern Europe.

This section begins with D. Robichaud's study, entitled "Valla and Erasmus on the Dionysian Question". This chapter examines historical aspects of the study of the Dionysian question and how the pseudonymity of the *CD* was shown and established by the humanists. It makes clear how the uses of the *CD* as a source changed from the medieval to the modern period.

Another interesting aspect of the modern reception of the *CD*, namely, Luther's approach to Dionysius and the Dionysian tradition, is studied by J. Zachhuber. Zachhuber makes clear that, despite Luther's rebuke of Dionysius, his stance was a reaction to some Catholic uses of Dionysius. He also presents evidence that some of Luther's writings reveal an interest in the mystical side of Dionysian thought.

Zachhuber complements this approach with a second chapter, where he deals with the reception of the *CD* in the later Lutheran tradition. He studies five German authors and points out different kinds of reception of the Dionysian tradition, arguing that, despite hostility to him in that tradition, Dionysius' heritage survived from the beginnings to the more recent stages of the Lutheran tradition.

In the following chapter, A. Louth surveys the reception of the *CD* in the English-speaking world. His survey begins from the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the use of the *CD* in English poetry and ends with readings of the *CD* in the early twentieth century. An interesting aspect of Louth's paper is his discussion of the modern English approach to mysticism as a cultural phenomenon.

The chapter by C. Schäfer, which examines the new stage for modern research paved by Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr, is a shift to the study of more recent reception. These two scholars demonstrated that Dionysius had copied Proclus' work and not the opposite. Despite the fact that their studies led to criticism of the author of the *CD*, this imagery has changed over the past decades and a friendlier view of this author and his use of philosophy has been promoted by many scholars.

Subsequently, in a study entitled "Three Theologians: Dean Inge, Vladimir Lossky, and Von Balthasar", M. Edwards compares three approaches to the *CD* by theologians from different confessions. Dean Inge read the *CD* as a classicist and Anglican theologian, whereas Lossky gave a pivotal position to Dionysius in his attempt to realize a neo-patristic Orthodox theology. Von Balthasar proposed a positive reading of the *CD* through his theological perspective and trends of the Catholic tradition.

"The Reception of Dionysius in Modern Greek Theology and Scholarship" is the title of the chapter by D. Pallis. His study offers a historical and critical overview of the socio-political premises, historical context, and intercultural exchanges that determined and fashioned the development of Greek Dionysian theology and scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth century with particular focus on three modern Greek theologians.

The fourth section of the volume also contains a chapter on the reception of the *CD* in post-modern philosophy, written by T. Knepper. This chapter deals with the French philosophers J. Derrida and J.-L. Marion. Knepper tries to show not only their affinities but also their differences as readers of the *CD*, one of them being Marion's evaluation of the concept of Dionysian hierarchy.

A chapter on Dionysius' "mysticism" by Y. de Andia focuses on many themes of the *CD* that could justify the title "mystic" for Dionysius. She offers insights on the references that Dionysius made to figures such as Hierotheus, Moses, and Paul, but she also discusses how these related to themes of the *CD* such as deification, mystical knowledge of God, and the hierarchical traditions.

This section concludes with a chapter by G. Geréby on Dionysius as a "political theologian". This chapter discusses themes of the *CD* such as eschatology, the divine plan for the nations, and political thought. Geréby shows that Dionysius' use of biblical themes is not secondary in the *CD* and that his philosophy complements these theological themes in a way that could be seen as political and as a theology of history.

In conclusion, *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite* is truly useful not only as a working tool for Dionysian scholars but also as a book for a wider readership. It enriches our knowledge of ancient patristic thought and its role in the development of medieval and modern European religious thought and culture. This comprehensive volume will also be useful to scholars who are interested in the history of philosophy and in various theological disciplines.

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