

**Asist. univ. dr. Ionuț Chircalan,
Facultatea de Teologie „Ovidius“,
Universitatea din Constanța**

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AUTHORSHIP OF *CORPUS DIONYSIACUM*

Abstract: *The author of Corpus Dionysiacum (CD) is known and unknown. So is in his/her theological view, the entire created reality and, especially, God Himself as the uncreated Creator of all. The reception of CD's authorship varied during the time from the acceptance of its genuineness to the charge of forgery hidden behind a well-chosen pseudonym. Some scholars suggested that pseudonymity may be a symbolical one or even a literary ploy. It is of interest to see which are the boundaries acceptable on this subject for the Orthodox Tradition. Is there any critical link between CD and its author, or the works written by him/her speak for themselves?*

Keywords: *Byzantinism, Orthodoxy, Neoplatonism, pseudonymity, Tradition.*

Introduction

Regarding the *CD's* authorship, modern scholars seem, recently, to have come to a new 'consensus'. In Vladimir Kharlamov's own words: "To establish the identity of the author remains impossible"¹. After a century of intense exploration of clues for clarifying the origin, profession, and lastly, the name of the author, this conclusion is, at least, a bit disappointing. There is almost no precise information on the author, except the fact that the presumed 'Dionysius the Areopagite' was extremely acquainted with Neoplatonic philosophy. There were suggested, from this perspective, many possible identities for *CD's* author, none of them being accepted unanimously. Among the Fathers

1. Vladimir KHARLAMOV, *The Authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus: A Deliberate Forgery or Clever Literary Ploy?*, Routledge, London and New York, 2020, p. i.

of the Church, these works can not be attributed to any of them. Beyond that, the debate continues as long as the arguments on both sides are balanced.

A part of the scholars, based on the ritual of the Synaxis (Liturgy) exposed in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, leans toward a Syrian origin of the author, although not for sure, as long as the author confesses to possessing very limited skills in Hebrew (*EH*, 4, 3, 10, 205B), a popular language in that geographical space, and, at the same time, the commentary on the liturgical rituals sounds like Constantinopolitan².

The last sustainers of the genuineness of the authorship almost vanished away facing the difficulty to explain the elaborated Greek Neoplatonic vocabulary used by *CD*'s author and the fact that *CD* contains borrowings from Proclus's works. The Christian camp tries now to anchor the *CD* on patristic grounds, at least, searching for possible sources in the post-apostolic literature before the 5th century. *CD*'s author was a polyglot as long as *CD* proofs the use of both Greek (Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret of Cyrus) and Latin (Jerome) Fathers of the Church³. As Metropolitan of Ephesus Hypatius suggested in his speech against the Severians, the moderate part of Monophysites, at the Conference from Constantinople in 532, there could be some interpolations in the text, either malicious (made by the Apollinarians)⁴ and/or well-intentioned ones (made by sustainers of author's apostolicity)⁵. In this second situation, the natural question that arises is why would someone use post-apostolic sources to consolidate a

2. Basil Lourié, "Peter the Iberian and Dionysius the Areopagite: Honigmann – van Esbroeck's Thesis revisited", in: *Scrinium. Zurnal patrologii, kriticeskoj agiografii i cerkovnoj istorii / Revue de patrologie, d'hagiographie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 6 (1) (2010), pp. 194-195.

3. Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI, "Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father", in: *Studia Patristica*, 96 (2017), pp. 425-440.

4. Giovanni Domenico MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio, cujus Johannes Dominicus Mansi et post ipsius mortem Florentius et Venetianus editores ab anno 1758 ad annum 1798 priores triginta unum tomos ediderunt, nunc autem continuat et absoluta: tomus 8, 492-536*, Florentiae, 1762, p. 820.

5. Paul ROREM, John LAMOREAUX, "John of Scythopolis on Apollinarian Christology and the Pseudo-Areopagite's True Identity", in: *Church History*, 62 (4) (1993), p. 482.

discourse of Saint Paul's disciple from Athens, at a time when such craftings would not have escaped unnoticed?

This study aims to present the arguments brought by each camp of scholars regarding the authorship of *CD* and to express an opinion on the acceptable limits for the Orthodox Tradition on this theme.

The Authorship as a Veil for an Intentional Forgery

The accusation of forgery or, milder said, of pseudonymous work, is not new. The first commentator of *CD*, John of Scythopolis and John Philoponus, in the *CD*'s Prologue, in the 6th century, felt the need to defend the apostolic origin of the author, whereas Sophronios of Jerusalem (c. 638) and Phocas bar Sergius, the translator of *CD* into Syriac, two centuries later, praise John's merits for defending the Council of Chalcedon and for refuting *CD*'s contestants' charges that "they are not from the great teacher [Dionysius], but from one of the Apollinarists or an unknown heretic of more recent times"⁶.

Later, in the 9th century, the well-read Photios of Constantinople in his *Myriobiblion*, 1, mentions of an unknown to us Theodore the Presbyter's treatise, "in which he undertakes to prove the genuineness of the works of St. Dionysius"⁷, as a result of the allegations on their recent age, suspicious obscurity, and anachronism. Although Photios did not pronounce in person on the subject of *CD*'s authorship, limiting himself to affirming that Theodore, trying to overcome these difficulties, did "his best to prove the genuineness of the treatises"⁸, these general charges turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg on the road to unmasking the pseudo-apostolicity of the author.

In the Middle Ages, doubts were expressed about the complex life of Dionysius the Areopagite (Peter Abelard, 1079-1142, on the

6. Cf. P. ROEM, J. LAMOREAUX, "John of Scythopolis on Apollinarian Christology...", p. 482.

7. Andreas SCHOTT (ed.), *Photii Myriobiblion sive Bibliotheca librorum quos Photius Patriarcha Constantinopolitanus legit et censuit*, D. Hoeschelius Augustanus (ed.), *Latine vero reddidit et scholijs auxit A. Schottus Antverpianus*, Augusta, 1778, p. 2.

8. A. SCHOTT (ed.), *Photii Myriobiblion sive Bibliotheca librorum...*, p. 2.

untenable identity between Denis of Paris and him) and during Reform, on the apostolicity of the writings (Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther, Jean Daillé), but the first pieces of incontestable evidence against the authorship were brought on the field of *CD*'s dependency on the Neoplatonic philosophers. Johann Georg Veit Engelhardt⁹, a translator of the corpus in German, was the first who suggested it (1820), followed by the philologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer¹⁰ who showed similarities of *CD* with Plato's *Alcibiades* on the hierarchical mediation of *eros* from God(s) to human beings through angels (*daimons*).

At the end of the 19th century, the familiarity of *CD*'s author with Neoplatonism became a fact. Two philologists, Josef Stiglmayr¹¹ and Hugo Koch¹² argued independently the borrowings of *CD*'s author from philosophical sources of late Neoplatonic Academy from Athens, an institution closed by emperor Justinian in 529 AD. Their studies highlighted similarities of passages and ideas on the problem of evil between the *CD*'s author and Proclus the Successor (d. 485 AD), probably mentioned in the text of *CD* as the philosopher Clement¹³. Thus, the year of Proclus' death indicates the *terminus a quo* for the date of the *CD*'s publication. The *terminus ante quem* is related to the first mention of the *CD* by the Monophysite bishop Severus of Antioch in a letter against Julian of Halicarnassus, addressed to in c. 518 (the

9. Magdalena WĐOWIAK, "The hidden author of the Corpus Dionysiacum—authenticity, rejection and apophysis in the historical context", in: *Classica Cracoviensia*, 17 (2014), p. 237.

10. Timothy RIGGS, "Eros as Hierarchical Principle: A Re-evaluation of Dionysius' Neoplatonism", in: *Dionysius*, 27 (2009), p. 85.

11. Josef STIGLMAYR, "Das Aufkommen der Pseudo-Dionysischen Schriften und ihr Eindringen in die christliche Literatur bis und Laterankonzil 649. Einzweiter Beitrag zur Dionysiusfrage", in: *Jahresbericht des öffentlichen Privatgymnasiums an der Stella Matutina zu Feldkirch*, 5 (1894), pp. 3-96; J. STIGLMAYR, "Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogenannten Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Übel", in: *Historisehes Jahrbuch*, 16, pp. 721-748.

12. Hugo KOCH, "Proklus als Quelle des Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre von Bösen", in: *Philologus*, 54 (1895), pp. 438-454.

13. Eugenio CORSINI, *Il trattato 'De divinis nominibus' dello Pseudo-Dionigi e i commenti neoplatonici al Parmenide*, Torino, 1962, p. 163.

original Greek, non-extant nowadays)/528 (the appearance of the Syriac translation of the letter).

The apostolicity of *CD*'s author being rejected, in the last century the new aim of the scholars became that to find out which was the main mobile of producing such an intricate "forgery", which lasted undisclosed for almost a millennia, and if the authorship belonged to a Christian or non/anti-Christian milieu. Several hypotheses have been put forward, two of them, not refuted yet, caught our attention and will be presented in short in the two following sections of the study.

The Authorship as a Literary Ploy

From a lack of success in identifying a suitable figure corresponding to the exigent profile of *CD*'s author, the scholars proposed different types of interpretation trying to reconstitute Dionysius' inner profession of creed. The opinions varied from the most suspicious one which considered *CD* a crypto-pagan project¹⁴ able to preserve the non-Christian philosophy and theurgical rites beyond the closure of Neoplatonic Academy from Athens to the one which sees in *CD*'s author a Neoplatonic disciple of Proclus converted to Christianity¹⁵.

A more complex opinion sees in *CD* a way of promoting a "paradigm-forming, speculatively visionary work, ...in a time of transitions... [so that Christians educated in Greek *paideia*] to preserve the best of philosophic tradition as a reflection of their cultural mentality in Christianized form and continue pursuing their philosophic interests, in touch with its own time and with a focus on the future"¹⁶. In this regard, *CD* appears to be "the first word of Byzantinism"¹⁷.

14. Tuomo LANKILA, "The Corpus Areopagiticum as a crypto-pagan project", in: *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture*, 5 (2011), pp. 14-40; T. LANKILA, „A Crypto-Pagan Reading of the Figure of Hierotheus and the 'Dormition' Passage in the Corpus Areopagiticum”, in: Butorac David D., Layne Danielle A. (Eds.), *Proclus and his Legacy*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2017, 175-182.

15. E. S. MAINOLDI, "Why Dionysius the Areopagite?...", p. 440.

16. V. KHARLAMOV, *The Authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus...*, pp. 72-73.

17. George P. FEDOTOV, *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity: The 10th to the 13th Centuries*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, NY, 1960, p. 27.

As a literary ploy, the authorship of *CD* receives a new significance, going beyond the charge of a well-chosen trick used to assure the recognition of its apostolic origin. In this original view, there is no intention of forgery in *CD*'s author mind, but an expressive way to suggest *Pax Romana* established between Jerusalem and Rome on the spiritual camp. The inclusive attitude of *CD*'s author over Neoplatonic vocabulary must be understood not as a contaminating factor of the Christian belief with pagan thinking, but as a rescuing outstretched hand to the intellectuals of that time to embrace the dominant state religion with ease, benefiting from the continuity of their ancestors' culture.

In this view, the chosen name, Dionysius the Areopagite, appears to be more a literary symbol suggesting the author's intention to unite the conflictual sides of the society by a non-polemical speech. There are some ambiguities in the *CD* that can be explained just on a literary ground. For the *CD* to be received as an apostolic work, the biblical frame seems a bit shaky. The pseudonymous itself, with no profound echo in the Christian literature from the 1st century, reminds just the fact that Dionysius was among the few Athenians converted to Christianity after Apostle Paul's speech on Areopagus (*Acts* 17:16-34); but with such a small pedigree, he could not have become a powerful candidate for an Apostolic Father of the Church. Moreover, besides a few names of the Apostles and their disciples used by the *CD*'s author in this works, there are no proper techniques used to secure its apostolicity. The position of Saint Apostle Paul is not bold in *CD*' author view, but of equal importance as that of master Hierotheos. 'Dionysius' from his writings feels free to address with a kind of superiority to Saint Paul's disciples (Timothy, Tit) giving them advice and tends to consider Apostle John an equal of him, attitude inappropriate for a later convert. In short, this can be explained if the "designation of this corpus to the Areopagite communicates the importance of this affiliation not as in a historical, but a metaphoric sense"¹⁸.

18. V. KHARLAMOV, *The Authorship of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus...*, p. 75.

***The Authorship
as a Politico-Ecclesiastical Strategy***

For decades, the studies on *CD* stressed its Christian Neoplatonism, with a tendency to credit its author as original in a broad sense. Although the vocabulary and some images echo directly the Neoplatonic Tradition, *CD*'s author is no less innovative, subtly adapting and creatively surpassing the Neoplatonic thought to express a Christian answer or the Christian doctrine¹⁹. The 'affirmative' tone used constantly in *CD*'s treatises and letters, the addressing to individuals carefully selected by, it might be called, the Discipline of the Arcane, confirms the preference of the author for a non-conflictual speech. In *Letters 6 and 7*, we can read down on print that the main goal of the missionary speech should be that to affirm the truth in a non-polemical way, as long as the truth is clear and convincing, and can not be refuted by a well-intended person. Moreover, Truth in a biblical key is the Person of Jesus Christ, Who remains unseen to the superficial look, inviting to a profound personal meeting.

Such an attitude would be of much interest to the political leadership of the Empire. If not existed, it should have been invented, seems to be the opinion of the late researches on *CD*'s authorship. If contemporary with Justinian I, the *CD*'s author would have served very well the politics of the emperor, that to restore the unity of the Christians. If we take into account that there is as much biblical language and patristic background in this corpus, as is the Neoplatonism already highlighted excessively in *CD*, that could mean that a Christian profile for *CD*'s author is still possible, be he/she a convert from Neoplatonic Academy.

As Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi puts it:

"The sources allow us to give a name to the ancient pupil of the school who engaged himself in contrast with Damascius' pagan apologetics. It is Damascius himself to speak about him in his *Life of Isidore*: he can be identified as one of the pupils of the late Proclus, whose name was Hegias, ... son of Theagenes, archon of Athens and senator in Constantinople ...

19. Marilena VLAD, „Introduction”, in: *Dionisie Areopagitul. Despre numele divine. Teologia Mistică*, Polirom Press, Iași, 2018, p. 19.

[who] the last Diadochus could not refrain from reporting a dramatic judgment against ... for having converted to ... Christianity. The political position of Theagenes would have given Hegias the chance to meet Justinian, and to present him his doctrinal answer to Damascius. It was probably after having encountered Justinian's interest and synergy that Hegias' philosophical project evolved into the pseudepigraphic *corpus* attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, and acquired, after Justinian's suggestion, its most striking strategic features, in the Christological, Origenistic, Ecclesiological, Monastic, and Mariological domains.

Pseudo-Dionysius' acquaintance with the Syriac culture can be explained recalling that Justinian hosted a community of Syrian monks in his Ormisda Palace at Constantinople. This Syrian presence provides us with the historical grounds for an explanation of CD syriacisms. (...) Through the mediation of [Justinian's wife, Empress] Theodora, the CD could have been sent to the former patriarch of Antioch, who was in exile in Alexandria, destined to become the first reader of the CD outside its native cradle in Constantinople"²⁰.

To such a seductive interpretation of the *CD's* authorship, we have to admit, it is hard to resist. But would it be acceptable from the *Orthodox Tradition* point of view? Which are the limits of good intention in Orthodoxy as long as the end does not justify the means?

Conclusion

The significance of *CD's* authorship, as seen, is multiple. For its first readers, in the mid-5th-6th centuries, Dionysius the Areopagite might have represented the most awaited Apostle whose writings had been 'lost' and, yet, found, able to speak bearing in mind the learned class of the society's background. It might have been a relief for the ones educated in Greek *paideia*, a new approach to accepting easier the transition toward Christianity.

For the hierarchy of the Church and theologians (Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Gregory Palamas etc.), Dionysius the Areopagite became the Great Master, before considering him a saint, a standard for how to convert the theological speech into an elevated

20. E. S. MAINOLDI, "Why Dionysius the Areopagite?...", pp. 425-426.

prayer of worship addressed to God, a landmark for the height of the Christian doctrine, a treasure ready to offer an inspired answer to most of the controversies on the theological field. This Tradition of *CD*'s reception lasted a thousand years and is still normative in the Orthodox Church.

For the opponents of its apostolicity, the *CD*'s pseudonymous author was considered the last straw in their attitude of rejection and suspicion against the Hellenistic culture. For them, the *CD* is the Trojan horse that complicated and altered the Christian faith, removing it from the simplicity of the Gospel. The ones least conflicting perceive the authorship as the best-crafted forgery of all times, as a spurious set of writings wrongly assigned to the disciple of the Apostle Paul, although the author never names him as the Areopagite, but with the humble title of 'priest Dionysius'.