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Book Review: Mark EDWARDS, Dimitrios PALLIS and Georgios STEIRIS (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022

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MARK EDWARDS, DIMITRIOS PALLIS, and GEORGIOS STEIRIS (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022, pp. 752. ISBN: 9780198810797

The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite is a well-constructed and attractive contemporary guide not only for scholars doing research on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (henceforth *CD*), but also for those who belong to a wider readership and are interested in ancient thought. It is interesting that a relatively small corpus of texts, of an author of the fifth or sixth century AD who is unknown to us, has been read, cited and interpreted by so many readers over the past fifteen centuries. The mystical dimension of the *CD* alone is not enough to explain its intriguing reception history. The truth is that along with the mystical veil of the *CD* there is a high level of intelligence.

The editorial team of the above volume, Mark Edwards, Dimitrios Pallis and Georgios Steiris, clarify that a large number of the papers from the volume were delivered at a conference on the *CD* itself and its reception, which was organized by Dimitrios Pallis a few years ago in Oxford. The following review of this book will attempt to make brief or longer references to each of the authors who contributed to it and after these will make a general comment about this project.

The book is divided into four sections, which are preceded by an introductory chapter. In the nine studies of Section I, the *CD* is examined in its historical and intellectual context and there is also attention to its sources. In her study, Beate Suchla describes the *CD* morphologically, as it has survived in our time. Subsequently, Tim Riggs describes the content of the *CD*, recognizing its simultaneous Christian and Neoplatonic features. Maximos Constatas (chapter 4) shows Dionysius' interest in the use of the New Testament and argues that the integral place of scripture in Dionysian thought has not received the attention it deserves in modern research. Dionysius cites from or refers to scripture over 1,600 times, with an attitude of reverence. Mark Edwards, in turn, explores the apophatic or negative approach to

God, a bold spiritual attitude, which is a special feature of the *CD*. In chapter 6, Bogdan Bucur provides a detailed analysis of how Philo Judaeus and Clement of Alexandria reflect significant elements of apophatic theology, which are also found in the *CD*. In chapter 7, Ilaria Ramelli claims that Dionysius seems to have been a Christian Platonist, indebted not only to “pagan” Platonists, such as Plotinus and especially Proclus, but also to Christians, such as Origen and Evagrius. Dionysius is probably an Origenian Platonist in the sense that he adopted or defended the doctrines of abandoning the world (*πάντα ἀφελών*) for the ascent to God and the *ἀποκατάστασις* (restoration) of everything at the end of time, showing these views as the true Christian philosophy. In chapter 8, Michael Motia compares Dionysius with Gregory of Nyssa, since both insist that no words –neither human conceptual language nor the revealed words of scripture– or even the non-discursive mind can comprehend “the deepest things” of God. As for the paper of Charles Stang, in chapter 9, the author tries to explore the influence of Iamblichus and Proclus on Dionysius, focusing on the inheritance of their distinctive terminology in the *CD*. In chapter 10, Mark Edwards and John Dillon argue that Dionysius asserts the absolute transcendence of God, as Proclus actually did, and he proposes a God-centered logic with the prefix *hyper-*.

In Section II, the wide impact of the *CD* in the Christian East, and especially in Byzantium, is examined. Emiliano Fiori develops the issue of the Syrian translations of *CD*, in particular the translation that was made by Sergius of Resh’ayna in the sixth century. Then István Perczel exposes his own perspective on the earliest Greco-Syriac reception of the *CD* with a relative exposition and analysis of specific texts. In chapter 13, Beate Suchla points out that John of Scythopolis was the first orthodox reader who strove for the defence and the appreciation of the *CD* in so extensive a manner, since by John’s time it had been received with controversy. Maximos Constatas, in chapter 14, deals with the reception of the *CD* by the theologian and martyr Maximus the Confessor. Throughout his writings, Maximus directly cites about thirty passages from the *CD* and, in general, he transformed some of the ideas of Dionysius into his Christ-centered cosmology. Also, Maximus utilized the *CD* against the Origenist doctrine of the fall of rational beings from a timeless union with God. Mark Edwards and Dimitrios Pallis, in chapter 15, write on John of Damascus as a careful reader of Dionysius who exerted influence on the eastern and western Christian thought that followed. They argue that John adopted elements from Dionysius in various aspects of his work but sometimes in a critical vein due to the circumstances that he faced. In chapter

16, George Arabatzis explores the relationship between Theodore the Studite and Dionysius the Areopagite with regard to Byzantine iconology. He concentrates on the concept of “image” and symbolic esotericism and compares Theodore the Studite with Dionysius the Areopagite from the viewpoint of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. He suggests that Theodore’s theological views include a combination of Dionysian and Aristotelian elements. In chapter 17, Antonio Rigo, in contrast to some earlier scholars, suggests that Dionysius the Areopagite played an important role in the development of Byzantine mysticism from Nicetas Stethatos to Gregory of Sinai. The latter aimed to establish a correspondence between celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies, and for this purpose he introduced a further hierarchy, the monastic one. Gregory Palamas, an important Byzantine thinker who utilized the Dionysian legacy in the development of his own theological work, is Torstein Tollefsen’s subject in chapter 18 of the volume. According to Gregory, God is the supreme mind, the highest good, the nature beyond life and divinity (ἡ ὑπέροχος καὶ ὑπέροθος φύσις), as he is for Dionysius. Moreover, Gregory found Dionysius’ theology useful when he developed his doctrine of divine essence and activity. As for the mystical experience, Gregory says that God “is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing”, which accords with Dionysius’ use of the term ὑπεράγνωστον. Georgios Steiris, in chapter 19, argues that the notable Byzantine intellectual George Gemistos Pletho was originally a political thinker and that he gradually evolved into a political philosopher in order to support his political vision. In this endeavour, the *CD* was particularly useful for his elaboration on a political ontotheology.

In Section III, several researchers examine the relationship between the *CD* and the Latin West. In chapter 20, Deirdre Carabine detects Dionysius’ effects on his most well-known Latin translator, John Scotus Eriugena. Following this, Mark Edwards examines the Latin reception of *CD* as that is found in the writings of the twelfth-century author John Sarracenus. In chapter 22, Declan Lawell deals with Robert Grosseteste’s translations and commentaries on the *CD*. In the next chapter, Monica Tobon maintains that specific Dionysian elements are fundamental to various aspects of Bonaventure’s thought and that these themes can be observed in many of his writings throughout the stages of his career. After that, Paul Rorem presents the Dionysian legacy in Hugh of Saint Victor. In chapter 25, Declan Lawell studies Thomas Gallus’ ‘affective Dionysianism’. According to Dionysius, there is a third way of knowing God, which lies beyond the modes of positive knowing and negation. Thus, God is hyper-wise and hyper-good, that is to say, God possesses

every attribute in a mode of excellence, which is beyond human conceptual schemes. According to the late Wayne Hankey, in chapter 26, Albertus Magnus made a reading of the works of Dionysius that highlighted the consistency between the views of Aristotle and Dionysius. A similar tendency, but with some differences, can be found in Albert's pupil Thomas Aquinas. Mark Edwards, in chapter 27, argues that the intriguing influence of Dionysius the Areopagite extends to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In his paper (chapter 28), Peter Tyler explores the reception of the *CD* in two key medieval sources: the anonymous mystical work *Cloud of Unknowing*, which was composed by an English author, and also the work of the Carthusian theologian, Hugh of Balma. In the subsequent paper, by Theo Kobusch, the affinity between Dionysius the Areopagite and Nicholas of Cusa is illustrated. In addition to the above approaches, in chapter 30, Mark Edwards and Michael Allen show that the commentaries by Marsilio Ficino on the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names* cultivate a path for the liberation of the soul, as described by the Platonists, which is interesting but may not be accepted by certain modern readers of the *CD*.

Section IV is dedicated to the influence of Dionysius in different contexts after the western European Reformation. In the first paper (chapter 31) of this section, Denis Robichaud attempts to write the history of the Dionysian question at the time of Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus. In two consecutive papers (chapters 32 and 33), Johannes Zachhuber shows the reception of Dionysius the Areopagite in Martin Luther and gives an overview of a lesser-known story of Dionysius' reception in Lutheran theology after the Reformation. In chapter 34, Andrew Louth develops various themes from Dionysius' reception in the English-speaking world. As regards more recent times, Christian Schäfer (chapter 35) argues that modern Dionysian studies began in 1895, when Josef Stiglmayr and Hugo Koch published their scholarly contributions about the date and content of the *CD*. Mark Edwards refers (chapter 36) to the way the *CD* was treated by three theologians and scholars of the twentieth century, William Ralph Inge, Vladimir Lossky and Hans Urs von Balthasar. It can be argued that these three readers, who belonged to different traditions, were influential for European research. This paper is followed by that of Dimitrios Pallis (chapter 37), who evaluates selected aspects from the reception of Dionysius in the Greek scene of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Pallis engaged with social and cultural aspects from that scene before comparing three authors: Emmanouel Karpathios, Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas. His analysis demonstrated that there is a variety of readings of the *CD* in the Greek theological and academic world of that period. In chapter 38, Timothy Knepper

outlines the issues of interpretation of the *CD* that differentiate the twentieth-century French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. In her paper (chapter 39), Ysabel de Andia approaches the question of whether Dionysius the Areopagite can be treated as a mystic. In the last paper, chapter 40, by György Geréby, on the theology of Dionysius, the author discusses general characteristics of the Dionysian enigma and points to some elements of political thought in the *CD*.

This volume constitutes a valuable contribution to the specialized bibliography to which it belongs, since it offers a comprehensive account of the *CD* and many aspects of its reception in the ancient and modern history of thought. It includes various new findings and brings the viewpoints of authoritative scholars from previous and more recent generations together. It is perhaps the longest collective volume on the *CD* in recent decades.

By way of conclusion, to give our own point of view on the *CD*, we could say that the release of this *Handbook* can also be related to modern philosophical and academic debate, insofar as it can be viewed as a theological and spiritual response to the social-political challenges of our time. The metaphysics of the *CD* could be taken as a type of neo-Platonic-Byzantine transcendence of some rigid modern scientific and political attitudes which give priority to technique rather than the value of human personhood and dignity. Dionysius enables us to think of our human fate in relation to a higher, unheard, magnificent and transcendent power, the strange hope that is represented by Jesus Christ himself for world history. The above alternative reality introduced by the *CD* is “not of this world”, since it is related with the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Dionysius is not limited to the use of ordinary discursive terms of thought, but he tries poetically and ecstatically to express his personal experience as a Christian Platonist. It is the presence of this divine otherness and the special personality of the author that creates surprise to modern readers, as the *CD* refuses to be reduced to a definitive and final, rational interpretation of God. In other words, Dionysius paves the way for the deification of man, without the need for an unbalanced use of technological progress, which at times tends to underestimate or misunderstand the spiritual maturity that comes from a distant past. This volume is a welcome addition, among others, to the above issue and it is pleasing that the form and content of many of its chapters can be read in a manner that is not limited to the academic sphere but has a wider resonance.

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