

**BYZANTIOS**

Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization

**Antonio Rigo**

*in collaboration with*

*Pavel Ermilov & Michele Trizio (eds.)*

**Byzantine Theology  
and its Philosophical  
Background**



BREPOLS

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4

Series Editors:  
Michael Altripp  
Lars Martin Hoffmann

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# TABLE OF CONTENT

ABBREVIATIONS	VII
PREFACE	IX
KATERINA IERODIAKONOY, Byzantine Theology and its Philosophical Background	1
GEORGI KAPRIEV, Was hat die Philosophie mit der Theologie zu tun? Der Fall Byzanz	4
PAUL GÉHIN, À propos d'une expression des <i>Chapitres sur la prière</i> d'Évagre	17
VALERY V. PETROFF, Plato's Phaedrus and the Neoplatonic Teaching on Dissimilar Symbols and Sacred Fiction in the Corpus Areopagiticum	32
JOHN A. DEMETRACOPOULOS, In Search of the Pagan and Christian Sources of John of Damascus' Theodicy	50
BRIGITTE MONDRAIN, Copier et lire des manuscrits théologiques et philosophiques à Byzance	87
MICHELE TRIZIO, « Una è la verità che pervade ogni cosa ». La sapienza profana nelle opere perdute di Barlaam Calabro	108
OLEG RODIONOV, The <i>Chapters</i> of Kallistos Angelikoudes	141
JOHN MONFASANI, The Pro-Latin Apologetics of the Greek Émigrés to Quattrocento Italy	160
PAVEL ERMILOV, Feodor Uspenskij and his Critics in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia	187
PETER SCHREINER, Hans-Georg Beck und die byzantinische Theologie	197
INDEX	213

## ABBREVIATIONS

BAV	<i>Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.</i>
BML	<i>Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana. Florence.</i>
BZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift. Berlin / New York.</i>
CCSG	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series graeca. Turnhout.</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller. Berlin / New York.</i>
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies. Birmingham.</i>
HAB	<i>Herzog August Bibliothek. Wolfenbüttel.</i>
JÖB	<i>Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik. Vienna.</i>
OCF	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica. Rome.</i>
PG	<i>Migne Patrologia graeca.</i>
PLP	<i>Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit. Vienna.</i>
PTS	<i>Patristische Texte und Studien. Berlin / New York.</i>
REB	<i>Revue des études byzantines. Paris.</i>
RGK	<i>Repertorium der griechischen Kopisten. Vienna.</i>
RSBN	<i>Rivista di studi bizantini e neoellenici. Rome.</i>
SC	<i>Sources chrétiennes. Paris.</i>

VALERY V. PETROFF

# PLATO'S PHAEDRUS AND THE NEOPLATONIC TEACHING ON DISSIMILAR SYMBOLS AND SACRED FICTION IN THE CORPUS AREOPAGITICUM\*

Dionysius the Areopagite developed a metaphysics of the symbol to ground theoretically sacred action. The author describes liturgical action as a series of symbols that are reflections and images of the higher realities, which are true and spiritual.<sup>1</sup> Although the rite may be seen in its sensual appearance, those who accomplish perfection apprehend the rite's intelligible meaning,<sup>2</sup> and this higher contemplation implies a passage from images to the truth of the archetypes.<sup>3</sup> As I will show, Dionysius borrowed this approach to the "sacred symbol" from the later Neoplatonists. This interpretation accords with the fact that the philosophical system of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* deliberately synthesizes Neoplatonic metaphysics and Christian theology.

## Symbol as Manifestation of the Hidden

The sacred symbols to which Dionysius refers in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* have various functions: safeguard, uplift and manifestation. Although the first two have been thoroughly studied,<sup>4</sup> the function of

\* This paper presents some results of the research project "Corpus Areopagiticum and Its Earlier Latin Reception" that received financial support from the Foundation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (2010).

<sup>1</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 2. 1: G. HEIL / A. M. RITTER, *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Vol. II, *PTS*, 36. Berlin/New York 1991, 69. When necessary alterations are introduced in the English translations quoted. If not otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 2. 3. 2: 74; *Ibid.* 3. 2: 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 3. 3. 2: 82.

<sup>4</sup> See P. ROEM, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis*. Toronto 1984.

“manifestation”, when a symbol reveals through itself the higher reality,<sup>5</sup> deserves greater attention. Concerning the events of historical Incarnation and the Eucharistic sacrament, Dionysius emphasizes that the invisible is made viewable by means of a special kind of symbol. The phrase that the invisible is made viewable repeats five times in the chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* dedicated to the mystery of Synaxis (the Eucharist), and the formula, “the hierarch makes (...) viewable that which is praised in hymns (ὕπ’ ὄψιν ἄγει τὰ ὑμνημένα) through the sacredly displayed symbols”<sup>6</sup> repeats three times. Dionysius’s expression means that the hierarch uncovers the veiled gifts, lifts them into the view of the believers, and distributes, or divides, them. According to Dionysius this action of the hierarch represents in symbols the process that had occurred during the Incarnation:

The bread which had been covered and undivided is now uncovered and divided into many parts (...) [He] multiplies and distributes the One in symbolic fashion. With these things he completes the most holy sacred act. For... the simple, hidden oneness of Jesus, the most divine Word, has taken the route of incarnation for us and, without undergoing any change, has become a reality that is composite and visible. He has beneficently accomplished for us a unifying communion with himself.<sup>7</sup>

According to Dionysius the hierarch reveals how the simple and intelligible Jesus passed into a divided, composite and sensible being through the Incarnation. By this act the hierarch imitates Jesus who is the first revealer as the Angel of Great Council and the revealer of his Father.<sup>8</sup> The rare term “Revealer” suggests the vocabulary of the Neoplatonists,

<sup>5</sup> Cf. PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia* 2. 1: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 10: “ἱεροπλάστως ἐν ποικιλίᾳ τῶν ἐκφαντορικῶν συμβόλων παραδέδοται”.

<sup>6</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 3: *ibid.*, 81; 3. 3. 10: *ibid.*, 90; 3. 3. 12: *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 3. 3. 12: *ibid.*, 92, transl. by C. LUIBHEID / P. ROEM, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*. New Jersey 1987, 222.

<sup>8</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia* 4. 4: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) “αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς (...) εἰς ἐκφαντορικὴν ἐληλυθὼς τάξιν Ἄγγελος μεγάλης βουλῆς ἀνηγόρευται”. Cf. *Ioh* 14. 9; 2 *Cor* 4. 4; *Phil* 2. 6-7. See also IRENAEUS, *Adversus haereses* 4. 6. 5. 82-85; L. DOUTRELEAU / B. HEMMERDINGER / B.C. MERCIER / A. ROUSSEAU, Irénée de Lyon. *Contre les hérésies*, livre 4, vol. 2. SC, 100. Paris 1965, 448, 4. 6. 6. 94-98; 448; 4. 7. 2. 24-30; 458; CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata* 5. 6. 34. 1. 1-2. 1: L. FRÜCHTEL / O. STÄHLIN / U. TREU, Clemens Alexandrinus, vol. 2, *GCS* 15. Berlin 1960, 348-349.



particularly Proclus.<sup>9</sup> As a revealer the Son of God is himself the highest symbol: as the Word of God he shows and manifests his Father; as the Incarnate he manifests his divinity through his humanity. Although Dionysius does not use the modern theologians' term "revealing symbol" to refer to Jesus, the text allows the possibility of such an interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

### Dissimilar Symbols in Iamblichus, Julianus and Dionysius

Certain passages of Dionysius belong to the tradition of Iamblichean Pythagoreanism, according to whom, the esoteric teaching must not be divulged but should be kept under the cover of the symbols. The "Pythagorean" approach stressed that symbols covering the truth must be "dissimilar", that is, not resembling the truth that they hide. In their theology, inferior or even base forms symbolize God, and, thus, the hidden doctrine appears as absurd and paradoxical to outsiders, the profane. The theoretical *rationale* for the aptness of dissimilar symbols was developed in Neoplatonism and was the result of lengthy polemics concerning the appropriateness of myths for philosophy. Iamblichus said that

[the followers of Pythagoras] practiced the divine mysteries in a way unknown to the profane (*ἀτελέστους*), and safeguarded their doctrines and writings from the outsiders through the symbols. And if someone, having taken these symbols, does not unfold them and does not explain them without mockery, their doctrine will appear to the hearers as

<sup>9</sup> Cf. PROCLUS, *In Platonis rem publicam commentarii*: W. KROLL, Procli Diadochi in Platonis rem publicam commentarii, II. Leipzig 1901, 153. 1-23; 255. 15; PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia* 10. 2: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 40 "Ἐκφαντορικοί δὲ πάντες εἰσὶ καὶ ἄγγελοι τῶν πρὸ αὐτῶν, οἱ μὲν πρεσβύτατοι θεοῦ τοῦ κινουόντος, ἀναλόγως δὲ οἱ λοιποὶ τῶν ἐκ θεοῦ κεκινημένων". On the term *ἐκφαντορικός* see Y. SNIТCHALINE, Заметки о переводах Ареопагитского корпуса в серии "Основания христианской культуры" (*СПб.*, 1994; 1997), *Греко-латинский кабинет* 3 (2000) 103-115 [Zamетки o perevodach Areopagitskogo korpusa v serii "Osnovaniia christianskoj kultury" (Sankt-Peterburg 1994, 1997), *Greko-latinskij kabinet* 3 (2000) 103-115].

<sup>10</sup> On Jesus as "revealing symbol" see K. RAHNER, The Theology of the Symbol, in ID., *Theological Investigations. Vol. IV: More Recent Writings*. London 1974, 221-252 (first published in: A. BEA / H. RAHNER / H. RONDET / F. SCHWENDIMANN, *Cor Jesu: Commentationes in Litteras Encyclicas Pii Pp. XII "Haurietis Aquas"*. Vol. I: Pars Theologica. Roma 1959, 461-505) and V. PETROFF, Реальный символ в неоплатонизме и в христианской традиции (в *Ареопагитском корпусе* и у Карла Ранера), *Вестник ПСТГУ. Серия I: Богословие. Философия* 3/31 (2010), 36-52 [Real'nyj simbol v neoplatonizme i v christianskoj tradicii (v *Ареопагитском корпусе* i u Karla Ranera), *Vestnik PSTGU. Serija I: Bogoslovie. Filosofija* 3/31 (2010, 36-52)].

laughable and inane, full of nonsense and bare words (γελοῖα καὶ γραῶδη, λήρου μεστὰ καὶ ἀδολεσχίας). But if these symbols are properly unfolded according to their style, they become for the majority not obscure but clear and transparent.<sup>11</sup>

Iamblichus' follower Julianus argues similarly, using "myth" and "symbol" synonymously:

Our ancestors in every case tried to trace the original meanings of things (...), then when had discovered those meanings they clothed them in paradoxical myths (μύθοις παραδόξοις). This was in order that, by means of the paradox and the incongruity (ἀπεμφαίνοντος), the fiction (τὸ πλάσμα) might be detected and we might be induced to search out the truth. Now I think ordinary men (ιδιώταις) derive benefit enough from the irrational myth which instructs them through symbols alone. But those who are more highly endowed with wisdom will find the truth about the gods helpful; though only on condition that... by such riddles (αἰνιγμάτων) as these he is reminded that he must search something pertaining to gods (τι περὶ αὐτῶν).<sup>12</sup>

If we compare Dionysius's *Epistle IX*, the similarity of the doctrine becomes evident:

Among uninstructed (ἀτέλεσι) souls the fathers of unspeakable wisdom give an impression of outstanding absurdity (ἀτοπίαν δεινήν) when, with secret and daring riddles, they make known that truth which is divine, mysterious, and, so far as the profane are concerned, inaccessible. That is why so many continue to be unbelieving in the presence of the explanations of the divine mysteries (μυστηρίων), for we contemplate them solely by way of the perceptible symbols attached to them... For if one looks at this [great variety of sacred symbols used by scripture] from the outside they seem filled with incredible and contrived fantasy (τερατείας).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> IAMBlichus, *De vita Pythagorica* 23. 104. 16–105. 6; U. KLEIN (post L. DEUBNER), *Iamblichi de vita Pythagorica liber*. Leipzig 1937 (repr. 1975), 60–61.

<sup>12</sup> JULIANUS, *Ad Matrem Deorum* 170a-c; W. C. WRIGHT, *The Works of the Emperor Julian with an English translation in 3 vols.* Vol. 1. *Loeb Classical Library* 13. Cambridge, Mass. / London, 1913, 474.

<sup>13</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *Epistula* 9. 1; HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 193, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7), 281.

According to Julianus, the incredulity of the myth stimulates the initiate to discover the hidden truth:

For it is the incongruous element (τὸ ἀπεμφαῖνον) in myths that guides us to the truth. I mean that the more paradoxical and prodigious the riddle is (παράδοξον καὶ τερατώδες τὸ αἰνίγμα) the more it seems to warn us not to believe simply the bare words but rather to study diligently the hidden truth, and not to relax our efforts until under the guidance of the gods those hidden things become manifest.<sup>14</sup>

The myths are intended for the immature, regardless whether immature in years or intelligence. Incongruent myths are even more valuable than the august because, while the latter regards the gods as exceedingly great and noble and good, the august myths risk portraying the gods as human beings.<sup>15</sup>

Dionysius shares the opinion of Julianus and Iamblichus that, in the depiction of the divine, absurdity is more appropriate than straightforwardness. While discussing “dissimilar similarities” in detail, derivatives of the verb πλάσσω (“to mould” but also “to invent”) saturate his text:

The mysterious theologians (μυστικούς θεολόγους) envelop with fiction (περιπλάττοντας) (...) even revelations (ἐκφαντορίας) of God himself. They sometimes praise him by means of the most exalted imagery, calling him for instance sun (...), star (...), light. Sometimes they use more intermediate, down-to-earth images. They call him (...) the fire..., water (...). Sometimes the images are of the lowliest kind, such as (...) ointment and (...) stone. Sometimes the imagery is even derived from animals so that God is described as a lion or a panther, a leopard or a (...) bear. Add to this what seems the lowliest and most incongruous (ἀπεμφαῖνειν) of all, for the experts in the divine (οἱ τὰ θεῖα δεινοί) say that it fictitiously enveloped (περιπλάττουσαν) itself in the form of a worm.

In this way the wise men of God, exponents of hidden inspiration, separate the “Holy of Holies” from defilement by the imperfect (ἀτελέστων) or the profane. They therefore honor the **dissimilar sacred fiction** (ἀνόμοιον ἱεροπλαστίαν) so that the divine things remain inaccessible to the profane (βεβήλοις) and so that all those with a real wish to see the sacred imagery may not dwell on the types (τύποις) as true. So true negations (ἀποφάσεις) and the **unlike comparisons**

<sup>14</sup> JULIANUS, *Ad Heraclium cynicum* 217bc: W. C. WRIGHT, *The Works of the Emperor Julian with an English translation in 3 vols. Vol. 2. Loeb Classical Library*, 29. Cambridge, Mass. / London 1913, 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.1–XVIII.4 (222c).

(ἑτεροίαις ἀφομοιώσειν) with their last echoes offer due homage to the divine things. For this reason there is nothing **ridiculous** about **applying imagery** (ἀναπλάττουσι) to the heavenly beings with **similarities which are dissimilar** (ἀνομοίων ὁμοιοτήτων) and appear incongruous (ἀπεμφαινουσῶν).

And I myself might not have been stirred from this difficulty (ἀπορίας) to my current inquiry, to an uplifting (ἀναγωγήν) through a precise explanation of these sacred truths, had I not been troubled by the deformity (τὸ δυσειδές) of revealing imagery (ἐκφαντικῆς ἀναπλάσεως) that scripture uses in regard to the angels. My mind was not permitted to dwell on imagery so inadequate (ἀπαδούσαις μορφοποιίαις), but was provoked to get behind the material show, to get accustomed to the idea of going upward (ἀνατείνεσθαι), through the appearances to the things that are beyond this world.<sup>16</sup>

To properly situate Dionysius's appeal, however, we must consider similar discussions that occur in Proclus.<sup>17</sup>

### Proclus and Dionysius on the Sacred Fiction (τὸ πλασματώδες)

Proclus, who directly influenced many of Dionysius's conceptions, argues for the use of symbolic myths while discussing the question of admissibility of myths in philosophy. During his argument he exploits both meanings of πλάσσω ("to put in a certain form, to mould" and "to form an image of a thing in the mind, to imagine").

In a non-extant treatise on symbols and myths,<sup>18</sup> Proclus admits that imagination and its images are necessary for those who live in the corporeal world. When souls fall to earth they become enveloped in the "imaginative intellect",<sup>19</sup> turn "passionate" from "impassive", and use images and symbols. They need myths,<sup>20</sup> which can be "images", "forms",

<sup>16</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De coelesti hierarchia* 2. 5; HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 15-16, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7) 153.

<sup>17</sup> On Proclus' theory of symbol, see L. CARDULLO, *Il linguaggio del simbolo in Proclo: analisi filosofico-semantica dei termini symbolon/eikōn/synthēma nel Commentario alla Repubblica*. Catania 1985.

<sup>18</sup> PROCLUS, *In Platonis rem publicam commentarii*: KROLL (cf. n. 9) 108. 27-109. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. 16-18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. 21-23, 107. 26-108. 2. Cf. PLATO, *Phaedrus* 246c6-d5.

“symbols” or “fiction, imagery”, for their instruction. Some souls have a double intellect: the interior intellect, which is truly ourselves, concerns the intelligible; and, the exterior intellect, with which the soul projects itself (προβεβλήμεθα), concerns the fictitious forms of the imagination (τὸ πλασματώδες).<sup>21</sup> Dionysius emphasizes Proclus’s contraposition of the pure intellect, which contemplates true being, with the intellect that imagines and only begins to move to true knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

The higher powers use myths and symbols to announce revelations involving the future or the divine things. The intelligible truth is not communicated directly, but is conveyed through riddles and fictitious imagery (πλάσματα). Thus, things that have no form appear through similarities that possess form (μεμορφωμένα τῶν ἀμορφῶτων ἀφομοιώματα). Proclus notes that this occurs during sacred rites (τὰ ἱερά) and the performance of mysteries (τὰ δρώμενα ἐν τοῖς τελεστηρίοις).<sup>23</sup> Symbols and myths used in mysteries not only lead the initiates to the truth but also conceal it from the profane. Moreover, mysterial symbols produce bonds of sympathy between the souls of the initiated and the gods.<sup>24</sup> The souls that have a predisposition (συνδιατιθεσθαι) to sacred symbols transcend themselves and ultimately ground themselves in gods.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the sacred symbols used in the mysteries provide the earthly beings with heavenly spirit and divine illumination.<sup>26</sup>

Proclus and Dionysius do not substantially differ in their understanding of the nature and function of images and sacred fiction. Dionysius’s views on the interrelation of the intelligible and the imaginative, the interior and the exterior, things that have no form and things that possess form, generally recapitulate Proclus’s teaching. Dionysius also distinguishes the impassive and noetic part of the soul from the passionate and imaginative one, by saying that the “passionate” part of the soul uses images and symbols while the impassive part contemplates the simple visions of the divine.<sup>27</sup>

As Proclus, Dionysius believes that the sensible beings, circumscribed by images and figures (ἐν πλάσει καὶ τύπῳ) and endowed by

<sup>21</sup> PROCLUS, *In Platonis rem publicam commentarii*: KROLL (cf. n. 9), 108. 2-6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 108. 7-10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 107. 7-14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 108. 17-21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 108. 21-24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 108. 27-30.

<sup>27</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *Epistula* 9. 1: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 198.

forms (μεμορφωμένοις), cannot seize the intelligible and the formless.<sup>28</sup> In order to become known, the latter must receive form and figure, must reveal itself through images and similarities accessible to a weak mind.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the inexpressible becomes bound by what can be articulated. From a love for humanity, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition reveal divine truth in a manner accessible to human comprehension: the formless receives form, the indivisible and integral becomes divided, and the simple and uncircumscribed appear as multiplied in a variety of symbols.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the sacred imagery of symbols (συμβολικῆς ἱεροπλαστίας), if seen from the outside (τὰ ἔκτος αὐτῆς) by the uninitiated, appears as a fairy tale (ἀπιθάνου καὶ πλασματώδους τερατείας),<sup>31</sup> but the real lovers of the divine can discern the symbols from the fictitious element because they alone have the contemplative power to pass from the sensible forms to the simple truth that transcends symbols.<sup>32</sup>

### Symbol and Mimesis

In the act of fraction, or breaking of the bread, and the distribution of the cup the hierarch recreates sacred drama, imitating Jesus' deeds at the Last Supper where Christ, for the first time, revealed to the apostles the mystery of his descent into the material:

The sacred initiators of our tradition... resorted freely to symbolism appropriate to God, regarding the sacraments of the most holy mysteries (μυστηρίων τελετάς) (...) Jesus himself (...) passes on to us the mystery of his divine activity (θεουργὰ μυστήρια) by using the symbolism of a Table (διὰ τυπικῆς τραπέζωσης).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus* 1. 1: B. R. SUCHLA, *Corpus Dionysiacum*. Vol. I., *PTS*, 33. Berlin 1990, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. "ἐν μορφώσει τῶν ἀμορφῶτων αὐτὸν ἡμῖν ὑπογράφει", *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 4. 3. 4: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 99; "ἐν μορφώσει τῶν ἀμορφῶτων ὁμοίωσιν", *De coelesti hierarchia* 4. 3: *ibid.*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus* 1. 4: SUCHLA (cf. n. 27) 114; *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 1, 5: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 67.

<sup>31</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *Epistula* 9. 1: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198, transl. by LUIBHEID/ROREM (cf. n. 7), 283. Cf. PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus* 5. 9: SUCHLA (cf. n. 27) "διὰ τῆς τούτων ἀναλογικῆς γνώσεως".

The Table of the Last Supper is the highest of the symbols:

The distribution of the one bread and of the one cup (...) reminds them of the most divine Supper, which is the original symbol of all the rites (ἀρχισυμβόλου τῶν τελουμένων). The Maker (δημιουργός) of all these symbols very rightly excluded from that sacred feast the one not devoted to himself [Jn 13:21-30].<sup>34</sup>

The mimetic reproduction of the Incarnation by the hierarch is defined as “bringing it to our eyes in the sensible as in the images”:

By bringing it to our eyes in the sensible (αἰσθητῶς ὑπ’ ὄψιν ἄγων) as in the images (ὡς ἐν εἰκόσι), [the hierarch] depicts (διαγράφει) Jesus Christ, our intelligible Life, who out of the hiddenness of divinity, for love of man, takes on a form corresponding to our nature by the perfect and unconfused assumption of our humanity, and from his natural unity passes to our divided condition, yet without change.<sup>35</sup>

When the hierarch “imitates God” in the sacred act of the synaxis, he “depicts” Jesus Christ and becomes Christ’s symbol. The mysteries depicted or “praised” through the symbols become present in reality, in the things themselves.

Although the intelligible aspect of the sacred action is significant for spiritual uplifting, the mystery works on the corporeal level too. In this way the integral participation is effected through both body and soul, allowing the whole person to receive union with the divine.

Dionysius’s claim that in the Eucharistic ritual the hierarch “imitates” Jesus himself and “depicts” him by making the unseen visible have parallels in Iamblichus, who held a similar understanding of sacred symbols and rites:

The ritual (ἀγιστεία) and hieratic celebration (...) imitates (μιμείται) the order of the gods (...). It possesses (...) wondrous tokens (ἐνθήματα), such as have been sent down hither by the maker and father of all, by means of which unutterable truths are expressed through secret symbols, beings

<sup>34</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 1: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 81-82, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7), 222.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. 3. 13: 93, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7), 222.

beyond form brought under the control of form, things superior to all image (εἰκόνας) reproduced through images (δι' εἰκόνων ἀποτυπώται).<sup>36</sup>

The lexical similarities are obvious: Dionysius calls Jesus, who distributes the bread and the cup at the Supper, the “Maker of the symbols”<sup>37</sup> and Iamblichus speaks of the Maker and Father of all whose symbols, sown throughout the world, can be activated in the sacred act.

The hierarch, being an image of divine energies,<sup>38</sup> partakes of the One as any image partakes of the archetype. The imitation of God is not an actor’s play on a stage.<sup>39</sup> When the hierarch reproduces the deeds of Jesus at the Table, he himself becomes Jesus’ living image to the extent of being connected to the Prototype whom he depicts in symbols.

### Plato’s *Phaedrus* 243e-257b as the background of *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* III, 3

As the Dionysian teaching on the sacrament of Eucharist has been widely studied<sup>40</sup> we will confine ourselves to an observation that seems to

<sup>36</sup> IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis* I. 21. II 1 (65,6-16); É. DES PLACES, Jamblique. Les Mystères d’Égypte. Paris 1966. 76-77, transl. by E. C. CLARKE / J. M. DILLON / J. P. HERSHBELL, Iamblichus. *De mysteriis*. Leiden / Boston 2004, 79-81. Cf. *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* I. 5; HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 67-68.

<sup>37</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3.3.1 HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 81.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. 1. 7: 109.

<sup>39</sup> Thus, K. P. WESCHE, Christological Doctrine and Liturgical Interpretation in Pseudo-Dionysius, *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 33 (1989) 73 was wrong to remark that “Dionysius’ notion of “symbol” is most congenial to some modern perceptions of the liturgy and the sacraments (...). The liturgy primarily is a “show” which one observes, rather than a celebration in which one participates”.

<sup>40</sup> See Th. L. CAMPBELL, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. Translated and Annotated. Lanham, Maryland 1981; P. SHELDON-WILLIAMS, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius, *Downside Review* 82 (1964) 293-302; (1965) 20-31; E. BOULARAND, L’Eucharistie d’après le pseudo Denys l’Aréopagite, *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 4 (1957) 193-217; 3 (1958) 129-169; G. S. BEBIS, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysios the Areopagite: A Liturgical Interpretation, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 19 (1974) 159-175; WESCHE (cf. n. 38); Y. DE ANDIA, La très divine Cène... archisymbole de tout sacrement (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 428B): Symbole et eucharistie chez Denys l’Aréopagite et dans la tradition antiochienne, in: I. PERCZEL / R. FORRAI / G. GERÉBY (eds.), *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy. Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*. Leuven 2005, 37-65; V. PETROFF, Таинство «синаксиса» у Псевдо-Дионисия Арэопэгита и у прп. Максима Исповедника, *Вестник ПСТГУ. Серия I:*



have passed unnoticed: the platonic background of Dionysius's reasoning in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3, which is dedicated to the sacrament of Eucharist or *synaxis*. This passage, which is called *θεωρία*, that is "contemplation" or "interpretation", begins with the words:

And now, my fair boy (*ὦ παῖ καλέ*), from the images (*εἰκόνας*), let us pass in orderly and sacred fashion to the godlike truth of their archetypes, telling to those yet being initiated in a spiritual guidance, that the variegated and sacred composition (*σύνθεσις*) of the symbols is not unprofitable to them, even though it presents only their external features.<sup>41</sup>

The address "*ὦ παῖ καλέ*", although it looks like an ordinary colloquial phrase, is a rare formula which, as it often happens in Dionysius, unambiguously points to its precise source: the beginning of the second speech of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* (243e-257b).<sup>42</sup> In his mythological and poetical manner, Socrates teaches his listeners that the soul is immortal and that Eros gives Psyche wings, with which it ascends from earthly beauty to the gods to see supermundane spectacles. When the soul, however, is unable to follow the gods, it is filled with forgetfulness (*λήθης πλησθεῖσα*) and evil, grows heavy, loses its wings and eventually falls to the earth (*ἐπι τὴν γῆν πέσει*). In this way, it "came into a living being" (*ἦλθεν εἰς τόδε τὸ ζῶον*).

*Богословие. Философия* 4/24 (2008) 48-59 [Tainstvo «sinaksisa» u Psevdo-Dionisija Arcopagita i u prp. Maksima Isповednika, *Vestnik PSTGU. Serija I: Bogoslovie. Filosofija* 4/24 (2008) 48-59].

<sup>41</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 1: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 81-82, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROREM (cf. n. 7) 211.

<sup>42</sup> The search with the help of electronic text database *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* shows that obviously before Pseudo-Dionysius this formula occurs only in PLATO, *Phaedrus* 243c8-244a1: "Understand then, fair boy (*ὦ παῖ καλέ*), that the former discourse was by Phaedrus..."; 252b2: "Now this condition (*πάθος*), fair boy (*ὦ παῖ καλέ*), about which I am speaking, is called Eros by men", transl. by H. N. FOWLER = H. N. FOWLER, Plato: Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus with an English translation. *Loeb Classical Library* 36. Cambridge, Mass. / London 1914, 491. Later, Themistius (in *Ερωτικὸς ἢ περὶ κάλλους βασιλικῶν* 171a8: G. DOWNEY / H. SCHENKL, *Themistii orationes quae supersunt*, vol. 1. Leipzig 1965) uses it but doing this he follows Plato because in that section he speaks on Eros and even mentions Socrates. Besides this formula occurs once in JOANNES STOBAEUS, *Anthologium* 1. 9. 11. 16: O. HENSE / C. WACHSMUTH, *Ioannis Stobaei anthologium*. Vol. 1-2, Berlin 1884, 114 and thrice in HERMIAS, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*. 80.11, 81.3, 187.20: P. COUVREUR, *Hermeias von Alexandrien. In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*. Paris 1901 (repr. Hildesheim 1971) but each time it is a quotation from the *Phaedrus*. For the same words but in different order cf. PLATO, *Euthydemus* 289b5: "*ὦ καλὲ παῖ*"; and THEOGNIS, *Elegiae* 1280.

Dionysius's reasoning in *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3. 3 incorporates elements of Socrates' speech, such as the Socratic explanation that souls possess "recollection" (ἀνάμνησις) of those things that it once beheld when it journeyed with God and ascended into real intelligible being. "There and then" the soul saw the shining beauty, the blessed spectacles and was initiated into the mysteries (ἐτελοῦντο τῶν τελετῶν); "being initiated (μούμενοι) into perfect and simple and calm and blessed apparitions (φάσματα), we contemplated (ἐποπτεύοντες) them in pure light". Every soul had the opportunity to contemplate the real being and the sacred things, and now it gleans from earthly things a recollection of those realities. After falling to earth, the souls turned towards unrighteousness through evil communications and "have forgotten the sacred sights they once saw". Whichever god the soul followed in its previous life (Zeus, Ares, Hera, Apollo), the soul honors and imitates (τιμῶν καὶ μιμούμενος) him or her in its life on earth. Moreover, each one chooses their love from the ranks of the beautiful according to one's character, and, having found these qualities in other people, falls in love. Aspiration for pure beauty, the beauty as such (αὐτὸ τὸ κάλλος), begins when someone sees a godlike face (θεοειδὲς πρόσωπον) or some bodily form (τινα σώματος ιδέαν) that is a worthy reproduction (μεμιμημένον) of beauty. Approaching earthly similarities and images, some souls are able to perceive reflections of the higher reality: justice, temperance, beauty, etc. The Philosopher, if employing such memories (ὑπομνήμασιν) correctly, is always initiated into the perfect mysteries (τελέους τελετὰς τελούμενος) and becomes truly perfect (τέλεος). With the help of memory (μνήμη) the yearning (πόθος) for the real life emerges in him. Having turned to the divine, he becomes possessed by god, so that the crowd admonishes him as one who has gone out of his senses (ἐξιστάμενος). Whoever searches eagerly within themselves to find the nature of their god, reaches and grasps it through memory (ἐφαπτόμενοι αὐτοῦ τῇ μνήμῃ) are inspired by god (ἐνθουσιῶντες) and participate in god as far as humanly possible (μετασχεῖν).<sup>43</sup>

This section from *Phaedrus* echoes throughout the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. Plato's words on the divine madness are quoted by Dionysius in the treatise *De divinis nominibus*:<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Cf. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, *Stromata* 5. 14. 138. 3. 1–9: FRÜCHTEL / STÄHLIN / TREU (cf. n. 8) 420, which is a quotation from *Phaedrus* 252e–253a.

<sup>44</sup> This textual dependence has been already noticed in the critical apparatus of the modern edition of the *De divinis nominibus* (PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus*, VII,4: SUCHLA [cf. n. 28] 199).

PLATO, *Phaedrus* 249ce

ἐξιστάμενος δὲ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων σπουδασμάτων καὶ πρὸς τῷ θεῷ γιγνόμενος, νουθετεῖται μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ὡς παρακινῶν, ἐνθουσιάζων δὲ λέληθεν τοὺς πολλούς. Ἔστι δὴ οὖν δεῦρο ὁ πᾶς ἡκων λόγος περὶ τῆς τετάρτης μανίας...

Having gone out of human deeds and having turned himself toward the divine, he is admonished by the crowd who consider him to be out of his senses because it is hidden from the crowd that he is inspired by god. All my discourse so far has been about the fourth kind of madness (...)

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus* VII. 4: SUCHLA, 199

Εὐ γὰρ οἶδεν ὁ πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐνωθεὶς, ὅτι εὐ ἔχει, κἂν οἱ πολλοὶ νουθετοῖεν αὐτὸν ὡς ἐξεστηκότα. Λανθάνει μὲν ὡς εἰκὸς αὐτοὺς ἐκ πλάνης τῇ ἀληθείᾳ διὰ τῆς ὄντως πίστεως ἐξεστηκῶς, αὐτὸς δὲ ἀληθῶς οἶδεν ἑαυτὸν οὐχ, ὃ φασιν ἐκεῖνοι, μαινόμενον.

The man in union with the Truth knows clearly that all is well with him, even if the crowd admonishes him as if he has gone out of his mind. It is hidden from them, naturally, that he has gone out of the path of error and has in his real faith arrived at truth. He himself knows for real that, far from what they say, he is not mad (...)

Plato's word play τελέους τελετάς τελούμενος ("being initiated into perfect mysteries") is a common theme of lexical play in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which overflows with almost 300 derivatives from the stem "τελε-". The mystical vocabulary of Platonism, which had been borrowed by Philo<sup>45</sup> and, thus, influenced other Christian authors,<sup>46</sup> becomes excessive in Dionysius as a distinctive feature of his writing style.

Here we will point out some parallels between the *Phaedrus* and the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*:

- a) Socrates says that the soul came (ἦλθεν) into this living being, and Dionysius says that "the one, simple, and hidden [reality] of Jesus,

<sup>45</sup> Cf. PHILO, *De specialibus legibus* 1: L. COHN, *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*. Vol. 5. Berlin 1906, 56.3-4: "τελουμένους δὲ τὰς μυθικὰς τελετάς"; ID., *De gigantibus*, 54.5: P. WENDLAND, *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*. Vol. 2., Berlin 1897: "τελούμενος τὰς ἱερωτάτας τελετάς."

<sup>46</sup> Cf., for example, JOANNES CHRYSOSTOMUS, *Epistola* 132: *PG* 52, 691. 12-15): "(...) τὴν μεγάλην οὐτῶ καὶ φιλόσοφον ψυχὴν ἰδεῖν τελουμένην ταχέως τὴν ἱερὰν τελετὴν, καὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἐκείνων καὶ φρικτῶν καταξιουμένην μυστηρίων".

the most divine Word, by taking our human shape and without undergoing any change, **has come** (προελήλυθε) into the composite and the visible [of our reality].<sup>47</sup>

- b) *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3. 3.1 1-13, which tells of the salvific therapeutic act of Jesus' incarnation, has one more parallel with *Phaedrus*. Although Socrates in *Phaedrus* speaks of the individual human soul, and Dionysius speaks of the whole human nature, the original idea remains intact: the soul/the human nature falls and forgets/loses concentration:

(...) having turned away (ἀποπεσοῦσα) from the divine and uplifting life (...) and wandering (πλανωμένη) far from the right path that led to the truly existent God (...) [the human nature] was unaware that it was worshipping (ἐλάνθανεν θεραπεύουσα) neither gods nor friends but enemies.<sup>48</sup>

- c) What Christian author would regret that man forgets to serve gods (in plural)? We may suggest that this is an echo of *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates describes qualities of various gods while speaking of the soul that in its earthly life continues to honour and imitate that god whom it followed in the previous life.<sup>49</sup>
- d) A little further, Dionysius writes that Jesus' incarnation made human beings share in his beauty (καλών),

and filled (...) the shadowiness of our mind with a blessed, divine light (φωτός) and adorned the formlessness with godlike beauty (θεοειδέσιν κάλλεσι) (...) and showed supramundane uplifting (ἀναγωγὴν ὑπερκόσμιον) and inspired citizenship (πολιτείαν ἔνθεον).<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, this is the language of Platonism as almost all the elements mentioned — the light, the beauty, the uplifting, and the supermundane region — occur in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>47</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 12: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 92.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 3.3.11: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 91. Here ἐλάνθανεν θεραπεύουσα may allude to λήθης πλησθείσα from *Phaedrus* 248c.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Phaedrus* 252c3–d5.

<sup>50</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 11: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 91, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7) 221.

- e) In the *Phaedrus* the soul imitates its god, and the recollection of the heavenly realm is awakened in it when it looks at the earthly beauty that reproduces (literally “imitates”, μεμιμημένον) the archetypical beauty. Those who use recollections rightly become initiated into the perfect mysteries (τελέους τελετὰς τελούμενος) and become truly perfect (τέλεος).

In Dionysius the imitation of God (τὸ θεομίμητον) becomes ours if the memory of the theurgic deeds of Jesus is repeatedly renewed (μνήμης ἀνανεουμένης), and this is achieved in the sacred words and acts. First of all, through hymns the hierarch praises the sacred works of Jesus, and “mystically sees with the eyes of his soul (ἐν νοεροῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἐποπτεύσας) their intelligible spectacle”. Afterwards, he “proceeds to the sacred symbolic act» (συμβολικὴν ἱεουργίαν)”, imitating the theurgic deeds in the ceremony. He performs it in a tradition ordained by God (θεοπαραδότως) because “we do this in its<sup>51</sup> memory” (cf. Lc 22. 19; 1 Cor 11. 24 and 25). The sacred act is an “imitation of God”<sup>52</sup> since the hierarch “performs the divine things by being made like Christ himself” (τῇ πρὸς αὐτὸν Χριστὸν ἀφομοιώσει τὰ θεῖα τελέσαι).

- f) The *Phaedrus* contends that the soul recollects “heavenly” beauty when seeing its earthly reflections and imitations, and through them the reason can apprehend the idea of beauty. Dionysius instructs that we must contemplate Jesus’ “most divine life in the flesh” because Jesus is “our intelligible life”.<sup>53</sup> In both the *Phaedrus* and Dionysius, the central idea of uplifting from the earthly manifestation to the truth of the archetype remains the same.
- g) The chapter on the Eucharist culminates with another allusion to the world of the *Phaedrus*:

*Taste and see*, the Oracles say (Ps 34. 8). Because through the sacred initiation (μύσει) into the divine, the initiates (μνούμενοι) will recognize its mercy that gives them great gifts. In perfect holiness they will in participation mystically gaze upon

<sup>51</sup> The quotation is not precise here, Dionysius writes: “εἰς τὴν αὐτῆς ἀνάμνησιν” (ibid., 92), where αὐτῆς refers either to the subject of the godly deeds – to Jesus who is called here “ἡ τῆς θεαρχικῆς ἀγαθότητος φιλανθρωπία” – or to the Table of Last Supper (τραπεζώσεως). Cf. PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *Epistula* 9. 1: ibid, 198: “καὶ αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν (...) τὰ θεουργὰ μυστήρια παραδιδόντα διὰ τυπικῆς τραπεζώσεως”.

<sup>52</sup> PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3. 3. 12: HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 92 “τῆς θεομιμήτου ταύτης ἱεουργίας”.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3. 3. 12: 93.

(ἐποπτεύοντες) its most divine loftiness and magnificence. Then they will gratefully (εὐχαρίστως) praise in hymns supramundane beneficence of God.<sup>54</sup>

This passage refers simultaneously to its biblical and Platonic background. Its Eucharistic context suggests Jesus' commandment "Do this in recollection (ἀνάμνησιν) of Me", and its mysterial vocabulary, coupled with the word "recollection", alludes to the famous passage from *Phaedrus*:

(...) and this is a recollection (ἀνάμνησις) of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being. And there it is just that the mind of the philosopher only has wings, for he is always, so far as he is able, in communion through memory with those things, the communion with which causes God to be divine. Now a man who employs such memories (ὑπομνήμασιν) rightly is always being initiated into perfect rites (τελετάς) and he alone becomes truly perfect.<sup>55</sup>

So, according to Dionysius the tasting of the Eucharistic bread and cup removes the curtain of the sacred symbols, reveals the vision of "theurgic lights", and grants the mystic vision of the blessed intelligible spectacles.

## Ontological Status of the Sacred Symbols

The sacred symbols of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* are not conditional signs that refer to some higher reality while being divorced from substantial unity with it; the sacred symbols essentially participate in this reality, and, hence, this higher being has real presence in the symbol at the moment of the sacred ritual. Since Dionysius understands the sacred symbols in this manner, any interpretation of Dionysius's "symbolical" language that reduces the Incarnation and the sacraments of the Church to inane signs must be rejected as inappropriate.<sup>56</sup> In the theology of the

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 3.3.15: 94, transl. by LUIBHEID / ROEM (cf. n. 7), 223.

<sup>55</sup> PLATO, *Phaedrus* 249C, in FOWLER (cf. n. 42) 483.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. J. MEYENDORFF, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*. 2nd ed. Crestwood (NY) 1975, 109: "The sacraments themselves are reduced to the role of initiating symbols" (quoted in: WESCHE [cf. n. 38], 64). According to K. P. Wesche "the sacraments, or the liturgical rites, do not themselves impart the life of God" (ibid. 61-62); "the mediation of gnosis, as the content of salvation, moreover, explains the purpose of the In-

*Corpus Areopagiticum* God's presence in the sacraments can be readily shown by referring to the text itself.<sup>57</sup>

In conclusion, as the comparative textual analysis demonstrated, the thought of Dionysius is deeply rooted in Platonic philosophy, and not only as a superficial matter of mere lexical borrowings or the reception of a few concepts and doctrines. The body of the Areopagitic universe is the same as the ancient philosophical tradition. Dionysius expends much effort to set this tradition as the cornerstone of Christian doctrine and experience, resulting in a unique system in which Christian theology is expressed in a language of the 6th century neoplatonism. Many central propositions of the "authentic Areopagite", however, are not orthodox. However, the "hermeneutical Greek"<sup>58</sup> of the Corpus, which hides the true meaning of the doctrine and requires the "unfolding" of the text in commentaries, is susceptible to different interpretive procedures. This allowed the Corpus to be "Christianized" almost immediately after its creation, either by means of the scholia and glosses attached to the text, such as by John of Scythopolis and his followers, by means of composing other writings in the tradition of the Corpus, such as Maximus the Confessor's *Mystagogy*, or by including selected quotations from it into different contexts, such as Gregory Palamas' *Pro hesychastis*.<sup>59</sup>

carnation" (ibid., 64); "the Incarnation of the Divine Logos is "merely" a symbol which saves only by providing for the mind the supreme perceptible token for its contemplation of God" (ibid., 67). As a result, according to Wesche the Incarnation "is rendered superfluous" (ibid. 62 and 64); "the salvation is gnosis which in the final analysis excludes the created, visible world from real participation in the divine life of God" (ibid., 67). The conclusions of Meyendorff and Wesche appear inadequate because they are based on a wrong interpretation of the nature of the symbol in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*.

<sup>57</sup> Concerning the reality of the Incarnation see, for example, PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* 3, 3, 12; HEIL / RITTER (cf. n. 1) 92.

<sup>58</sup> The term "hermeneutical Latin" was introduced by M. LAPIDGE, The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin literature, *Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (1975) 67-111 for a group of medieval texts the understanding of which necessarily required the knowledge of the same glossaries from which the author borrowed its vocabulary. In our case the place of such glossaries is reserved for the writings of the Neoplatonists.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. GREGORIUS PALAMAS, *Pro hesychastis* 1. 3, 5; 2. 3, 20; P. K. CHRESTOU, *Γρηγορίου του Παλαμᾶ Συγγράμματα*, I. Thessaloniki 1962, 413-415; 556-557.

*Abstract**Plato's Phaedrus and the Neoplatonic Teaching on Dissimilar Symbols and Sacred Fiction in the Corpus Areopagiticum*

The article shows that the Neoplatonic metaphysics of the symbol in the *Corpus Areopagiticum* provides a theoretical basis for Christian liturgical practice. The sacred symbols have various functions: safeguarding, anagogic and manifesting. According to Dionysius in both the events of the historical Incarnation and the Eucharistic sacrament the invisible is made visible by means of special kind of symbols. This is because Jesus himself is the first Revealer of his Father. It is demonstrated that Dionysius prefers “dissimilar symbols” and thus follows the similar doctrines of Iamblichus and Julianus. It is argued that there is no substantial difference between Proclus and Dionysius in their understanding of nature and function of sacred fiction (τὸ πλάσματῶδες). Dionysius shares Proclus’ belief that images are necessary means for those who live in the corporal world: the inferior beings need fictitious imagery (πλάσματα) for their instruction, and the superior powers use it to announce divine revelations. Plato’s *Phaedrus* 243e-257b is shown to serve as the background for Dionysius’ *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* III, 3. There are lexical borrowings and parallels, and also similarities in conceptual framework. The conclusion is drawn that the sacred symbols of the *Corpus Areopagiticum* are not conditional signs since they essentially participate in the higher reality, and thus God is really present in the sacraments.

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