

Eros in the first century's Christian theology

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

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Abstract: For among most contemporaries, the concept of Eros seems to have nothing to do with Christianity. Sifting through the psychoanalysis of sexual fantasy, theologically it says nothing. Our study gives reasons showing that for theologians since the dawn of the Christian era, Eros-love plays a fundamental role.. The connotations of this concept, however, are different from those of today, when its sensory meaning is more restricted to sexuality. Greek theologians of the first centuries after Christ, taught the concept of Plato enshrined as a unifying enthusiasm, the attraction of inferior to superior states, as “hungry and thirsty” for something continuously higher, developing, and enriching the connotation. The work of Dionysius ((Pseudo) Areopagite, the Idea of Good, leads us step by step up the ascent of the erotically chaste, and is identified with the One-God, who is the very source of love. Consequently, Eros-love originates from God, Eros- love being not only an ascending but firstly a descending love, which calls for a reciprocal communion:

Keywords: *Eros, the Platonic Eros, the true Eros, part Eros, Christian love*

I. INTRODUCTION. THE PLATONIC MODEL OF LOVE

The dialogue between science and theology, was preceded by another dialogue, deeper, more intimate and more fertile, that between philosophy and theology. Historical evidence for this dialogue is found in the writings of the Greek Fathers of the early Christian era, which documents explicitly or implicitly the great Greek philosophy. We illustrate the above mentioned through the teaching of the Platonic concept of Eros and the adaptation to the demands of Christian theology in the work of (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite.

The Platonic Eros was a tutelary spirit, a divine messenger of transcendence in immanence. Touched by the wings of love climbing step by step, from the here and now, from below, to beyond this world, above, to the eternal world of Ideas, over which lives the Idea of Good. The Intercessor of this erotic progression was the idea of beauty, the only one which shows itself to mortals in its diverse hypostases. Under the seduction of beauty we are progressing from a beautiful body, to the beauty of a body, , from a beautiful soul to the beauty of a soul, from the beauty of actions and laws, to the beauty of science, to arrive finally at Beauty itself,

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meaning the Idea of Beauty, which is at the same time Good.[1] This is the purpose of our lives, says Plato, “for if life is worth living by man, it’s only merited by one that that reaches the contemplation of beauty itself [...] without the dross of mortal flesh [...] the face of truth” [2]. The Initiate progresses thus from sensory experiences to the aesthetic and epistemic, in an ascending dialectic, which ends in a metaphysical experience. We arrive here beyond the intellect to understand, placing us in full revelation. Thus the Platonic rationalism “ends with a mystical edge” [3]. Love is, “missing and desire” generated by “erotic enthusiasm” [4] through “the rumour of immortality” contained in it, leading to the “deification”, through the “procreation in the name of beauty “and “striving to master forever the Good “[5]. As a consequence, in love the transcendent calls us through the mediation of earthly shadows of Beauty itself.

II. MEDIATION OF PLOTINUS

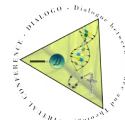
The Platonic philosophy is on the verge of being incorporated in Christian theology by Neo-Platonist Plotinus, which is “both an end and a beginning - an end as regards the Greeks and a start regarding Christianity [6]. Plotinus’ uses Plato’s text just as Christian mystics use the “Song of Songs”[7], the Platonic Banquet becoming the object of an allegorical interpretation. In Plotinian metaphysics all beings originated in the primordial unity, in The One, rationally unknowable, indefinable, to whom we cannot attribute characteristics, but we can just say “it is”, all that exists owing its existence to the fall from this unity. Each rung of existence is justified by the higher level of the Hierarchy, up to The One who is the source of all. The movement from the top down, “emanation” or “procession”, meets with an opposite movement, generated by the aspiration to return to the primordial unity of all beings. This return is a spiritual movement expressed in a mystical love. The position of Eros, the tutelary spirit, leading to Good, is now replaced by the grace that descends from the Good, but the motive of ascension remains love. Grace is the attraction exerted on us by the presence of Good, through love, through which “the soul has the chance to meet Him”, The One-God; when “there is nothing between them and

no longer two but both are one: indeed, you cannot separate them while He is there: their image is that of lovers and beloved here on earth who would very much like to merge “[8].

From this point on begins, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. The One, The Good and The Beauty will become God, the emanation will metamorphose in creation, and Eros, grace of Good, will become the love of God the Creator of created beings and their loving response to their creator.

III. THE SUPREME GOOD OR LOVE

Beyond the controversy over the identity of the Areopagite corpus [9], “The Homeric problem of Christian literature of the first centuries” [10], Areopagus’ writings contain passages that, taken separately by themselves, could pass as fragments of the Platonic dialogues. For Dionysius, God is very similar to the Idea of Good, described by Plato in the Republic; like the Sun, The One is simultaneously Good and Beautiful, and similarly a source of everything good and beautiful, “Because all things that exist derive from this beauty, and all the harmonies and friendships and communions among everything, exist for beauty; and through beauty everything is joined together. And beauty is the beginning of all, or the cause of all. It moves all and sustains all through its love for beauty itself. And it is the end of everything and a beloved and final and exemplary cause (for all is done for beauty), as all are defined according to it. Therefore beauty is the same as the good, because all is wanted for beauty and the good it contains. And there isn’t anything from what exists, that does not share the beauty and good [...]. This One and only good and beautiful is, in a uniform manner, the cause of all things beautiful and good “[11]. As one can easily see from the above quotation, the Dionysian hermeneutic approach still exists in a realm of Platonic philosophy. The One, above all names, has “multiple benefactor names”. Along with The Good and Beauty, illustrated above, the “unnamed deity” also bears the name of Eros-love. Unlike Plato - “the chief among Greeks” [12], for whom Eros was only a mediator between this world and the one beyond, understandably, to Dionysius, Eros is the appropriate name of God, for he does not have love as quality of His, but He is love, love



being His very way of existing. Each divine person achieves his being in the absolute dedication of self to the other divine Persons This unifying devotion of self of divine Persons is called by Dionysius “the Teon Eros” [13].

If Platonic Eros is primarily responsible for something missing, the Dionysian - love desired - is also an outpouring of divine goodness - of creative love. Out of this love God created all that exists, in heavenly and earthly hierarchies. God, whose very nature is love, offers as His gift, creation of the whole universe and man, made in His likeness

Eros is precisely this huge movement of love that spreads, at the beginning, into a multitude of beings, so that afterwards it can coalesce and bring them to the unity of their origin. Through this love, the one who loves is removed from himself and centres his being onto the object of his love, unites himself with the loved one, who is for him a manifestation of beauty. Love is, “a unifying, binding power that combines the beautiful and the good.”[14]

The sense of existence is therefore, the return of creation to its origin, the erotic enthusiasm being the divine appeal to unity, the active force that unifies creation with its Creator.

IV. THE TRUE EROS AND EROS IN PART

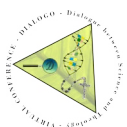
Although during his era there was a difference between eros and agápe, the author of the Areopagit corpus prefers the term of eros in, *About Divine Names*. It seems that, starting with that time, the terms eros and erotic didn't enjoy a good reputation, something which encourages Areopagit to dedicate a whole series of paragraphs in order to legitimise it. The name agápe (ἀγάπη) is considered by Yannaras [15], (no doubt a close connoisseur of the evolution of Greek terminology), to be charged with inferior semantic content, thus just defining a social virtue, identified by altruism, charity, kindness. For this reason, in the Areopagetic writings the preferred term is eros (έρως), desire, unifying thirst, claiming the scriptural origin of the term, encouraging you to consider Solomon's Parables: “But so that we don't appear to be saying this, changing the scriptures so that the name of love (eros) can be heard by researchers/ critics: Love her (έράσθητι) and

she will keep you. Embrace her and honour her so that she embraces you (Parables 4,6-8)” [16]. Although “some of our holy orators thought that the name of eros (love) is less divine than agape (love)”, we shouldn't, argues Dyonisos, “be afraid of the name of love (eros), nor should we be troubled by any dubious meaning about it. It seems to me that according to the Scriptures there is a common meaning between the name of love and eros, and that's why the word eros is used more for the divine [17], because of the misplaced prejudices from such people” [18].

“These misplaced prejudices” derive from the unilateral understanding of eros, only as the thirst for egocentric pleasure, as an expression of rebellious autonomy of the senses. The priest considers it is not possible, however, to identify the true Eros with his idols, because: “not only we, but also the Scriptures praise Eros as being in accordance with God. But the public, not understanding the unity between God's name and Eros, tended to use the name of Eros in a form separated from God, focusing on the human, of lust, distinctive aspect of it, it doesn't reflect the true Eros, but his idol, better described as a fall from true Eros”[19]. To avoid any misunderstanding, the Areopagite uses the form, “true Eros”.

Another difference between “true Eros” and his “idol” is the ecstatic character, of the first one: “Divine Eros is also ecstatic, not allowing people who are in love to belong to themselves, but to those whom they love” [20]. The Eros of the people, the Eros portraying human lust, is nothing but an alienation from the meaning of true Eros, due to its fall; it divides and fragments, by serving ephemeral appetite. But even through its egocentric desire for pleasure, it still retains something of its nature before the fall, through its thirst for life as thirst for relationships, for dedication, for relating to something external.

Dumitru Stăniloae considers that the Areopagite “does not distinguish between kindness, love (AGAPE) and eros” [21] because he “does not know the difference the Protestant theologians make, (eg. Nygren), between eros and agape, considering the first one as a natural attraction that creation feels towards God, and the latter as a benevolent acknowledgment by God to them, and assigning to the church Fathers a Platonism contrary to Christianity, whereas he



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forgets about God's love, which acknowledges the creation (AGAPE) [22] ". St. Symeon the New Theologian uses these terms in a similar manner; he states that "love (eros) and love (AGAPE) for You, Oh Savior, is light (phos)" [23] God being "the radiant sun" [24] which generates light. Therefore, although the term coined to describe today Christian love seems to be the agape, Christian parents of the first millennium preferred the term eros.

V. EROTIC UNIFICATION

For Areopagite Eros is a unifying power, whatever form it takes: "Whether we call it heavenly or angelic, either mental or spiritual or physical, we should understand it as a unifying and enabling power that moves superior beings to care for inferior ones, and those of the same kind towards reciprocity in communion, and ultimately inferior beings to return to the highest and most advanced ones"[25]. This unifying trend animates Eros towards both human beings, and towards God. The thirst for unification and the inclination to renounce ourselves is implanted in us by divine creativity. This erotic passion for a minute sign of Good can be deduced even in the tragedy of erotic lust, "the debauched, although depriving himself of good through irrational lust [...] still shares the good, through a characteristic of union and love" [26]. It so happens that, because Eros is the passion and thirst for wealth, springing from the consciousness of inadequacy, that cannot be fulfilled except by someone or something external: "And the very one who lusts after the worst life, as one who desires this throughout life, which it seems, moreover, is the best, even by the fact that he lusts after life and aspires to the life he pictures as being the best, participates to Good "[27].

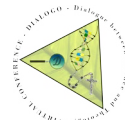
So far we are, however, very close to Plato. Where do the two Eros divide? At the end of the road. The ascent through the stages of Platonic erotica leads to the impersonal idea of, Beauty, Good, The Beauty-Good. And then, the Platonic Eros is devoid of personal reciprocity. Contrastingly, the Christian Eros presupposes a personal reciprocity, the person being "an erotic category through excellence and the Eros being a personal category through excellence" [28] as Yannaras argues. The Supreme Good

is no longer an Idea but a Person animated by erotic goodness. In all its stages this divine Eros presupposes a relationship that requires sharing. The other is no longer just in the midst of my ascension, as in Plato, but my neighbour.

The ascent is the answer. Christ descended among men, suffered with them and, finally in their place. This Christian God, named Eros, is madly in love with his own creation, and especially the one being that was made in his likeness. On this one He is waiting to return home.

The thinking of the early Middle Ages does not distinguish between the work of Dionysius and his commentator Hrisopolis Maximus, known as Maximus the Confessor [29], who interpreted in his Scholium, Areopagus' work. In Scholium at About the Godly Names, Maximus the Confessor, notes that Areopagite calls God the wellspring of love and of unifying Eros, [30] divine Eros, without beginning and without end, which extends from Good and returns to Good, through a circular motion. When we talk about the Divine eros, the angelic one, the understanding one, the psychic Eros (animal love) or the natural (of the inanimate), his role is the same, to make them all face the spring and to draw them towards Him: God is an Eros which creates, supports and attracts the creation to itself through its Beauty and Goodness. Everything is kept bounded by Eros and pushed towards the spring of beauty and goodness. "Divine Love makes the good fruitful for the good itself" [31]

God as the source of Hierarchy is beautiful, wise and good, the whole Hierarchy having these qualities in varying degrees. In, 'About The Hierarchy of Heaven', the Greek theologian makes a classification, now classic, of angelic armies or of the nine "names/callings" portrayed as the "three orders threefold". The first Hierarchy, in the immediate proximity of God, next to the primordial illuminations of the Tetrachy includes the Thrones, the Cherubims and the Seraphims, the second celestial triad comprises the Pillars, the Lords?! and the Powers, and the last triade contains the Angels, the Archangels and the Beginners[32]. The three orders of angels seem to be arranged in vertical concentric spirals, "fiery wheels" which, "turn in circles around the same Good" [33]. If the first



triad is in direct contact with “The high being”, the last one is in direct connection with the people. All of them are moving, passing through purification, illumination and perfection [34]. The unity of the system is supported by the force of attraction at the centre. This force of attraction is love, “a dance suite around God” [35]. A symbolic church Hierarchy corresponds to the heavenly Hierarchy, without a scriptural basis [36]; the church Hierarchy consists of two “triads” and six “armies”, the one of the initiators (the deiform hierarch, the priests, and the deacons) and the initiated (the monks, the holy people and the cleansed); The Bishop “sanctifies and perfects”, the priest “illuminates” and the deacon “purifies”. The church Hierarchy is a “sacred order” through which Christ’s light reaches us. “Theurgy” is “the work of the Hierarchy” and its numerous mediators, through which one can reach union with God. Climbing the successive steps of the Hierarchy, on the path of initiation, one can reach the mystery which remains in its hidden being; in the absence of an initiation, we can only have an indirect knowledge, via hierarchical intermediaries or symbols [37]

The highest ones within the Areopagitic Hierarchy are burning with love for “The Transcendental One” and radiate love in the next circle. Love unites all levels of existence, the ones belonging to the world of angels between them, and them with those of earthly existence. The goal of the Hierarchy, Areopagite tells us, is, “likeness and union with God, as much as possible [38]”. Ascension to the divine, deification, presupposes likeness, perfection, being animated by divine love that generates love for others. But love cannot occur without freedom. Although love is the nature of all, it has been attracted, even in the case of some angels, to themselves, which led to their fall, and in some people’s cases, to material pleasures, since they are dressed in flesh. Purification, illumination and perfection are conditions for rediscovering good love, for true eros.

Although some contemporary commentators [39], with particular regard to the hierarchies, accuse Dionysius of individualism, “too overwhelmed by Platonism” [40], we consider that for Dionysius, the ascent to Good, unlike Plato’s, is nevertheless uniting and not solitary. Rather as in Plotinian thinking, every stage of

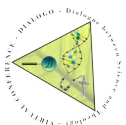
existence is drawn by a higher stage, but at the same time, it exudes love, care and responsibility for the inferior one, which attracts it. People cannot feel the connection with divinity without a connection with others. Dionysius describes an, “ascending hora”, symbolic expression of brotherhood and solidarity.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion I will point out the opinion of John Rist, who believes that, “the first who combined the Neoplatonic idea about God as Eros with the idea of “ecstasy” of God, is Pseudo-Dionysius, and it would be simply perverse to deny that Dionysius’ Christianity is the direct cause of this adaptation. Dionysius actually adapted Eros to the Christian requirement, according to which, God loves all creation, being the first to do so “[41]. First or not, the fact is that in Dionysius writings we find a Christianization of the Platonic Eros, transformed from divine messenger into deity. And this was necessary, since Good isn’t just an Idea any longer, but a divine Person. Hence, for the Christian Eros note specifically: personal reciprocity.

In conclusion, the Greek fathers use the concept of Eros to denote the “name” of God, the Trinitarian-interpersonal love, the creative divine love as well as man’s love towards God. The concept of Eros retains the Platonic significance of unifying enthusiasm, concerned in its authentic hypostasis, (“true eros”) as the sense of spiritual love, the bodily love belonging to “the fallen eros” or “eros in part”.

This interpretative line, which emphasis the Greek concept of Eros, will be rediscovered and recycled theologically, towards the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century by Vladimir Solovyov, who in *The Life Drama of Plato* deplores the inconsistencies of the ancient philosopher, who allowed Eros “to fabricate himself in conjecture”, and finalises “man’s deification”, bringing the realisation of “divine-humanity” [42]; Nicholas Berdiaev, who in *The Meaning of Creation. An Attempt at the Justification of Man* [43] theorizes the meta-historical process, the creation and tragedy of existence around the concept of love; Vasily Rozanov, for which the erotic experience is the only barrier of being, through which we

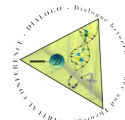


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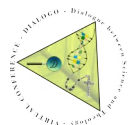
approach the sacred [44]; Sergei Bulgakov, who develops a Sofiane erotica [45], or Ch. Yannaras, who theorizes the relationship between Person and Eros [46], and argues that “we must learn God again, from the beginning,” [47]. According to these thinkers, the concept of Eros is rich in meaning, and permits renewals in the Christian theological space.

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- [13] See chapter Cunoaștere apofatică – comuniune erotică (Apophatical Knowledge – Erotic Communion) from Christos Yannaras, Heidegger and Areopagite, Rom. translation Nicolae Șerban Tanașoca, Anastasia Publ. House, Bucharest, 1996.
- [14] Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, Despre Nimirile Dumnezeiești (About Godly Names), IV, § 12 in Opere complete (Complete Works), p. 150. The idea of unifying force of eros will be discussed by other fathers; Nicolae Cabasila (1320-1391) states that „what unites, everywhere, is the power of love” (Nicolae Cabasila, Despre viața în Hristos (About life in Christ), Romanian translation Teodor Bodogae, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 2001, p. 229).
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