

# SYNESIUS OF CYRENE AND THE CHRISTIAN NEOPLATONISM: PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL SYMBIOSIS

Dimitar Y. Dimitrov

## I. *The question of the three objections in Letter 105 and the religious and philosophical views of Synesius*

The three main philosophical and theological objections, as they were posed in *Letter 105*, were traditionally considered as an evidence of Synesius' affiliations to pagan Neoplatonism as well as an act of non-acceptance of the main doctrines of Christianity. Crawford was the author—who in a more detailed way—developed such a thesis in the already remote year 1901. Synesius was declared to be a non-original philosopher, who did not succeed in solving the controversial issues between Christianity and Neoplatonism; moreover, he did not even realize them. According to the English author, Christianity and Neoplatonism were very different, to the extent even of being opposite doctrines, diverging radically on at least twelve points. Concerning Synesius, he was not a Christian thinker, but rather remained all the time devoted to pagan Neoplatonism and Hellenism. Crawford labeled his eclectic and chaotic doctrine in a witty way as *Synesianism*. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that Crawford was not well acquainted with Neoplatonism and knew Plotinus only through the medium of the French philosopher De Pressensé.<sup>1</sup>

Later scholars were more tolerant towards the person of Synesius, but anyway, they continued to repeat the arguments from *Letter 105* as an evidence of his pagan or at least crypto-pagan views.<sup>2</sup> H.-I. Marrou

---

<sup>1</sup> Crawford, *Synesius the Hellene*, 122ff. The work on Neoplatonism and Christianity, used by him, was of De Pressensé, *Histoire des trois premiers siècles de l'Église Chrétienne*.

<sup>2</sup> Here I allude mostly to the British translator of the letters of Synesius, A. Fitzgerald—Synesius of Cyrene, *Letters of Synesius of Cyrene*—as well as to the French scholar Lacombrade, *Synésios de Cyrène*. I have used predominantly the edition of the whole literary inheritance of Synesius, done by Garzya, *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene: Epistole, operette, inni*. Some references were made to the new edition of the letters by A. Garzya and D. Roques; Synesius, of Cyrene. *Synésios de Cyrène: Correspondance: Lettres I–CLVI*.

was the first to divide the problem into two different levels of reasoning.<sup>3</sup> The posed questions are quite difficult to solve, they were the key-problems dividing pagans and Christians, but they were far from being settled even in the Church at the time when Synesius lived. The charge of paganism seems to be unjustifiable. The discussion continued in R. T. Wallis, Barbanti and Vollenweider, but without any explicit conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to add something which could change the angle of treatment and evaluation of these three objections and for a better understanding of *Letter 105* in general. Synesius undoubtedly raised questions to Patriarch Theophilus, but did he set forth positions as well? And if there were such positions, how to define them? Not to prolong too much my presentation, I will pass to the concrete parameters of the problem.

After explaining why he accepted the bishopric with fear and reluctance, but also with a notion of duty and dignity, Synesius moved on to *difficillimae quaestiones*, very important and crucial. “It is difficult, if not quite impossible, that views should be shaken, which have entered the soul through knowledge to the point of demonstration.”<sup>5</sup> After such a definite position, concerning the importance of the rational and *scientific* methods, the future bishop of Ptolemais stated something no less important, although generally neglected: “You know that philosophy rejects many of these convictions which are cherished by the common people.”<sup>6</sup> Could it be Christianity that he meant, especially if we consider the fact that Synesius was writing, though in an oblique way, to the rigorous patriarch of Alexandria? It could hardly be so. The man from Cyrene was an elitarian by all means, but I think that such a statement is to be a key to important conclusions.

Concerning the objections, here is the first of them: “For my part I can never persuade myself that the soul is of more recent origin than the body.”<sup>7</sup> Plato already had defended the immortality of the soul and

<sup>3</sup> Marrou, “Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism,” 126–50.

<sup>4</sup> Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 101–5; Di Pasquale Barbanti, *Filosofia e cultura in Sinesio di Cirene*, 114–148; Vollenweider, *Neuplatonische und christliche Theologie bei Synesios von Kyrene*.

<sup>5</sup> Χαλε πᾶστιν, εἰ μὴ καὶ λίαν ἀδύνατον, εἰ ψυχὴν τὰ δι' ἐπιτήμης εἰ ἀπόδεξις ἐλθόντα δόγματα σαλεθῆναι. I used the English translation of Fitzgerald as well, but very often with disagreement and serious changes from my side.

<sup>6</sup> Οἴσθα δ' ὅτι πολλὰ φιλοσοφία τοῖς θυλλομένοις τούτοις ἀντιδιατάττεται δόγμασιν.

<sup>7</sup> Ἀμέ αὖ τὴν ψυχὴν οὐκ ἀζιώσω ποτὲ σώματος ὅστε φρενὴ νομίζεαι.