

## THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY OF MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

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**Sladana Ristić-Gorgiev**

Faculty of Philosophy, Niš  
slabra@eunet.yu

**Abstract.** *This paper deals with the problem of authenticity of medieval philosophy. It does not consider any particular philosophical ideas of the Middle Ages, but rather questions modern interpretations and modern view of medieval philosophy. It particularly discusses the definition of philosophy, which today, from the positivist perspective, deprives philosophy of metaphysical topics. Mystical and metaphysical themes by and large permeate medieval philosophy; that's why the credibility of this philosophy is often questioned. However, positivist definitions question many other, undoubtedly confirmed philosophical systems, not limited to the Middle Ages. This paper therefore starts with the widest possible definition of philosophy, that of love of wisdom. Medieval philosophy represents a specific form of philosophizing, although, from the modern perspective, its role boils down to serving religion. However, the history of philosophy confirms that philosophy has never been in any other service but that of the truth.*

**Key words:** *medieval philosophy, authenticity, religion, God, wisdom, secret, interpretation, archetype.*

The concept of philosophy has changed significantly in the present day as compared with its origin. Today philosophy is the knowledge of history of philosophy or its part, but a philosopher is not expected to offer personal testimony or responsibility for what he is talking about. In ancient and medieval times, philosophy originated from its broadest determinant – it was treated as love of wisdom.

The Middle Ages had a much broader interpretation of philosophy in mind. St. John Damascene, medieval philosopher and theologian, defines philosophy in the following way: "*Philosophy is again love of wisdom, and true wisdom is God, thus love of God is the true philosophy*"<sup>2</sup> In principle, philosophy is the study of the most sublime secrets ingrained in God.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper discusses only some problems related to the authenticity of medieval philosophy. The difference between western and eastern philosophy in the Middle Ages is not discussed.

<sup>2</sup> St. John of Damascus, *The Fountain of Wisdom*, Jasen, Bjeli Pavle, Nikšić, 1997, pp. 56.

In contemporary philosophical circles the well-accepted opinion goes that medieval philosophy is a philosophy of "secondary importance".<sup>3</sup> The reason for this is the very dominant influence of religion in the Middle Ages, so that philosophy of the time is treated as a mere servant to religion. The philosophy of medieval times is thus viewed only as a method for a better understanding of the Revelation. This strips medieval philosophy of its originality, and also questions its authenticity.

For these reasons, the philosophy of the Middle Ages is most often passed on to the studies of religion. However, any philosopher delving more deeply into the exploration of the Middle Ages may find arguments for a different view of medieval philosophy.

*"Historically conditioned coexistence of philosophy and theology, sometimes rather peaceful, sometimes openly conflicting, resulted in a philosophical consciousness unmatched in tone, after which it can be easily identified and distinguished from the philosophical consciousness of ancient times or the modern age. The theological idea had the same regulative function for the medieval philosopher as the aesthetic and cosmological idea had for the ancient philosopher or the idea of scientific knowledge for the philosopher in the modern age."*<sup>4</sup>

The first problem is to understand the concept of philosophy, since the term is now largely dependent on its modern interpretation.

The very definition of the term philosophy, reflecting its urge to discover the secret and Wisdom, points to the fact it cannot be reduced to reason alone. It is therefore very difficult to clearly distinguish between religion, philosophy, and art. In Hegel's terms, the Absolute Mind is manifested via art, and religion, and philosophy, only in different ways.

Every profound, serious scientist will have difficulty in deciding where philosophy ends and religion starts, where philosophy ends and art starts. *"If the Middle Ages were full of theologians who were also philosophers, the modern world has never lacked philosophers who are also theologians, nor has anyone ever seen the borderline between theology and philosophy and has claimed that it actually exists."*<sup>5</sup>

Precisely for this reason, to enter the world of philosophy means to forsake daylight and confront dusk. The dusk is even more uncertain and darker if the philosophy in question is that of the "dark Middle Ages". Any attempt to make a transition into another age, culture, or language is a real challenge. No wonder that present-day science, in its search of accuracy, obviousness and clarity avoids the "secretive" issues, i.e. problems not explicable in terms of criteria of the positivist mind. And it is exactly such issues that dominate medieval philosophy.

Positivism, which treats philosophy only as a science finding support in the rational and conceptual apparatus, either avoids medieval philosophy or refuses to treat it as philosophy.

However, this fact alone does not deny any scientist, or philosopher, the right to "re-evaluate" the concepts of science and philosophy and interpret them in their authentic, original meaning.<sup>6</sup> Not only is there a right to re-evaluation, but there is also the duty of

<sup>3</sup> B. Russel, *History of western philosophy*, Narodna knjiga, Alfa, 1998, Beograd.

<sup>4</sup> G. G. Mayorov, *Formation of Medieval Philosophy*, Grafos, Belgrade, 1982, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> E. Gilson, *A History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, p. 635.

<sup>6</sup> All present-day science comes from philosophy, and each form of knowledge was observed from the

every scientist to keep returning to the source. The fact that the Age of Reason, in consequence of man's alienation from God and the Universe, introduced a new, limited, interpretation of these terms, does not at all mean that this interpretation should be embraced by every scientist today. "*Every philosophy of the past not only contains historical truth, but also enables us to communicate with it so we could reveal the assumptions of historical continuity of philosophy as a whole.*"<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the fact that, in justifying its theses, philosophy remains in the domain of the rational, even when dealing with the most sublime theological and mystical issues, this does not entail that the object of its study is only that which is rational. The principal intention of philosophical explorations is to discover the world at its most secret and obscure. For, in the words of St. Gregory the Theologian: "*The secret anointed (i.e. invited) me, I faltered for a moment before the secret, so as to test myself; with the secret I once again return...*"<sup>8</sup>

Philosophy is rational in its explanations, but not in its explorations. Philosophy cannot remain exclusively rational during its "irrational encounters". "*The history of philosophy need not renounce dialectical incorporation of the most conscious and well thought out expressions of protest against that part of rationalist abstraction without which philosophy cannot move on*"<sup>9</sup>

If a Plato, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and, say, Wittgenstein, attempted to define the concept of philosophy, they would probably fiercely disagree. However, this would not make any of them a minor philosopher. Every insistence on a singular determination of philosophy denies philosophy precisely what makes it different from other sciences, depriving it of its subject matter, i.e. **the world as a whole**. The essence of philosophy is not to discover "something new", but to address and explain the existing, i.e. the eternal, ancient, yet always contemporary.

Another historical fact testifies how unjustified the neglect of medieval philosophy has been. It deals with the understanding of the term philosopher. In ancient times a philosopher was a wise man, one confirming his wisdom by his life and deeds. The title philosopher was reserved only for the select few, worthy and morally dignified individuals, instructed into divine secrets. These were ultimate devotees, eccentrics, loners.

In the Middle Ages, with Christian culture replacing its Hellenic counterpart, the same type of people took to monkhood. When St. John Chrysostom was asked where true philosophers could be found, he responded without hesitation: "*if true philosophers are among monks, they surely are not among commons*".<sup>10</sup> This applies to monks dwelling in deserts, whom St. Theodore of Kir describes as the "*thoughtroom of philosophy*".<sup>11</sup>

This is the reason for which we find numerous medieval thinkers attaching to their name the title – Philosopher - *St. Justin Martyr – the Philosopher, Anthinagora the Philosopher, Constantine the Philosopher*, etc. It is absurd that in their time, the Middle

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perspective of sense in the beginning of philosophy. Science today acts from the realm of survival, while philosophy continues to act from the realm of meaning.

<sup>7</sup> V. Georgieva, *Byzantine Philosophy*, Tabernakul, Skopje, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, *Easter Sermon*, Sermons of Holy Fathers, Athos, Belgrade, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> S. Avernicev, I. Medvedev, *Overview of Byzantine Philosophy*, Plato, Belgrade, 1996, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> P.G. 62, col 153

<sup>11</sup> P.G. 82, col 1368 B

Ages, they were perceived as philosophers, while today we consider them mere theologians. And the only reason for this is that we constrain ourselves to a different, much narrower definition of philosophy from the people of that age. They did not clearly distinguish between philosophy and theology.<sup>12</sup> Anyone truly seeking God was considered a philosopher, while the road to God was taken to be philosophy.

St. Constantine the Philosopher describes philosophy in the following way: "*It is the understanding of matters divine and human, that teaches us how close man can get to the cheek and bone of his creator.*"<sup>13</sup>

St. Gregory the Theologian discusses the same issue: "*To philosophize on cosmos, matter, soul, good and bad human nature, resurrection, doomsday, sin, martyrdom of Christ... and to succeed is not worthless.*"<sup>14</sup>

Another problem has strongly influenced the tendency not to fully appreciate medieval philosophy. Whatever viewpoint is taken, the Middle Ages are treated as the era of gloom and darkness. The modifier "dark" was ascribed to the Middle Ages due to the domination of religion and lack of scientific, presumably technological advancement. When one adds to this historical details such as the Inquisition, burning at stake anybody diverting from the dogma, there seem to be sufficient reasons for such a view. Yet, is it warranted in the case of philosophy?

First of all, can we at all talk about advancement or progress in philosophy? The idea seems to be much more coherent with the essence of science and technology than philosophy. We can hardly find progressive and regressive philosophies, or the opportunity for a new philosophy to subsume its predecessors?

Didn't many tyrannical regimes find pretexts precisely in the fact that the ruling, "advanced" ideology was not to be departed from? However, does ideology relate to philosophy?

It seems the two dimensions can be extracted from philosophy – **vertical and horizontal**. **The vertical dimension** pertains to the **eternal philosophical questions**, to the essence, primordial principles, initiated by different thinkers in different times. **The horizontal dimension** deals with the totality of the **social, cultural, and individual patterns** in which a philosopher lived. Moved by the same motives, philosophers of all times, no matter how different their languages, culture, or circumstances, tread along the philosophic vertical, transcending time and space. Precisely due to this vertical does history recognize them as philosophers. For this reason, we may hold there is only one philosophy, but different ways of philosophizing, determined by the spirit of the times. Thus we distinguish between the philosophy of the Old Age, the Middle Ages, the Age of Reason...

With this problem in mind, Karl Jaspers defines the history of philosophy as a history of human happiness, spirituality, freedom, peace, while for him the history of human society is a history of disaster and suffering. In Jaspers' words, from the very beginning philosophy has inherited the entire truth.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The borderline between theology and philosophy was established much later, towards the end of the Middle Ages.

<sup>13</sup> Hagiography of Constantine the Philosopher, *Detailed Hagiography of Constantine Cyril – the Philosopher* (Zagreb, Vladislav Transcription of 1469), Climent of Ohrid, Complete Works, Vol. III, Sofia, 1973, BAN, pp. 91 (L. 724-4)

<sup>14</sup> P.G. 36, col 25 A

<sup>15</sup> K. Jaspers, *World History of Philosophy*, Novi Sad. 1992

In any age, be it "dark", philosophy and philosophers have been the light to illuminate the road above, whether they were burnt or not, whether they were deemed saints or losers. If the history of human society in the Middle Ages was indeed dark, the philosophy of the time was not, and should therefore not be denied its rightful position in the history of philosophy. If some philosophical ideas still happened to glide towards ideology, they immediately became opposites to philosophy. If philosophy is the road "upward", ideology leads "downward". As the venue where the transitory and the eternal meet, philosophy could not serve anyone but truth, at any given moment, even the Middle Ages: down the very essence, it is synonymous to searching truth and God.

In that sense, one may pose the following question: if in the ancient times philosophy served aesthetics, and in the Middle Ages religion, can it be said to serve science in modern times?<sup>16</sup> Precisely in the way the engineering views science today? Modern science took over from philosophy those "readable" and empirically viable topics, while proclaiming everything else as quasi-issues. In this way science allowed philosophy position in the scientific system, according to its own criteria. Exactly from this contemporary view of philosophy medieval philosophy is judged today. And this happens in spite of the fact that a different view of medieval philosophy was taken by many important philosophers of all ages, such as Descartes, Leibniz, Hegel, etc. For Hegel, philosophy is the other language of the being of theology. Hegel held that medieval philosophy functioned to express absolute contents of Christianity, using philosophical terminology.

However, even if medieval philosophy is allowed some authenticity, its originality is questioned, where the excuse is that this philosophy did not introduce many novel ideas. The usual opinion is that it dealt only with the interpretation of religious books. But one must not forget that the Scriptures were not written strictly according to a geometric model, but via sometimes mutually contrasted stories. "*If canonic texts had allowed only one interpretation, there would have been no patristics, nor almost any of medieval philosophy, but no theology either... singular meaning would imply no secrets and no sacramentalness*"<sup>17</sup>.

Hence, if the Holy Scriptures are so clear, why interpret them? The truth is that medieval philosophers were interpreters of the truth found in the Gospels. However, according to the clerics of the time, the secret meaning of the Scriptures revealed itself only to the chosen ones, inspired by divine grace. Are not philosophers, whatever their time, just there to interpret the all-present truth? And does not every profound thinker see himself as an interpreter, rather than innovator? Does not the problem of a new and ingenious discovery come again from the world of science, rather than that of philosophy?

Even before the Middle Ages, ancient people did not believe in the possibility of an independent creative discovery, particularly in philosophy. For them, the question who "took over" ideas from whom was irrelevant, since the source of all knowledge was always God. If the stoics took from Aristotle, Aristotle did from Plato, Plato from Socrates, Socrates from Pythagoras, Pythagoras from the Brahmins, and the Brahmins from God.

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<sup>16</sup> The development of science and technology has strongly influenced contemporary philosophy as well, in such a way that philosophy has largely lost its independence and become a mere method for the sciences to understand themselves better. But this is the price philosophy has "paid" in order to survive in the modern system of sciences.

<sup>17</sup> G. G. Mayorov, *Formation of Medieval Philosophy*, Grafos, Belgrade, 1982, pp. 15

*"Nothing is more erroneous than to hold that medieval philosophy is an episode seeking conclusions within itself only, such that it could be neglected when one presents the history of ideas. From the Middle Ages stem many modern philosophical and scientific doctrines..."*<sup>18</sup>

Especially interesting is the way of writing or approaching any creative work. In the mind of medieval man consciousness prevailed over the need to penetrate one's inner being through prayer and redemption. For this reason, everyone tried to get as close to the archetype, to invest as little subjectivity as possible in any creative activity. Hence pseudonyms, such as Pseudo-Dionysus, Pseudo-Aristotle, etc. The medieval thinker is characterized by remarkable honesty and moral purity, unrivalled to the present day. Texts were usually ordered, with the purpose of defending Christianity from heresy, and sometimes they were comprised as confessions. Thus medieval thinkers refused to rely on their talent only. They rather resorted to it only when asked to write a piece. This meant they were summoned by God, they were given sign to use their talent to the benefit of mankind. Any work, creative in particular, was preceded by fast and prayer, so they could start writing purified.

To get closer to truth and be able to hear it, we must renounce the distorted image of ourselves.

In addition to peculiar psychological profundity and reflexivity, the medieval thinker is also characterized by erudition and strives for universality.

*"For all Western thought, neglecting the Middle Ages would mean neglecting oneself... We shall not free ourselves of our history by renouncing it, just as man does not detach himself from his previous life by renouncing the past"*<sup>19</sup>

From contemporary perspective, the value of medieval philosophy is found in the fact it preserved ancient philosophy from oblivion and made it available to the modern age. However, the spirit of ancient philosophy is by far closer to the spirit of the Middle Ages, according to both social and cultural organization and the worldview. On the foundations of ancient philosophy, Christianity built its novel, authentic, and in many respects original philosophy. It is therefore much more reasonable to claim that medieval philosophy is a specific kind of philosophizing, which represents a priceless value in the treasury of philosophical ideas.

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<sup>18</sup> E. Gilson, *A History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, pp. 636.

<sup>19</sup> E. Gilson, *A History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad, pp. 637.

**PROBLEM AUTENTIČNOSTI SREDNJOVEKOVNE FILOZOFIJE****Sladana Ristić-Gorgiev**

*Ovaj rad bavi se problematikom autentičnosti srednjovekovne filozofije. Ne razmatraju se neke posebne filozofske ideje u srednjem veku, nego se više dovode u pitanje savremene interpretacije i savremeni pogled na filozofiju u srednjem veku. Posebno se razmatra definicija filozofije, koja danas iz pozitivističke perspektive filozofiji oduzima metafizičke teme. Mistične i metafizičke teme uglavnom preovladavaju srednjovekovnom filozofijom, te se radi toga sumnja u originalnost te filozofije. Ali pozitivističke definicije dovode u pitanje i mnoge druge, već potvrđene filozofske sisteme i van srednjega veka. Zato ovaj rad polazi od najšire definicije filozofije, kao ljubavi prema mudrosti. Srednjovekovna filozofija je jedan poseban način filozofiranja, mada se njena uloga iz savremene perspektive, svodi samo na služenje religiji. No istorija filozofije potvrđuje da filozofija nikada nije ni u čijoj službi već uvek u službi istine.*

Ključne reči: srednjovekovan, autentičnost, religija, Bog, mudrost, tajna, tumačenje, prototip