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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE THANATOLOGICAL PROBLEMATICS IN HELLENISTIC
RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY AND ITS INTERFERENCES WITH
THE PHILOCALIC THEOLOGY OF THE FIRST EIGHT
CENTURIES**

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-Summary-

Keywords: *μελέτη θανάτου, practice of death, assumption of death, accomplished death, separation of soul from the body, thanatology, Platonism, destiny of the soul, practice of life, askesis, anachoresis, anthropology, trichotomism, dualism, revival, autonomy of the soul, martyrdom of consciousness, mystical death, ritual, eternal life.*

In the History and Philosophy of Religions, there are some approaches to the theme of death from different angles and perspectives. Death occupies a particular place in the philosophy of religions; it is analysed from the religious, cultural, ritualistic, cosmic and mythological point of view and, at the same time, death lies in connection with every important act of human life. In this way, we can talk about death and birth, death and sexuality, initiatic death, etc.

The paper seeks to show the importance of continuity in understanding the concept of death, from the Greek mythological and philosophical period until the concept infusion in Christianity. We have analysed this concept in Greek culture and philosophy and the characteristics it received in Christianity, precisely because the new religion found in the culture of Greek philosophers not only a complex terminology but also common laws of the human spirit. According to Professor Jaeger Werner's notice, Greek philosophy and culture have had a remarkable intuition of what humanity would have been thinking over the centuries.

The thesis consists of two parts. The first part, entitled *The Root of a Problem and the Received Answers*, comprises three chapters, and the second part, *Christianity and the Transformation of Thanatological Optics*, consists of four chapters.

In the first chapter, we have analysed the concept in the mythological view. In Homeric writings, the concept has the meaning of an effort to acquire *arete*, an ideal for

which life itself deserves to be sacrificed, and in this way the simple man may become a hero. We can see this in Odysseus's refusal of immortality instead of a life lived with fulfilled consciousness. The other part of the mythological analysis is Orphism. The analysis of the concept from an orphic perspective represents a key for the future understanding of the concept development. In the rituals practiced by the orphics, they sought to acquire a new state, which had to be assumed in everyday life through an orphic way of living, but of all things, the divine element had to triumph in man over the titanic one, since the cult is not a zeitgeist current. Orphism has brought forth the idea of imprisoning the soul in the body.

A follower trainer of the orphic conception is Pythagoras. The Crotonian philosopher understood and assumed *μελέτη θανάτου* in a restricted framework, through a certain way of life, but especially through a series of specific rules and principles. Another way to comprehend *μελέτη θανάτου* in Presocratic thinking is the cosmos analysis. For the Presocratics, the cosmos represents the combination of beauty, balance, orderly movement, which is not to be found in man, but which philosophers crave for.

Heraclitus presents another view of the concept, even if it is at the opposite pole to the previous one mentioned above. In this way, the analytical principle of *μελέτη θανάτου* is self-knowledge. Parmenides apprehends *μελέτη θανάτου* as an effort to distrust senses, seen as misleading and distorting for the truth. In the same way, this conception is asserted by his disciple, Zeno. This philosopher also states that true philosophy is used to "learn to die".

In the second chapter, in *The Pillars' Triad of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, the concept of *μελέτη θανάτου* becomes more prevalent. Socrates relates the concept with the eternal destiny of the soul. In the last dialogue of Socrates, *μελέτη θανάτου* is associated both to self-knowledge and ethical integrity, but also to the words and gestures from his last day of life. Socrates' disciple, Plato, relates the concept with anthropology and the dual nature of man, having two main characteristics: the first one is *sinanthroizo*, and the second one is *omiosis to theu*, and this is illustrated through several examples in the myth

of the cave from the Republic, perceived as a habit, and at the same time, as an effort in acquiring a more objective understanding. If Plato asserts that man's completion is the transcendent, Aristotle states that the discrepancy between reality and the world of Ideas is an abyss that could not be overlooked, precisely because man must also be fulfilled in this life. Aristotle moves the effort of human fulfillment into immanence. He closely relates *μελέτη θανάτου* to virtuous and honest living.

The Hellenistic period, even if it is seen, from a philosophical perspective, as a period of decadence, from the point of view of the concept, it reveals such an enrichment and development that *μελέτη θανάτου* penetrates from the philosophical framework into the religious and existential one. In Stoicism, *μελέτη θανάτου* is seen as a continuous assumption of moral intention, and it is not done effortlessly. Death is seen as a simple act, which can be overcome if the man would take heed to himself. Another feature of *μελέτη θανάτου* is conscious assumption of the present and its improvement. It is important to remember that this concept is viewed by the Stoics as an examination of conscience through the effort of repeating the doctrines and the fundamental apothegms having a therapeutic character. At the same time, the scrutiny of conscience also points to a way of assuming a fulfilled death.

In the effort of acquiring ataraxia, in order to preserve the most objective conscience, *premeditatio mallorum* was used for the purpose of hardening man to the hardships and trials of life. In the pursuit of his *premeditation mallorum*, man seeks to analyse himself under *specie aeternitatis*, as he will not bide eternally in this life, this exercise having the purpose of improving evil deeds in terms of correcting actions. This is related to the negative nature of *μελέτη θανάτου*, as living in proximity of death. The positive feature of *μελέτη θανάτου* in Stoicism is given by universal reason, in order to disburden man of unnecessary worries.

For Epicurus school, *μελέτη θανάτου* is a means of acquiring *autarchy*, by waiving all the artificial forms imposed by society, offering a life devoid of unnecessary solitudes and acquiring the state of complete freedom. Another aspect in this school is the awareness of one's own existence through the joy of being and living in the moment,

as the only thing we can master, and we can enjoy. The four specific points, the epicureic *τετραφάρμακος*, which function to soothe the soul are the following: good is easy to acquire, evil is easy to bear, gods are not to be feared of and death shall not affright us. Another idea of overcoming death and practicing *μελέτη θανάτου* is to explain all processes in order to acquire the state of calmness.

In Neoplatonism, *μελέτη θανάτου* is an exclusive effort of the mind, by acquiring ecstasy for the effort to break out of itself and overcoming the degrading condition of the world. The Plotinian Neoplatonism was not a movement of the masses, but of a narrow, exclusivist group.

The second part of the paper presents the concept of *μελέτη θανάτου* in Christianity and the influences that derive from Greek philosophy. Saint Clement of Alexandria asserts in his writings that *μελέτη θανάτου* is a continuous effort to substitute the bodily activities with spiritual activities, preserving the platonic structure of the three parts of the soul. As a Christian note of *μελέτη θανάτου*, the writings of the Alexandrian father illustrate it firstly in the imitation of Christ by overcoming passions, and secondly, in the Gnostic martyrdom by fully assuming the Christian consciousness. Also within the Alexandrian space, Origen presents the concept in pneumatic anthropology, as an indelible gift, but which the unworthy will not enjoy in the other world. An image of *μελέτη θανάτου* he sees in the Holy Mystery of Baptism which he perceives as a death to the world. A specific feature of *μελέτη θανάτου* in the first Christian period is martyrdom both as an act and as a conscience, both having a charismatic character. At the end of the chapter, the concept of *μελέτη θανάτου* is presented as a paradoxical experience in Alexandrian Christianity.

In the second chapter, we have presented the concept in the Cappadocian Fathers' view. A defining characteristic of the concept in the Cappadocian context is both kenosis and personal character. In presenting *μελέτη θανάτου* in their homilies, Cappadocian fathers often begin from the ephemeral nature of life and the need for self-knowledge. Saint Basil the Great closely relates *μελέτη θανάτου* to *θεωρημάτων συνεστάναι*, but at the

same time to the Holy Mystery of Baptism, to such an extent that he sees *μελέτη θανάτου* as a living in a strange body, as he himself practiced and confessed.

In the writings of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, the concept is met under a Platonic form, with the difference that the body has a special value, and attention must be placed on the effort of the mind to analyze the work of God's mysteries. In addition, the saint asserts the necessity to represent the presence of death in the proximity of life in order to overcome it. Saint Gregory of Nyssa sees in *μελέτη θανάτου* the acquisition of a state of ubiquity of the soul. The dialogue with the older sister, Macrina, emphasizes the Christian points of understanding *μελέτη θανάτου* in contrast to the Phaidon dialogue, concluding that through the body resurrection, which is unconceivable for Platonism, and through Christ's redemption of man, physical death loses its tragedy.

In the Philocalic synthesis, *μελέτη θανάτου* is related to human life, a balance between soul and body powers. In this way, the most prolific father who brings into light the importance of philosophy and of an assumed Christian life is Evagrius Ponticus. *Μελέτη θανάτου* is connected to the state of passionlessness in the spiritual ascension, but at the same time it is also seen as a means of fighting against acedia. Saint Macarius the Egyptian sees *μελέτη θανάτου* as an effort to escape from one's own selfishness and to experience one's neighbour's life. Saint Diadoch of Photikos understands *μελέτη θανάτου* as a martyrdom of consciousness assumed by accepting: bodily sufferings, diabolical temptations, and the effort of acquiring virtues.

In the last chapter, we have presented the conception of Saint Maximus the Confessor on *μελέτη θανάτου*, manifested both by paradoxical thinking and willingness to assume pain and flee pleasure. Another feature is the acquisition of Adam's life. Saint Maximus also sees in prayer, which is a way to eternalize our dialogue with God, a possibility to keep our thought to the fact of our ephemeral existence.

Saint John Climacus analyses *μελέτη θανάτου* in the seventh step of his work, where it is described as an extreme ecstasy, in which man no longer knows nothing of his own, since he is no longer in the body, living a state similar to clinical death. Even though he identifies the cell with a grave that springs light, several examples and

descriptions make us realize that in the ascetic effort of man, psychologising *μελέτη θανάτου* is apparently sliding on the slope of the imaginary. This apprehension will not be devoid of consequences, precisely because the work of the Sinaite saint has had an overwhelming influence in the eastern space, which is why the influence is felt also on the works of other Christian writers such as Saint Theodore the Studite and, a few centuries later, Saint Symeon Metaphrastes.

Greek philosophy has provided Christianity not only concepts, but also terminology, and, above all, an experience that some Saints could not disregard for *preparatio evangelica*. From the history of religions' perspective, knowledge of ancient philosophy helps us to understand the complexity of the human spirit in search of perfection. The Greek philosophy has given Christianity an experience, precisely because man as a spirit is subject to common laws.

In a resembling sense, the paper represents a sign of return to the perennial values of the world, since otherwise we risk losing our identity. Through the relativization of authentic values, we risk being condemned or misunderstood by future generations. Thus, the following words written in George Orwell's novel, *1984*, become increasingly present: "Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

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