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Between the dogmatic and magical formula. Ecumenical perspective

The reading of Christian magical papyri,¹ which are short magical texts, dating from the second century BC to the fifth century AD, allows us to notice that their authors possessed extensive knowledge of the Christian doctrine. They were familiar not only with the evangelical pericopes and the works of the Church Fathers, but also with the dogmatic declarations. On several occasions the form of those texts is not convincing enough to let us conclude that we deal with magic. Formally, they seem to resemble prayers. Cited in the papyri, numerous formulas and names pertaining to God, Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, clearly refer to the Bible and the documents of the first church councils.

This article is aimed at comparing the magical and dogmatic formulas, as well as trying to answer the question to what extent Christian understanding of dogmatic formulas has an ecumenical dimension.

The article consists of four parts. The first part provides examples of Christian magical papyri dating from the first centuries, which show the use of both the New Testament as well as the terms and dogmatic formulas in the magical

¹ K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, vol. 2, München–Leipzig 2001, p. 209–232. Christian papyri are given reference numbers P 1 – 24.

texts. The second part gives examples of the Fathers of the Eastern and the Western Church in their common criticism of magic. The third part presents differences in the understanding of dogmatic formulas between Christianity and magic. Finally, conclusions of ecumenical character are presented.

Christian magical papyri

Magic tended to put strong emphasis on the names, terms and ways to refer to God and people, therefore it required solid theological knowledge. Within the scope of our interest, in the papyri we can find precise citations of biblical texts and examples of good knowledge of trinitology, christology and mariology.

The papyri cite the Gospel fragments referring to the healing of all kinds of diseases and weaknesses by Jesus (Mt 4:23),² the Hymn to the Word from the Gospel of John (Jn 1:1–3),³ and even part of the Lord's Prayer put in a broader context – showing the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray (Mt 6:9f; Lk 11:1f).⁴ The authors of magical texts cite fragments of all four Gospels, being short mentions taken out of context, which refer mainly to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, as well as to the healings and raisings performed by Him.⁵

The papyri characterise God both in a very general way, as the Holy Trinity, as well as precisely describing each of the Holy Persons.

The following names are used to refer to the Father: Almighty (παντοκράτωρ), Holy (ἅγιος), True (ἀληθινός), The Lover of mankind (φιλόανθρωπος), Creator (δημιουργός), The Father of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (ὁ πατήρ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ σωτήρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).⁶

The christology emerging from the pages of magical papyri is particularly rich in terminology. God's Son is referred to as: Lord (κύριος),⁷ Almighty (παντοκράτωρ),⁸ the Firstborn of creation (πρωτογενέτωρ),⁹ Self-born

² Cf. P 4. This papyrus highlights the healing nature of the Gospel of Matthew.

³ Cf. P 5b. Cf. also P 9; P 19.

⁴ Cf. P 9; P 17; P 19.

⁵ Cf. P 18 mentions the raising of Lazarus and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law.

⁶ Cf. P 1.

⁷ Cf. P 1; P 3; P 13a.

⁸ Cf. P 13a.

⁹ Cf. P 13a.

(αὐτογενέτωρ),¹⁰ Born without seed (ἀσπερμογόνητε),¹¹ Holy (ἅγιος),¹² the Highest God (ὑψιστε θεέ),¹³ Heavenly King (οὐράνιε βασιλεῦ),¹⁴ Jesus, Christ, Son (υἱός), The Son of God (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ),¹⁵ the Word of the Living God, the Saviour, the Son of David, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary (ὁ τεχθεὶς ἐκ τῆς ἀγίας παρθένου Μαρίας),¹⁶ God of the Pool of Bethesda (ὁ θεὸς τῆς προβατικῆς κολυμβήθρα),¹⁷ Light from Light (φῶς ἐκ φωτός, θεὸς ἀληθινός),¹⁸ True God (θεὸς ἀληθινός).¹⁹ The use of those terms proves that the authors of magical texts knew the doctrine of the first church councils: they were familiar with the Creed of Nicaea and Constantinople. As far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, there are only short mentions of Him, without deeper reflection.

The titles used to refer to Mary show that the magi were also familiar with the works of the following councils, which called Mary *Theotokos*. She is described as: the Mother of Christ (μήτηρ Χριστοῦ),²⁰ God-bearer (θεοτόκος),²¹ All-holy (*Panagia*)²² Virgin (παρθένος),²³ Ever-Virgin (*Aeiparthenos*),²⁴ Immaculate (ἄφθαρτε, ἀμίαντε, ἀμόλυντε),²⁵ Our Lady (δεσποίνα ἡμῶν).²⁶ Saint John is called an apostle, evangelist and theologian.²⁷

¹⁰ Cf. P 13a. The term referring to Jesus in: Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1, 14, 3, in: Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, livre I, édition critique par A. Rousseau et L. Doutreleau, tome 1, texte et traduction, Paris 1979, p. 216.

¹¹ Cf. P 13a.

¹² Cf. P 3.

¹³ Cf. P 3.

¹⁴ Cf. P 3.

¹⁵ Cf. P 5b.

¹⁶ Cf. P 3.

¹⁷ Cf. P 5b.

¹⁸ Cf. P 9.

¹⁹ Cf. P 9.

²⁰ Cf. P 5a; P 15b.

²¹ Cf. P 5b; P 15b.

²² Cf. P 12.

²³ Cf. P 3.

²⁴ Cf. P 12. The term *Ever-Virgin* to refer to Mary is used in the Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553).

²⁵ Cf. P 15b.

²⁶ Cf. P 5b.

²⁷ Cf. P 5b.

The texts found in the papyri also accentuate the power in the name and blood of Jesus. His Name is great, holy, admirable, inexpressible, glorious, but also terrifying for his opponents.²⁸ Numerous epithets characterising the name of Jesus seem to refer to the reflection on the Names of the Word developed especially in the Judeo-Christian theology.²⁹ The Blood of Christ shed on the cross not only redeemed the souls of His people, but can also protect us today from misfortunes and evil spirits.³⁰ That is why in one of the papyri the Blood of Christ is the addressee of those who cry out for help against misfortunes.³¹

The examples mentioned above prove that the authors of magical papyri possessed the knowledge of not only biblical issues, but also dogmatic ones. They associated magical meaning with the terms and formulas describing the persons of the Holy Trinity and Mary.

Christian criticism of magic

Despite the fact that the magi showed good knowledge of the Bible and the doctrine of the Church formulated during church councils, from the very beginning the Church Fathers presented critical opinion of magical way of thinking and behaving. The knowledge the magi possessed did not lead the followers to a deeper relationship with God, but resulted in treating God instrumentally. Therefore, it is not surprising that the works of early Christian writers are filled with criticism for magic. Frequent criticism for magic also proves that Christians made use of the services of magi. Christian writers make mentions of the fact, for example Tertullian in the Western Church and John Chrysostom in the East.³²

The Church, aware of the danger connected with magic, cautioned its followers against using it, and also made a catechetical and homiletic effort in order to help them develop their Christian lives.³³ The Church acted in a twofold manner: by warning people and giving them positive message.

²⁸ Cf. P 5b; P 8a; P 13; P 21. Cf. also M. Gilski, *Chrześcijańskie papirusy magiczne*, "Polonia Sacra" 27 (2010), p. 92.

²⁹ Cf. J. Daniélou, *Teologia judeochrześcijańska*, Kraków 2002, p. 205f.

³⁰ Cf. P 2a; P 5d; P 13.

³¹ Cf. P 2a.

³² Cf. A. Wypustek, *Magia antyczna*, Wrocław 2001, p. 344–345.

³³ Cf. P. Wygralak, *Stanowisko Kościoła wobec idolatrii i magii na terenach Galii i Hiszpanii w późnej starożytności chrześcijańskiej (VI–VII w.)*, Poznań 2011, p. 203.

The Apostolic Constitutions indicate that magic is the way of death,³⁴ highlighting that the one who does not want to give up on magic must not be admitted into the Catechumenate.³⁵ The Apostolic Canons ordered a 20-year penance for sorcery and magic in the form of separation from the Communion.³⁶ Saint Basil (can. 65) emphasises that witchcraft or making magic potions is subject to the same punishment as murder.³⁷

The Western Church, in the penitentials dated from the sixth to eleventh century, also gave severe punishment for using magic. Penance lasting a few years was imposed for using the services of sorcerers, and also for preparing love potions. Causing death with sorcery was punished with a seven-year penance, including living three years on bread and water. The same penance was given for casting spells to bring bad weather. Severe punishments were also imposed for fortune-telling and superstitions.³⁸

The Church Fathers were unanimous in their severe criticism of magic, seeing the dangers connected with it.

Christian versus magical understanding of formulas and terms

Although from an external point of view the magical formula may often resemble the dogmatic one, they differ diametrically in their perception. The magi concentrated solely on the knowledge of God, which was supposed to enable them to use His power. Their only aim was to use it efficiently. Christianity, on the contrary, has shown a much broader view of God. In that view the knowledge of God is as essential as morality and spirituality. In Christianity this has resulted in a close relationship between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthoiconism. The uncovered truth about God led to prayer, holier life and to visualising that truth on icons.

What is of primary importance for magic is the terminology, whereas for Christianity not the word itself, but understanding it, is crucial. Therefore,

³⁴ *Constitutiones Apostolorum et Canones Pamphilii ex synodo apostolico Antiocheno, Lex canonica sanctorum apostolorum, Poenae pro lapsis sanctorum apostolorum, Euchologion Serapionis*, układ i opracowanie A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2007, VIII, 18, 1.

³⁵ *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, dz. cyt., VIII, 32, 1.

³⁶ Cf. *Poenae pro lapsis sanctorum apostolorum*, in: *Constitutiones Apostolorum*, dz. cyt., p. 298.

³⁷ Cf. *Canones Patrum Graecorum*, układ i opracowanie A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2009, p. 55.

³⁸ Cf. *Libri poenitentiales*, układ i opracowanie A. Baron, H. Pietras, Kraków 2011, p. 102–103.

the magi merely repeated their formulas and terms, sometimes without understanding them, while theological reflection and the church councils that followed, developed and interpreted the existing doctrine. In the field of magic, we deal with the search for more terms and formulas, while in religion we encounter the phenomenon of resignation from some formulas when they are already contained within other terms. An excellent example of this approach is the Creed formulated at the First Council of Nicaea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381). The latter did not only add further wording, developing mainly the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but it also resigned from the formulation 'of the substance of the Father' (*ek ousia Patris*) present in the First Council of Nicaea, recognising that this truth is contained in the term *homoousios*.

Although early Christianity used to stick to biblical formulas, yet in later reflection it turned to others terms helpful in expressing the truth about God in a better way.

In religion, cognition and understanding is not only about acquiring knowledge, but its aim is to facilitate building the relationship with God. This way of thinking is clearly present in the Parable of the Sower. Producing a crop is only possible on the condition of listening to the word and understanding it (Mt 13:23). Neither listening to the word nor accepting it, constitutes a condition sufficient enough for it to be fruitful. Listening to the word without understanding it enables the evil one to come and snatch away what was sown in the heart (Mt 13:19); and consequently, no crop is produced. The condition of *sine qua non* for the word to remain in a man and produce the crop is understanding it. It is therefore not possible to give a response to the word without understanding it. Lack of understanding blocks the work of God in a man.³⁹ Thus, understanding is a crucial factor in the process of shaping a proper relationship to God.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. M. Cholewa, M. Gilski, *Kult poszukuje zrozumienia*, in: *Zrozumieć, aby czcić. Encykliki Jana Pawła II*, red. M. Cholewa, S. Drzyżdżyk, M. Gilski, Kraków 2014, p. 9–10.

⁴⁰ Cf. M. Cholewa, M. Gilski, *Rola myślenia w religijnej i magicznej interpretacji rzeczywistości*, "Analecta Cracoviensia" 43 (2011), p. 7–23; M. Cholewa, M. Gilski, *Magical Thinking and Religious Thinking*, "E-Theologos" 3 (2012) no. 2, p. 190–199.

Ecumenical perspective of thinking

What conclusions for ecumenism can be drawn from our analysis? First of all, dogmatic formulas allow diversity and complementarity, since they are primarily about showing the truth about God, which truth can be expressed in various ways and by means of different terms. The development of theological reflection is aimed at such increasingly more thorough presentation of God's revelation. It cannot be provided by a magical formula, which is fixed by nature, since only the exact recitation of the formula reveals its power.

Secondly, the notions of unity and diversity were of great importance in theology right from the beginning. Diversity protected Christianity from thinking in terms of homogeneity and uniformity. Saint Irenaeus of Lyon says that the difference in practice confirms the unity in faith.⁴¹ That is the ecumenical formula which the magic formula is distant from.

Thirdly, dogmatic formulas by their nature are addressed to all believers. They are not only a response to the situation of a particular individual's life and directed to that individual, as it is the case with magical formulas. Dogmatic formulas, unlike magical ones, are community-forming and even culture-making.

And finally, the fourth conclusion is that the common Christian anti-magic opposition means in practice even greater fidelity to the Gospel, the Church Fathers and dogmas. Although magical papyri contain a great deal of Christian elements, their syncretic character causes the uniqueness of the Gospel to be lost. The return to the Gospel always has an ecumenical dimension. It was perfectly expressed in *Ages of the Spiritual Life* by Paul Evdokimov. In that book he evokes the character of Saint Dorotheus, who in his attempt at presenting the Christian way of understanding salvation, made use of the image of a circle. God is in the centre and all people are located on its circumference. Heading towards God, each person follows a radius of the circle; the closer they get to the centre, the nearer its radii draw together to each other. All radii run from the circumference towards the centre, and hence in its very centre, in God, all radii are united. This way the shortest distance towards God leads through a neighbor.⁴²

These two dimensions remain in a close correlation, like in the Greatest Commandment, which combines the love of God and the love of your neighbour. Christians' togetherness with God means their togetherness with one

⁴¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, v, 24, 13, oprac. H. Pietras, Kraków 2013, p. 367.

⁴² Cf. P. Evdokimov, *Wiek życia duchowego*, Kraków 1996, p. 186.

another. Conversion to God has an ecumenical dimension, bringing us closer to those who come close to Him. That dimension is lacking in the magical way of thinking.

ABSTRACT

The present article concerns the question of the formulas which both religion and magic use. Although even if they often sound identical, their understanding and their role are radically different. The article consists of four parts. The first part provides examples of Christian magical papyri dating from the first centuries, which show the use of both the New Testament as well as the terms and dogmatic formulas in the magical texts. The second part gives examples of the Fathers of the Eastern and the Western Church in their common criticism of magic. The third part examines differences in the understanding of dogmatic formulas between Christianity and magic. Finally, conclusions of ecumenical character are formulated.

KEYWORDS

ecumenism, magic, Christian magical papyri, magic formula, dogmatic formula

ABSTRAKT

Między formułą dogmatyczną a magiczną. Ekumeniczna perspektywa myślenia

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę formuł, którymi posługuje się religia i magia. Choć niejednokrotnie brzmią one identycznie, to jednak ich rozumienie i rola są diametralnie różne. Artykuł składa się z czterech części. W pierwszej są podane przykłady chrześcijańskich papirusów magicznych z pierwszych wieków, które rejestrują wykorzystanie zarówno Nowego Testamentu, jak i terminów i formuł dogmatycznych w formułach magicznych. Druga przywołuje ojców Kościoła Wschodu i Zachodu w ich wspólnej krytyce magii. W trzeciej zaprezentowane są różnice w rozumieniu formuł dogmatycznych między chrześcijaństwem a magią. Na koniec sformułowane zostały wnioski o charakterze ekumenicznym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

ekumenizm, magia, chrześcijańskie papirusy magiczne, formuła magiczna, formuła dogmatyczna

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