

# **The problem of solar theology. Helios-Sol in ancient literature, religion and philosophy**

## Summary

The concept of solar theology was introduced to the study of ancient religions at the beginning of the 20th century by Franz Cumont. According to his reconstruction solar theology was a coherent system of ideas that combined elements of Eastern religiosity and science with Greek philosophy. As Cumont assumed, the original religio-scientific doctrines – which resulted in the view of the cosmocracy of divine Sun – developed in the *milieu* of Semitic priesthood (the Chaldeans). In the Hellenistic era, characterized by intensification of cultural exchange between Greek world and Eastern societies, Sun-centered Chaldean reflection was to interest a Stoic thinker Posidonius, who adopted its assumptions in his own cosmological speculations. In Cumontian narrative there were two complementary aspects that eventually constituted solar theology: firstly, an „oriental” astronomy/astrology in which emphasis was put on importance of the Sun in planetary system and its influence on physical processes on earth; secondly, a philosophical concept that linked the Sun’s substance with the substance of the human soul. The result was a view that the Sun attracts the soul after the death of the body (solar eschatology). Moreover, the mystical side of solar theology stressed that the Sun, while ruling the cosmic order, reveals to the mankind a divine mind at work. That is why the Sun in some philosophical writings was called the „intellectual light” or the „mind of the world”.

Franz Cumont, while reconstructing assumptions of the Chaldean solar theology, was also convinced that he presents a doctrine, which was adopted by the Roman world in 3rd century C.E. together with the official introduction of the cult of Syrian sun-god, known from the sources as *Sol Invictus*. The appeal of new deity’s theology was to revive decaying and rigid traditional polytheism and lead to an era of religious syncretism, uniting many traditional gods in the form of the Sun – the highest divine force in the cosmic order.

The aim of this dissertation is to try to answer the question whether, and to what degree solar theology can be perceived as religio-historical phenomenon in the context of ancient culture. It is obvious today that Cumont’s hypotheses concerning „oriental” solar theology are not accepted uncritically and many of his interpretations no longer find support among researchers of ancient religions. However, in Classical scholarship the view on far reaching solarization of the religious culture of later antiquity – which was founded on a scientific,

philosophical and religious reflection on the cosmological importance of the sun – still holds. In this context, the interest of researcher focuses mainly on the „novelty” of ideas presented in the late antique works of Neoplatonic philosophers (Julian the Apostate, Proclus) and the well-known passages devoted to the Sun in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*. But the construction of ideas on the nature of the Sun and its role in the cosmic order has very long tradition in ancient literature. The concepts concerning the Sun in antiquity have changed along with mythical, philosophical and scientific imagination. The objective of this study is therefore also to present the continuity of the functioning of solar themes in the circulation of literary culture in Greece and Rome – starting with images known from mythology through early (presocratics and Pythagoreans) and classical (Plato and Aristotle) philosophy, to philosophically inspired Orphic literature. The argument of dissertation is that the solar speculations found in works of Late Antique authors are deeply rooted in earlier – also „rationalizing” – concepts. In addition, the selection of sources made in the work allows to consolidate the hypothesis, which states that solar theology was neither a phenomenon as unique and revolutionary in antique religious landscape, as some scholars would like, nor was it solely a product of syncretic tendencies in later polytheism and neoplatonic philosophy.

The first chapter identify basic tendencies in the research on solar theology (*status quaestionis*). The above-described and very influential Franz Cumon’s paradigm is subject to detailed analysis and discussion. Then, more recent positions on the issue of solar theology are described. This part discusses also, although it is not the main topic of the study, the hypotheses concerning Roman cult of *Sol Invictus*, which by many scholars is associated with theological reflection on the Sun in Late Antique literature.

The next two chapters discuss the issue of the presence of solar threads in religion and ancient philosophy. Chapter 2 begins with methodological remarks on the study of the religiosity of ancient Greeks, followed by a description of the mythology and cult of Helios emerging from literary sources. In this chapter also, on the example of two kings – Demetrios Poliorketes and Alexarchos – the question of the solar prerogatives of the Hellenistic rulers is discussed.

After discussion on the importance of Helios in Greek religious tradition and mythical cosmology, chapter 3 reviews the solar speculations found in early and classical Greek philosophy. An important element of this section, due to the purpose of the study, is the discussion of the presence of the sun in presocratic philosophy and Pythagoreanism. Then, the solar themes in Plato’s dialogues (primarily in the *Republic* and *Laws*) and Aristotle’s conceptualizations of the Sun are presented. Complementing the issue of earlier speculations

on the nature and importance of the Sun in Greek philosophy is presentation of solar themes in the old Stoic school and the writings of Plutarch.

Chapter 4 explores the presence of solar motifs in Orphic literature. This section begins with a discussion of the importance of the Sun in cosmology as presented by the anonymous author of *Derveni Papyrus*. The solar speculation of the Derveni author is triggered by particular mythical motives of an Orphic theogonic poem interpreted on the papyrus. This then arises the question whether there was a solar dimension of Orphic theology. In order to discuss this problem, other Orphic sources are analyzed.

The last, 5th chapter deals with Neoplatonic solar speculations. It focuses mainly on the concept of associating the Sun with the metaphysical world. This theme is closely related to the discussions presented in chapter 3 and 4. It appears from the writing of some Neoplatonic philosophers that they placed great emphasis on the practice of intellectual solar worship, inspired primarily by Platonic dialogues and mystically-oriented religiosity expressed in the Chaldean Oracles. The dissertation ends with short summary of topics that were discussed in it.