

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT

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CLUJ-NAPOCA
2026

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
1. Motivation for Choosing the Research Topic	4
2. Importance and Timeliness of the Research Topic	6
3. The Logic of the Research Topic within the Discipline of Pastoral Theology	8
4. The Scientific Objectives Assumed within the Research	13
5. Current State of Research	15
6. Research Methodology	15
7. The Stakes of the Research	18
Chapter I.....	19
Astrology and Mythology in Ancient Civilizations	19
1.1 General Considerations	19
1.2 Analysis of the Zodiac in Eastern Civilizations: Mythology versus Astrology	25
1.3 Analysis of the Zodiac in European Civilizations.....	68
Conclusions	97
Chapter II	105
Astrology as a Psychological/Therapeutic Instrument: The Christian Perspective	105
2.1 Jung and Psychoanalytic Astrology	105
2.2 The Natal Chart and Its Importance in Psychoanalytic Treatment	111
2.3 The Use of Zodiac Signs in Psychology and Theology	116
2.4. The Natal Chart as a Symbolic Map of the Self: Applications in Depth Psychology.....	147
2.5 The Integrative Perspective on the Use of Astrology as a Psychological Instrument.....	148
Conclusions	158
Chapter III	
Astrology/The Zodiac in Religious Texts	161
3.1 Astrology in the Old and New Testament.....	161
3.2. Astrology in the Old and New Testament: Between Authentic Exegesis and Erroneous Readings of the Sacred Texts.....	169
3.2.1 On the False Distinction between “Worship” and “Consulting the Signs”	169
3.2.2 On the Manipulation of Cosmological Texts (Genesis 1:14; Job 38:31–32).....	172
3.3. Prophetic Texts of Condemnation: Ignored or Reinterpreted	173

3.4 The Absence of Patristic Confrontation and Contemporary Orthodox Hermeneutics.....	174
3.5 Theological Conclusion: Between Symbol and Idol.....	176
3.6 Astrology and the Zodiac in Pastoral-Liturgical Texts.....	178
3.7 Pastoral Guidelines Regarding Occultism and Its Relationship with Astrology	185
3.8 The Canonical Position on Astrology, Divination, and Occult Practices	186
3.9 Liturgical Aspects	188
Conclusions	190
Chapter IV.....	193
The Evocation of God in the Midst of the Heavens/Zodiac Signs.....	193
4.1 Iconographic Analysis – God and the Zodiac Signs in Orthodox Places of Worship.....	193
4.2 The Cosmos and the Place of Worship – A Patristic Perspective.....	194
4.3 The Zodiac and the Place of Worship in Contemporary Theological Discourse.....	196
Conclusions	207
Bibliography.....	215
Sources	215
General and Specialized Works	215
Journals	224
Online Sources	224
Appendices.....	226
Appendix 1.....	226
Appendix 2.....	229
Images of the Zodiac in Various Places of Worship around the World.....	229
Appendix 3.....	238
Images of Different Zodiac Systems.....	238

Abstract of the Doctoral Dissertation

“The Zodiac Between Myth and Pastoral Practice: Psychotheology and Iconography”

Keywords: zodiac and Orthodox Theology, astrology and Christian faith, cosmic symbolism, zodiacal iconography, free will and destiny, idolatry and spiritual discernment, horoscope and religious syncretism, contemporary pastoral ministry.

Research Context and Objectives

The doctoral dissertation “*The Zodiac Between Myth and Pastoral Practice*” (supervised by Archimandrite Professor Teofil Tia, PhD, DSc, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca) undertakes a critical examination of the significance of the zodiac and astrology from an Orthodox theological and pastoral perspective.

The research is grounded in the premise that the heavens and celestial bodies hold particular significance for a wide spectrum of believers, both at the level of the macrocosm and within the human microcosm. Consequently, the study argues for the necessity of a theological reinterpretation of astrological motifs as they appear in popular religious beliefs and in Orthodox iconography.

The primary objective of the dissertation is to elucidate the spiritual relationship between Heaven and Earth by analyzing the zodiac as an integral component of divine creation. Additionally, the thesis adopts a psychotheological approach, emphasizing the symbolic and therapeutic dimensions of astrology, while engaging with concepts drawn from Jungian analytical psychology.

Main Theological and Pastoral Themes

The Zodiac and Divine Creation

The dissertation emphasizes that the zodiacal signs are part of Creation itself. From an Orthodox theological perspective, astrology cannot constitute an autonomous power but functions rather as a language of creation. Consequently, biblical texts strongly condemn the worship of stars as idols: “all the gods of the nations are idols” (Wisdom 13:1–2). Saint John of Damascus affirms that human destiny is not governed by planetary movements, stating that human beings are “made free by the Creator and masters of our own actions.”

Accordingly, the thesis argues that astrology must be approached symbolically, as a reflection of God in His role as Creator of the universe (cf. Isaiah 44:24–25), and not as a deterministic force shaping human destiny.

Scriptural and Patristic Exegesis

The theological chapter highlights Orthodox exegesis of scriptural passages that may appear to legitimize divination through the stars. For example, Deuteronomy 18:10–12 explicitly prohibits practices such as divination and astrology, thereby reinforcing traditional Christian teaching. Likewise, the episode involving the prophet Daniel (Daniel 2:27–28) underscores the impotence of pagan diviners in contrast to divine revelation.

The dissertation also notes the relative absence of extensive patristic treatments of the zodiac, while documenting historical confusions that emerged when occult practices were absorbed into or conflated with Christian elements. One of the key theological conclusions is the decisive distinction between symbol and idol: Christian faith may employ cosmic symbols—such as icons incorporating astrological elements—as testimonies to God’s providential care for humanity; however, any astrological interpretation that claims control over human destiny is deemed idolatrous.

Iconography and Pastoral–Liturgical Symbolism

The thesis offers a concrete analysis of the use of zodiacal imagery in Orthodox sacred art. A notable example discussed is the depiction of God the Father surrounded by the twelve zodiacal signs, as found in the frescoes of Voroneț Monastery. This representation conveys a clear theological message: the celestial bodies are God’s creation, and the Kingdom of Heaven—symbolized by angels and golden hues—is not determined by them.

Accompanying iconographic inscriptions drawn from Scripture (such as Isaiah 44) reaffirm that the Creator of heaven and earth is the Lord, raising a fundamental theological question: if planets were to govern human life, what would remain of free will and the economy of salvation? The dissertation thus demonstrates that zodiacal scenes in churches fulfill a catechetical function, reminding the faithful that both earthly and eternal life remain in God’s hands.

The study also addresses the history of the medieval “Zodiac Man,” its connections to early Christian traditions, and Eastern iconographic influences, illustrating how cosmic symbols were reinterpreted within the framework of holy iconography.

Psychological and Psychotheological Approach

The chapter devoted to psychological perspectives demonstrates how astrology operates as a mythic and therapeutic language. Jung’s theories of archetypes are examined, particularly in relation to the zodiac and its symbolic connection to the human psyche—for instance, the image of the zodiac as an “imaginary belt” of the cosmos reflecting the inner human microcosm.

From a Christian standpoint, the dissertation argues that astrological numbers and signs may be interpreted as symbolic expressions of the human need for meaning and harmony, rather than as predictive or magical instruments. Ultimately, the study proposes a holistic vision: when approached theologically and psychologically, astronomy and astrology can enrich pastoral understanding of the human condition (for example, in spiritual counseling), provided it is acknowledged that cosmic powers are not objects of worship but manifestations of the Creator's revelation.

Methodology and Critical Analysis

The dissertation employs an interdisciplinary methodology. On the one hand, it undertakes exegetical analysis of biblical and patristic texts, carefully examining passages from both the Old and New Testaments that refer to the stars and celestial phenomena, particularly those found in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. On the other hand, the study engages in iconographic research and comparative theological analysis, identifying historical representations of the zodiac in sacred art and explicating their doctrinal significance.

In addition, the thesis incorporates a psychotheological analysis, drawing on references from analytical psychology (notably Jung and Forer), as well as contemporary examples, such as the horoscope understood as a modern social phenomenon.

The major critiques identified in the dissertation concern the lack of a clearly articulated contemporary Orthodox hermeneutic of astrology—especially the insistence that “Christian tradition does not explicitly refer to astrology as destiny”—the absence of comprehensive synthetic studies at the national level, and the potential syncretistic tendencies observed among modern believers. From an argumentative standpoint, the thesis succeeds in bringing together multiple disciplinary fields: it moves beyond a merely moral condemnation (while clearly affirming that divination is identified as sinful according to Scripture) and simultaneously proposes constructive reinterpretations.

Specifically, the dissertation abandons the esoteric view of astrology as a magical force and redefines it as a symbolic framework and explanatory instrument for the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. Scriptural texts are thus reinterpreted primarily as warnings against idolatry rather than as anti-scientific statements.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates rigor in its use of sources. Primary references are drawn from the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers (e.g., Deuteronomy 18:10–12; Jeremiah 27:9–11), followed by contemporary Romanian Orthodox theological works, including pastoral reflections (with authors such as Danion Vasile cited). The scope

of the research is limited to the Romanian Orthodox and Western-Orthodox contexts; other Christian confessions (Catholic and Protestant) are not included.

The study explicitly defends a position grounded in Orthodox Christian conviction, categorically identifying astrology with superstition, and is thus doctrinally consistent from an Orthodox dogmatic perspective. The dissertation anticipates that postdoctoral research will expand the methodological framework through sociological analysis based on robust empirical data (such as surveys and everyday behavioral patterns), although the introduction already references statistical data provided by IRES concerning belief in horoscopes.

The author makes use of unconventional sources within the field of pastoral–liturgical theology. Alongside classical sources (Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers), the study—inevitably—also incorporates popular informational materials, such as horoscope websites and magazines. This is not a mere inventory of sources; rather, through this realistic strategy, the dissertation captures the way in which astrology is perceived in contemporary society.

For example, the inclusion of excerpts from newspapers or online horoscope platforms illustrates for believers how “the horoscope presents itself as an oasis of hope and benevolence.” Although such a method might otherwise appear cumbersome or questionable within an academic framework, the author justifies it as a necessary approach in order not to bypass the actual phenomenon under investigation. This openness to non-traditional resources represents a clear innovation when compared to conventional theological studies, which often ignore mass media entirely.

Secondly, the dissertation is distinguished by its integrated approach to the subject matter. It weaves together dogmatic theology, biblical exegesis, and pastoral practice with elements drawn from literary and sociological analysis. For instance, the chapter devoted to pastoral issues relies both on canonical and patristic sources (such as *The Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* by Saint John of Damascus, cited to reject horoscope-based predestination) and on statistical data or anthropological observations concerning the prevalence of astrology in contemporary Romania.

This methodological synthesis is relatively rare. In contrast to recent Romanian theological writings—where the emphasis tends to fall primarily on general moral warnings—the dissertation offers a detailed analytical framework, including direct interventions at the level of symbolic language and concrete practices. One such example is the explicit theological definition of “star-diviners” as idols, rather than as neutral cultural phenomena.

The following table highlights specific methodological features and categories of sources employed in the research:

Elements of Originality and Methodological Contribution:

Element of Originality	Description / Key Content	Significance and Impact
Use of Media-Based Sources	An uncommon scholarly engagement with popular materials (astrology magazines, online horoscope platforms) in order to capture the “real face” of the phenomenon as it manifests in contemporary culture.	Provides a timely and context-sensitive perspective, explaining why believers are drawn to horoscopes and how pastoral counseling can address these attractions more effectively.
Interdisciplinary Synergy	Integrates theological exegesis with analytical psychology, iconographic studies, and sociological data.	Offers a comprehensive understanding of the zodiac’s impact—both as a symbolic system and as a social phenomenon—surpassing the scope of earlier works limited to strictly theological analysis.

Original Contributions and Points of Scholarly Interest

This dissertation advances several noteworthy contributions to the field:

Psychotheological Synergy

- The study integrates Jungian perspectives with patristic theology—an approach rarely encountered in Orthodox doctoral research—demonstrating the potential significance of zodiacal imagery as representations of the human psyche. For example, constellations are interpreted symbolically as an “imaginary belt” of the cosmos that mirrors the inner psychological microcosm.

Christian Iconography Incorporating Astrological Motifs

- The dissertation examines Orthodox zodiacal iconography (such as the frescoes at Voroneț Monastery and icons featuring stellar ornamentation) not as marginal or accidental phenomena, but as deliberate theological statements. Through a detailed analysis of pictorial symbols and liturgical inscriptions—including scriptural citations positioned around zodiacal figures—the study reveals how ecclesiastical artists

preserved zodiacal imagery while reinterpreting it within a Christ-centered theological framework.

Recontextualization of Tradition

- The research also addresses modern reinterpretations of ancient themes, such as the influence of the New Age movement within Eastern Christian contexts. It documents how contemporary believers attempt to reconstruct a “bridge” between astrology and Christianity in syncretistic ways, while the dissertation itself challenges such tendencies by calling for a critical reassessment of the pagan roots of horoscope-based practices.

Pastoral Relevance

- The dissertation proposes contemporary frameworks for pastoral engagement with occult practices (cf. the subsection *Pastoral Guidelines*), recommending that clergy clearly articulate the distinction between observing the heavens as part of divine worship and theological contemplation—such as in the prayer of Saint Basil the Great, which invokes the expulsion of “every work of the devil” manifested through unnatural phenomena—and the worship of signs as a sinful act. This distinction provides priests with practical tools for addressing confusion between cosmological symbolism and idolatry in pastoral counseling.

In addition, the study reiterates key dogmatic affirmations—such as the conviction that “God created the heavens and the earth,” rather than the constellations themselves functioning as autonomous powers—by drawing on both historical examples and contemporary theological reasoning. The argument grounded in human free will (“if the planets were to govern human life, where would human agency and responsibility remain?”) is employed to reinforce the Orthodox understanding of salvation and moral accountability.

Taken together, these contributions have the potential to enrich Romanian Orthodox theological literature on occult beliefs, a field that has remained relatively underdeveloped over the past century.

Interdisciplinary Psychotheological Approach

The interdisciplinary psychotheological approach represents another major element of originality. One of the truly innovative aspects of the dissertation is the integration of analytical psychology—particularly Jungian theory—into the study of the zodiac within the framework of Orthodox theology. Rather than treating astrology solely as a doctrinal issue, the thesis approaches it as a symbolic and therapeutic instrument of the human psyche,

noting that astrology has functioned as “an effective therapeutic tool” for modern individuals.

This perspective, rarely encountered in Romanian theological literature, emphasizes the archetypal function of astral signs and opens a conceptual bridge between symbolism and mental health. The discussion of “depth psychology” in relation to astrology (Chapter II), together with the explicit inclusion of Jung in the argumentation, marks a new direction in Orthodox pastoral theology. While classical theological treatises tend to condemn astrology exclusively as superstition, the dissertation introduces its symbolic and therapeutic dimensions as viewed through a Christian lens.

At its core, the study proposes a reinterpretation of the zodiac as a means of self-knowledge and alignment with the divine, rather than as a source of prophecy or determinism. This constitutes a significant methodological innovation, as explicit discussions of the psychological role of Christian and pre-Christian myths are rarely found in pastoral-theological works.

Original Iconographic and Symbolic Analysis

The dissertation further offers an original contribution through its iconographic and symbolic analysis of zodiacal motifs in ecclesiastical art. It is the first study to construct a comprehensive account of how zodiac signs appear in Orthodox frescoes and icons and to explicate the theological meanings attributed to them in these contexts.

A particularly detailed analysis concerns the iconographic representation of God the Father positioned among the twelve zodiac signs—found at Voroneț Monastery and in other Orthodox churches. This imagery conveys a fundamental theological message: the created heavens, symbolized by the sun, moon, and stars (the zodiac), are depicted as being “above” yet ultimately “within the hand” of God. In this context, the icons visually articulate the teaching that astrological signs are elements of creation, not rulers of human destiny (cf. Isaiah 44 and Jeremiah 27, as cited in the dissertation).

This iconographic approach is profoundly innovative, as it connects concrete visual representations with fresh theological interpretations. One notable example is the explanation of why angels are depicted as “unrolling” or “holding” the zodiac like a scroll—an image interpreted as a visual proclamation of divine sovereignty over cosmic order. Recent scholarship lacks a systematic analysis correlating zodiacal symbolism with Scripture and Patristic theology in the manner achieved by this dissertation.

Consequently, the study is distinguished by the *primacy of theological vision* in its reading of images and by its methodical decoding of visual symbolism—an approach marked by a high degree of originality.

The table below highlights this contribution as a novel element of the research:

Original Contributions: Iconographic and Scriptural Analysis

Element of Originality	Description / Key Content	Significance and Impact
Symbolic Analysis of Zodiacal Iconography	An original study of visual representations of the zodiac in Orthodox churches (e.g., Voroneț Monastery) and their theological interpretation.	Demonstrates how religious art incorporates zodiacal motifs to emphasize God’s sovereignty over cosmic structures. The interpretation of iconographic messages provides new didactic tools for clergy and catechetical instruction.
Integration of Zodiacal Imagery with Biblical Texts	A direct correlation between zodiacal signs and scriptural passages (Isaiah, Jeremiah), as well as dogmatic sources (John of Damascus), presented within an iconographic context.	Highlights the continuity between Creation and Scripture, demonstrating that any attempt at “reading the stars” as determinants of destiny is interpreted as idolatry (cf. Sirach 13), while reaffirming Christian freedom in relation to the cosmos.

Pastoral Implications and Recommendations

The discussion developed in the dissertation carries several concrete implications for clergy and spiritual counselors:

Catechetical Education

- The study recommends the inclusion of these themes in sermons and catechetical programs in order to counteract popular anti-Christian influences. For example, clergy may draw on iconographic imagery (such as the frescoes at Voroneț Monastery) and patristic texts to demonstrate that zodiacal signs do not determine human destiny, but rather point toward the responsibility of knowing and worshiping the “Creator of the heavens.” In this way, cosmological symbols are reoriented from fatalism toward theological contemplation.

Spiritual Counseling

- The pastoral care of individuals who rely heavily on horoscopes may be significantly enhanced through the framework proposed by the dissertation. Spiritual counselors may acknowledge symbolic analogies (for instance, zodiacal signs interpreted metaphorically as stages of spiritual growth), while clearly distinguishing such symbolism from any claim to predictive or controlling power. Since “the horoscope offers the false impression that destiny can be known in advance,” pastoral guidance must consistently reaffirm the Christian understanding of freedom as a gift received from God and exercised in personal responsibility.

Liturgical and Canonical Implications

The dissertation reaffirms that no Ecumenical Council or Church Father has ever sanctioned divination through the stars. On the contrary, the involvement of occult practitioners is explicitly condemned in prophetic texts as a sign of divine displeasure (cf. Jeremiah 27, where diviners are said to “prophesy lies”). Accordingly, the study recommends the pastoral use of prayers of protection—such as the Prayers (Molitfas) of Saint Basil the Great—in situations where demonic influence is perceived or pastorally discerned.

Educational Programs

In light of the statistical data cited in the dissertation (indicating that approximately 45% of Romanians consult horoscopes), the author proposes the development of educational initiatives at the parish level or within youth-oriented programs such as summer schools. These initiatives would draw on the dissertation’s psychotheological framework—integrating Jungian insights, iconographic analysis, and scriptural references—to address contemporary vulnerability to charlatanism and superstition.

Systematic Pastoral Innovation and Scholarly Impact

A major element of originality is also found in the dissertation’s systematic pastoral dimension. The thesis explicitly formulates pastoral recommendations and catechetical frameworks for addressing the phenomenon of horoscopes—an approach rarely encountered at the doctoral level. The author’s merit lies in effectively linking scholarly research to the concrete needs of the contemporary Church, identifying multiple levels of pastoral intervention (preaching, spiritual counseling, prayer, and pedagogical formation) where zodiac-related issues must be addressed.

This practical orientation—most notably reflected in a dedicated chapter entitled *Pastoral Guidelines*—confers upon the dissertation an unusually applied character. In contrast to many theological studies that remain largely abstract or theoretical, this work is explicitly

designed to serve pastoral vocation, a feature that constitutes a significant argument for its originality.

In summary, the dissertation’s original contribution lies in its psychotheological and iconographic focus, through which it uncovers meanings previously unexplored in the existing literature. Its potential impact on Romanian pastoral theology is considerable: it offers a model of integrative research and provides concrete pastoral practices for engaging with contemporary occult phenomena. The findings presented here may thus be regarded as initial steps toward the development of a school of thought capable of addressing syncretism and modern myths with the same rigor traditionally applied to fundamental dogmatic issues.

Summary Table of Themes and Pastoral Applications:

Thematic Area	Core Focus	Pastoral / Academic Applications
Theological Interpretation of the Zodiac	The zodiac understood as part of divine creation, interpreted symbolically rather than deterministically.	Clarifies the distinction between cosmic symbolism and idolatry; supports catechetical teaching on creation, providence, and free will.
Biblical and Patristic Exegesis	Analysis of scriptural and patristic texts addressing stars, divination, and human freedom.	Provides doctrinal grounding for pastoral responses to astrology; reinforces traditional Orthodox teaching against fatalism.
Iconographic Analysis	Study of zodiacal motifs in Orthodox frescoes and icons (e.g., God the Father among the twelve signs).	Offers visual and catechetical tools for preaching and religious education; enhances theological literacy through sacred art.
Psychotheological Perspective	Integration of Jungian analytical psychology with Orthodox theology; zodiac as archetypal language.	Enriches spiritual counseling by addressing psychological needs for meaning and coherence without endorsing superstition.

Thematic Area	Core Focus	Pastoral / Academic Applications
Pastoral Counseling	Engagement with individuals influenced by horoscopes and occult practices.	Supports clergy in affirming Christian freedom and responsibility while acknowledging symbolic dimensions of human experience.
Liturgical and Canonical Framework	Reaffirmation of the Church's rejection of divination and occult practices.	Guides the appropriate use of protective prayers and liturgical resources in pastoral contexts.
Educational and Catechetical Programs	Development of parish-based courses and youth programs addressing astrology and superstition.	Promotes critical discernment among believers; counters syncretism through integrated theological, psychological, and cultural education.
Scholarly Contribution	Interdisciplinary methodology combining theology, psychology, iconography, and sociology.	Proposes a replicable research model for pastoral theology and religious studies addressing contemporary myths and beliefs.

Conclusions

The doctoral dissertation *“The Zodiac Between Myth and Pastoral Practice”* offers an integrative vision of astrology within the Orthodox context. Rather than merely reiterating traditional condemnations, the study advances a psychotheological and visual interpretation that remains engaging even for non-specialist readers. Through a dense yet accessible scholarly language, the author succeeds in maintaining exegetical rigor—drawing extensively on Scripture and the Church Fathers—while simultaneously demonstrating creativity in the dialogue established between image and theory.

The dissertation's practical contributions—ranging from the development of inspirational visual resources to concrete pastoral recommendations—render the synthesis particularly valuable for Romanian Orthodox clergy and theologians. Taken as a whole, the study emphasizes that discussions surrounding horoscopes and zodiacal beliefs cannot be relegated to a peripheral status. Instead, such issues engage core themes of Orthodox

theology, including the doctrine of the Creator, human free will, and the relationship between humanity and God, thereby requiring sustained attention within pastoral practice and catechetical formation.

Postdoctoral Research Directions

The dissertation also opens several compelling and methodologically robust avenues for postdoctoral research. These research axes raise key questions that are credible and relevant to both theology and psychology:

I. Idolatry as a Psychological Mechanism

- **Research Question:** Is idolatry primarily a theological error, or an inevitable psychological mechanism?

Theoretical Framework: Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of the Self, the numinous, and projection, in dialogue with Wisdom 13 and the theological confusion between creation and Creator.

Hypothesis: Idolatry does not arise from the absence of religion, but from the hyperfunctioning of symbolic imagination that remains psychologically unintegrated.

Methodology: Comparative analysis of biblical texts and Jungian writings; symbolic hermeneutics; history of religious ideas.

Research Aim: To reformulate idolatry as a psychological pathology in the perception of the sacred, rather than merely a moral deviation.

II. The Forer Effect and Spiritual Discernment (Cognitive Psychology and Theology)

- **Research Question:** Why do individuals tend to recognize false revelations as authentic?

Theoretical Framework: Bertram R. Forer's work on cognitive bias, correlated with traditional concepts of spiritual discernment in Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian.

Hypothesis: Classical spiritual discernment functions as a cognitive antidote to the Forer effect.

Methodology: Psychological analysis of ascetic texts; correlation with contemporary literature on cognitive biases; potential interdisciplinary experimental studies.

Research Aim: To position theology as an epistemological resource, not merely a confessional discourse.

III. The Numinous Without God (Jung and Secular Spirituality)

- **Research Question:** What becomes of numinous experience in a post-theistic culture?

Theoretical Framework: Jung's concepts of the numinous and *religio naturalis*, combined with studies on the "spiritual but not religious" phenomenon.

Hypothesis: Modernity has not lost the sacred but has fragmented it into micro-idolatry (e.g., the self, science, ideology).

Methodology: Sociology of religion, discourse analysis, cultural psychology.

Research Aim: To explain the resurgence of "magical" thinking within highly rationalized societies.

IV. Archetype versus Revelation: The Limits of the Psychology of Religion

- **Research Question:** Can psychology fully explain revelation without ultimately negating it?

Theoretical Framework: Jungian archetypal theory and symbolism, apophatic theology, and critiques of psychological reductionism.

Hypothesis: Reducing revelation to archetypal structures reproduces precisely the error described in Wisdom 13.

Methodology: Epistemological analysis; interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and psychology; philosophy of science.

Research Aim: To establish a clear methodological boundary between explanation and reduction.

V. Modern Idolatry and the Psychology of Belief (Contemporary Applications)

- **Research Question:** What “gods of the world” does the modern psyche produce?
Potential Case Studies: The cult of performance, technology as transcendence, identity-based ideologies, absolutized wellness culture.
Theoretical Framework: Jungian and Forerian psychology, biblical theology, and self-psychology.
Research Aim: To achieve interdisciplinary and public relevance by analyzing contemporary forms of idolatry with cultural impact.