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Rev. S. Clive Thexton, M.Th., in the Chair

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## NEOPLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY

By

the Rev. Principal PHILIP S. WATSON, M.A., B.D.

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

# NEOPLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY

By the Rev. Principal PHILIP S. WATSON, M.A., B.D.

## SYNOPSIS

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I. Neoplatonism flourished from about A.D. 245 to 529. It influenced Christian thought directly through St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, indirectly through Muslim philosophy. Renaissance "Platonism" was thoroughly Neoplatonic—as was also the "Christian Platonism" of the second century, which resulted from the same general movement of thought as Neoplatonism.

II. The presupposition of Neoplatonism is the "Alexandrian world-scheme", in which there is a descending scale of existence from God to matter, and an ascending movement of the soul from the material world to God. In Neoplatonism the descending scale comprises the Divine Triad of the One, the Intelligible World and the World-Soul, and also the sense-world, formed by Soul out of Matter. Matter is the principle of evil, and salvation consists in flight from the world, the mystical ascent of the soul through purification and illumination to union with God.

III. Christianity and Neoplatonism are basically incompatible. Christianity thinks of evil, not as matter, but as the devil, to whom man has fallen victim. Deliverance is found not through man's flight from the world, but through God's coming into the world; and the end is not individual disembodiment, but corporate resurrection and the renewal of the entire cosmic order.

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## I

NEOPLATONISM is the name commonly given in modern times to the last great philosophical school of antiquity.<sup>1</sup> It is distinguished as *Neoplatonism* from the older, more conservative Platonism of the Athenian Academy, although in their own day its representatives were known simply as Platonists. Originating at Alexandria, it flourished from about the middle of the third century A.D. to the early decades of the sixth, its main centres being in turn at Rome, in Syria, and at Athens. Its most outstanding representative was Plotinus (A.D. 205–270),<sup>2</sup> who is often regarded as the founder of the school, and who was certainly its most creative thinker. Other names of importance in its history are those of

<sup>1</sup> On Neoplatonism generally see: C. Bigg, *Neoplatonism* (1895), T. Whittaker, *The Neoplatonists* (1901), E. R. Dodds, *Select Passages illustrating Neoplatonism* (1923), E. Caird, *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers* (2 vols., 1900–1902), W. R. Inge, art. "Neoplatonism" in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> On Plotinus see: W. R. Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (2 vols., 1917–1918), S. Mackenna, *Plotinus* (a translation of the *Enneads*, 5 vols., 1917–1930), G. Turnbull, *The Essence of Plotinus* (mainly extracts from Mackenna's translation, 1934).

Porphyry (A.D. 233–304), the biographer of Plotinus and editor of his works; Iamblichus (died c. A.D. 330), who introduced a number of modifications into the Plotinian system; and Proclus (A.D. 410–485),<sup>1</sup> the “scholastic” systematizer and summarizer of Neoplatonism.

Plotinus, who was born in Egypt, was educated at Alexandria. There he devoted himself to philosophy, but found no teacher to satisfy him until, at the age of twenty-eight, he went to hear Ammonius Saccas (c. A.D. 160–242). Saccas, who is said to have been born of Christian parents, though he was not a Christian himself, is held by some to have been the real founder of Neoplatonism—not unreasonably, seeing that Plotinus studied under him for no less than ten years and must have been considerably indebted to him. He is reported to have made it his principal aim to reconcile Platonism and Aristotelianism; but little is known of his teaching, since he would neither commit it to writing himself nor permit others to do so.

At the age of forty, after a brief excursion to the Middle East, Plotinus took up his residence in Rome. There he opened a school, which soon became popular and even fashionable, counting the Emperor Gallienus and his wife among its patrons. Porphyry, who became a member of it nearly twenty years later, describes how the works of the great philosophers were read and discussed, essays were set for the students to write, and a lively correspondence was carried on with Athens and other intellectual centres. Plotinus, of course, expounded his own thought in lectures; but he wrote nothing for publication, and the fact that his work survives is due to Porphyry, who borrowed and edited his lecture-notes and essays. As these had been hastily and carelessly written in a very difficult style, and were in no sort of order, Porphyry had anything but an easy task. He arranged the material according to the topics treated, in six books of nine chapters each—“an arrangement for which only Pythagorean reasons can be found”,<sup>2</sup> but from which they derive their title, *The Enneads*.

The work of Plotinus was continued at Rome by Porphyry, and for a time by his pupil Iamblichus. Both were natives of Syria, where Iamblichus taught in his later years, and both were anti-Christian. Whereas Plotinus had attacked only the Gnostics,<sup>3</sup> Porphyry published an important and lengthy work *Against the Christians*, of which unfortunately only fragments survive. Porphyry was a prolific and versatile writer, but Iamblichus was the abler philosopher and contributed more to the development of Neoplatonism. Much of his work, too, has perished, and his thought is chiefly known to us from secondary sources, especially Proclus, and from the semi-philosophical work *On the Mysteries of the*

<sup>1</sup> On Proclus see: E. R. Dodds, *Proclus, The Elements of Theology* (1933).

<sup>2</sup> Inge, *Plotinus*, I, 119.

<sup>3</sup> In the 9th book of the 2nd *Ennead*.

*Egyptians*, which is traditionally attributed to him, and which certainly belongs to his school. He modified and elaborated the Plotinian system with the aid of Pythagorean number-symbolism and Oriental ideas reminiscent of Gnosticism.<sup>1</sup>

It was the spirit of Iamblichus's Syrian Neoplatonism that found expression in the attempt of the Emperor Julian the Apostate (A.D. 332–363) to suppress Christianity and restore the pagan faith. When the attempt failed, paganism was thereafter on the defensive, but the story of Neoplatonism was far from ended. Towards the end of the fourth century it captured the Academy at Athens in the person of the then Diadochus, Plutarch (A.D. 350?–430),<sup>2</sup> whose successor Syrianus became the teacher of Proclus.

Proclus, who was born at Constantinople, studied at Alexandria before coming to Athens at the age of nineteen. In due course he became Diadochus, and held the chair of Plato till his death—though at one period his vigorous criticism of Christianity cost him a year's banishment from Athens. He was an energetic lecturer and voluminous writer, who besides commentaries on the Platonic Dialogues and a work *On the Theology of Plato*, produced astronomical, mathematical, literary and grammatical treatises, several essays in theodicy, and a number of hymns. His most important work is *The Elements of Theology*, in which he seeks to give a full and systematic account of Neoplatonism, including certain modifications of his own. Although he ranks as second only to Plotinus in importance, he was less a creative thinker than “a systematizer who carried to its utmost limits the ideal of one comprehensive philosophy that should embrace all the garnered wisdom of the ancient world.”<sup>3</sup> None of his successors was of comparable significance, and the last of them, Damascius, went into exile with the rest when the Emperor Justinian, in an excess of Christian zeal, closed the philosophical schools and confiscated their endowments in the year 529.

But the expulsion of the philosophers was not the expulsion of philosophy. Over a century earlier, St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430) had been helped on his way to Christianity by reading, as he tells us in his *Confessions*, “certain books of the Platonists”.<sup>4</sup> These were (or included) the *Enneads* of Plotinus in Latin translation, and they so thoroughly converted Augustine to Neoplatonism that his subsequent conversion to Christianity made little difference to the basic structure of his thought.

<sup>1</sup> Dodds, *Proclus* xxiii, quotes Olympiodorus as saying: “some put philosophy first, as Porphyry, Plotinus, &c.; others the priestly art, as Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus and all the priestly school”. What this means may be illustrated by a passage from the *de Mysteriis* (Dodds, op. cit., xx) which says: “It is not thought that links the theurgist to the gods. . . [but] the unspeakable acts correctly performed . . . and the power of the unutterable symbols. . .”

<sup>2</sup> The “Diadochus” was the “Successor of Plato” as head of the Academy.

<sup>3</sup> Dodds, *Proclus*, xxv.

<sup>4</sup> *Conf.*, vii. 9.

It was therefore a Neoplatonized Christianity that was mediated by his authority to the Middle Ages. Nor was Athenian Neoplatonism without its effect. Within a generation after the death of Proclus, his teaching was "dressed up in Christian draperies"<sup>1</sup> and passed off as the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of St. Paul (cf. Acts 17: 34). Although suspect at first, "Dionysius" soon gained an authority second only to that of Augustine. His works became the subject of a long series of commentaries extending over several centuries; they were translated into Latin by the schoolman and mystic, Erigena (A.D. 810-877); they influenced scholastic thought generally, and not least that of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274); and they exercised a powerful effect on St. John Damascenus (died c. A.D. 750), the Aquinas of the East.

In the meantime, however, the closing of the Academy had borne strange fruit. The exiles had migrated to Persia and Syria, where their influence reinforced that of Nestorian and Monophysite Christian schools in disseminating a knowledge of Greek learning through the Middle East. This was the chief though not the only means by which philosophy was introduced to the Muslim world, whose scholars studied Syriac and Arabic translations of Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists, furnished for them by the Christians.<sup>2</sup> Then in due course, Latin versions of these translations, and of the works of Arabian and Jewish philosophers, were made available to the medieval Schoolmen. It is true that the Arabians regarded Aristotle as the philosopher *par excellence*; but they made little of the differences between the Greeks, and they read their Aristotle with more or less Neoplatonic eyes.<sup>3</sup> What is more, certain highly influential books attributed to Aristotle were in fact of Neoplatonic origin: the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, for instance, and the *Liber de causis* consist of little more than extracts from Plotinus and Proclus respectively.

A more direct influence of Neoplatonism on scholastic thought resulted when, from the latter part of the twelfth century onwards,<sup>4</sup> Latin translations of original Greek texts were gradually produced. Of particular importance among these were the works of Proclus, including the *Elements of Theology*, which appeared at a time when Plotinus and Plato were almost entirely unknown in the West, and which played a decisive part in shaping the later medieval conception of Platonism. The *Elements* was used by Aquinas, and it had considerable vogue among the German Dominicans, notably Eckhart (1260?-1327) and his disciples, Tauler, Suso and Ruysbroeck. (Neoplatonism is the primary source of western

<sup>1</sup> Dodds, *Proclus*, xxvi.

<sup>2</sup> J. W. Sweetman, *Islam and Christian Theology*, I (1945), 84-92.

<sup>3</sup> This is important when we remember that Aquinas, for instance, interpreted his Aristotle with the aid of the Arabian commentator Avicenna (1135-1204). Inge, *Plot.*, I, 15, holds that St. Thomas is nearer to Plotinus than to the real Aristotle.

<sup>4</sup> Especially after the capture of Constantinople by the crusading Latins in 1204.

mysticism!) Then, in the fifteenth century, there came a still more powerful wave of Neoplatonic influence, when Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464) founded the Platonic Academy in Florence under the inspiration of Greek scholars who had fled to Italy when Constantinople was threatened by the Turks. At the Florentine Academy, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) transcribed his own copy of Proclus, translated and expounded Plato, Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius—and interpreted St. Paul's Epistles in the light of them all! Such was the "Platonism" that marked the Renaissance as a reaction from the Aristotelianism of the schools, and such was the fruit of Justinian's endeavour to deliver Christendom from the perils of pagan philosophy.

But there is yet another important source of Neoplatonic influence on Christianity, earlier than any so far mentioned. If Ammonius Saccas was the founder of the school, then there is a direct influence through Origen (c. A.D. 183–252), who like Plotinus studied under him. But even if not, the "Christian Platonism" of Origen—and indeed of his predecessor Clement (c. A.D. 150–212/5)<sup>1</sup>—is of a thoroughly Neoplatonizing type. For both Christian Platonism and Neoplatonism may be said to be products of a wider movement of thought, typical of the age, which found expression supremely at Alexandria.

It was a movement that arose, broadly speaking, out of a threefold sense of need. Men wanted a unified philosophy, to supersede the weary rivalries of the schools; they wanted authority, to buttress failing confidence in their own unaided reason; and, above all, they wanted salvation, a way of deliverance from the ageing and decaying world in which they felt they lived. At Alexandria, the great cosmopolitan centre of late antiquity, schools and sects of every kind sought to cater for this need. Here Philo (c. 20 B.C.—A.D. 50) had claimed the authority of Moses for his synthesis of the Jewish and the Hellenistic spirit; here the Neopythagorean theosophy flourished, invoking the authority of a half-legendary name; here the Gnostics alleged secret tradition or special revelation for their mingled Christian, Greek and pagan lore; here Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism were indiscriminately drawn upon to form the eclectic philosophy of the day. The distinctions between the various schools had grown more and more vague, and that between philosophy itself and religion had become increasingly blurred. Alexandrian religion was philosophical and Alexandrian philosophy religious—and it was no doubt for this reason that Pythagoras and Plato were the philosophers most favoured among the Alexandrians generally.

Plotinus does not seem to have been directly indebted either to Philo—who has nevertheless been called "the Jewish founder of Neoplatonism"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the Christian Platonists see C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (1886).

<sup>2</sup> A. Wolf, "Philosophy, History of" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 14th edn., XVII, 749 b).

—or to the Christian Platonists. He is more closely akin to the Neopythagoreans and eclectic Platonists<sup>1</sup> like Plutarch of Chaeronea (A.D. 46–120) and Numenius of Apamea (fl. A.D. 150–200). But his own intention was to be purely and simply a Platonist, and he would have been delighted with St. Augustine's saying that "in Plotinus Plato lived again".<sup>2</sup> Greatly as he revered all "the ancient philosophers of blessed memory"<sup>3</sup> (and not least Aristotle), Plato alone is for him the quite infallible authority;<sup>4</sup> and next to Plato he ranks Pythagoras. A similar leaning to authority is found later in Proclus,<sup>5</sup> who speaks of Plotinus and Iamblichus as "most divine", but who nonetheless gives Plato first place as definitely an inspired writer and a mediator of divine revelation. Alongside Plato, however, and of equal authority with him, Proclus places the *Chaldaean Oracles* as containing a direct revelation from the gods.

## II

But let us return to Alexandria. Here there developed, as a result of the syncretistic tendencies indicated above, a distinctive kind of philosophy of religion, of which the characteristic features can be traced alike in Gnosticism, Christian Platonism and Neoplatonism.<sup>6</sup> These features are comprised in what has been called "the Alexandrian world-scheme", which came to be the basic, unquestioned assumption of Alexandrian thought. In this scheme, a sharp contrast is drawn between the world of the divine and that of material existence—a contrast closely akin to that in Plato between the world of Ideas and the sense-world. The two worlds are now set over against one another in a way that makes it necessary to establish communication between them by means of a series of intermediate beings. This communication is conceived as proceeding in two directions: downwards from the divine to the material, and upwards from the material to the divine. The downward movement provides an explanation of the existence of the phenomenal world, while the upward movement is the way of salvation for the soul. Here—in a manner that is hardly Platonic—cosmology is wedded to soteriology, and theorizing about the world is subservient to the practical quest for salvation. And as with the Alexandrians generally, so with Plotinus, the practical, religious interest is paramount.

According to Plotinus, all forms and phases of existence emanate or radiate from the One, which is also called the First, the Good and the

<sup>1</sup> So Inge; but Dodds would give an important place to Poseidonius of Apamea (?130–50 B.C.), as "the first of the three dominant personalities who have left their individual impress upon Neoplatonism" (*Proclus*, xviii).

<sup>2</sup> *Contra Academicos*, 3. 18. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Enneads*, 3. 7. 1.

<sup>4</sup> When he says in the *Enneads* "we read", he means "we read in Plato", and the phrase has about it something of the numinous finality of the N.T. "it is written".

<sup>5</sup> Dodds, *Proclus*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (revised edn., 1 vol., 1953), 350.

Primal Beauty.<sup>1</sup> The One is "the possibility of all things: without whose existence all would be non-existent" (3. 8. 10). Knowledge of the One is possible only by the way of negation; we can say what it is not, but not what it is. It is beyond being, beyond activity, beyond thought (5. 4. 2; 1. 7. 1); it is the negation of number (5. 5. 6),<sup>2</sup> and is fundamentally infinite; in fact, it is ineffable. Nonetheless, Plotinus manages to say a good deal about it. It is the first and final cause, on which all things depend, and to which all aspire. From it, as the First, all things proceed by an inner necessity: the universe is a kind of overflow (5. 2. 1) from it. Towards it, as the Good, all things consciously or unconsciously strive: its unity is the goal of universal desire. As the Primal Beauty, it is the ultimate source of the beauty in all that is beautiful, whereby the love-longing of the soul is kindled that drives men on the upward way. Yet the One remains wholly independent of all else, entirely unaffected either by the outflow from itself or the aspiration towards itself.

Next after the One, and streaming forth from it like the rays from the sun, comes the Intelligible World, which comprises *Nous*, the *Noēta* and *Noēsis*<sup>3</sup>—the Mind, its Thoughts and its Thinking.<sup>4</sup> The Thoughts are not the product of the Mind, but its objects: they are real existences which proceed together with the Mind from the One. There are, however, no Thoughts outside the Mind; for the Mind is so united with them as to be virtually identified with them by its own proper activity of Thinking. The Thoughts and the Mind are thus distinguishable but inseparable, and together they constitute the world of Being, the only truly real world, of which the phenomenal world is but an imperfect copy or shadow. But the Thoughts are also archetypes of objects in the sense-world: they are, in Platonic language, Ideas. There are as many Ideas "Yonder" (in the Intelligible World) as there are Forms "Here" (in the phenomenal world), and they are contained in the Mind as parts in a whole. This Mind is, of course, divine, and may be said to be God; for although the One is also God, Mind is as it were the revelation of the One, without which the One would remain hidden and wholly unknown.

Next in the hierarchy of existence comes Soul—the World-Soul.<sup>5</sup> This is the offspring of Mind, generated through the Mind's contemplation of the One. For Mind has two acts: upward contemplation and (in consequence) generation downwards; and what it generates is patterned on what it contemplates. But the begotten is always inferior to the begetter, and the Soul is a son less perfect than its father (5. 1. 3). It shares in the

<sup>1</sup> On the One see esp. 6. 9. 1, 3, 4; 3. 8. 8–10. (References, except where otherwise stated, are to the *Enneads*.)

<sup>2</sup> It is, in effect, zero; cf. Inge, *Plot.*, II, 107 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Nous* (with its correlatives) is very variously translated by interpreters of Plotinus, e.g.: Intellect, Intelligence, Intellectual Principle, Divine Mind, Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> On the Intelligible World see esp. 3. 8. 8; 5. 5. 1–2; 5. 8. 7; 5. 9. 4; 6. 7. 12–15.

<sup>5</sup> On the World-Soul see esp. 2. 9. 2–4; 3. 8. 4–5; 4. 8. 3; 5. 1. 2–3, 7.

nature of Mind, being eternal and timeless, indivisible and extra-spatial; but it differs from Mind inasmuch as it is the subject of unfulfilled desires. The Soul, however, has two aspects: in the first of them it dwells unchangeably Yonder, contemplating the glories of the Divine Mind; in the second it goes forth ceaselessly, as life streaming from life, and generates the phenomenal world after the pattern of its vision. The Soul is not in the world, but the world is rather in it, embraced and moulded by it—and very much inferior to it. For Soul is a divine thing, more precious than anything earthly; and although its energy descends as low as vegetable life, and even slumbers in inorganic nature, yet the Soul itself orders and governs the world from its abode on high without ever becoming involved in the world (4. 3. 9; 2. 8. 9).

Last in order of existence comes Matter;<sup>1</sup> and the meaning of Matter must be understood in the light of the Aristotelian contrast between Matter and Form. All existences that are capable of further development are "matter" in relation to whatever "form" it is possible for them to assume. The rough block of marble is "matter" out of which the sculptor cuts the "form" of the statue; the acorn is "matter" in relation to the seedling, the seedling to the sapling, the sapling to the oak. So in Plotinus, all orders of existence are "matter" in relation to those next above them, and "forms" in relation to those next below (5. 9. 4). Soul is thus "matter" in relation to Mind (5. 1. 3), but "form" in relation to what is beneath it; and what is beneath it is Matter pure and simple, since there is nothing still lower in relation to which it could be "form". This Matter, which is the common substrate of all bodies, is itself incorporeal; for it is prior to, and presupposed by, bodies, which are compounded of Matter and Form. It is not ponderable, extended stuff, but bare, abstract potentiality devoid of potency, the bare receptacle of Forms. It is "no thing", even though it is not absolutely "nothing" (1. 8. 3);<sup>2</sup> it is the infinite, the indeterminate.

But as possessing the lowest degree of reality, Matter also possesses the lowest degree of value, and it can be described both as the absence of Good and as the First Evil.<sup>3</sup> It is the point at which the light that streams from the One runs out into darkness. As receptive of Forms, it is like a mirror that reflects the rays from the One that fall upon it; but it is also like a mirror in that it shows us, not Reality, but empty and deceptive shadow-images (3. 6. 7). Indeed, it seems actually to offer resistance to the "forming" activity of Soul (1. 8. 11), and is thus positively evil. Not that the Soul—and still less the Mind or the One—takes any harm from this. There is no evil in the blissful life of the Divine

<sup>1</sup> On Matter see esp. 1. 8. 3, 9; 2. 4. 6; 3. 6. 7.

<sup>2</sup> It is τὸ μὴ εἶναι, though not οὐκ εἶναι.

<sup>3</sup> On the problem of evil see esp. 1. 8. 4, 7-8, 11-12, 15; 3. 2. 14-15.

Triad. But with individual souls the case is different, since they are connected with bodies that are compound of Matter and Form.

According to Plato, it is the greatest misfortune of the human soul, that it is enchained in the "cavern" of the sense-world, imprisoned or entombed in a body. Yet Plato also says that the Creator sent the souls into the world in order to make it the abode of intelligence and with a view to its perfection.<sup>1</sup> Plotinus finds it a little difficult to reconcile these two views of his master, and his own view is somewhat uncertain. He attacks the Gnostics, "who say that the Demiurge is evil and the world is bad" (2. 9), yet he undoubtedly regards the life of the body and the senses as a hindrance to the soul.<sup>2</sup> It is said of him personally (by Porphyry) that he seemed almost ashamed of being in a body. For the soul belongs by nature to the divine realm, of which it is a microcosm, having affinities with it in all its aspects. Like the World-Soul, it proceeds from the Divine Mind: not as part of the World-Soul, which is indivisible, but in some way united with it, participating in it. Unlike the World-Soul, however, the individual soul "comes down" into the body, leaving its true home Yonder to take up its abode Here.<sup>3</sup>

But why does the soul come down?<sup>4</sup> The answer to this question lies in the principle which Plotinus sees running through the whole of existence: upward contemplation and creative activity downwards. Our soul before our birth, dwelling in the divine realm and contemplating the Intelligible World, conceived the desire to go forth and create according to the vision it beheld. Being thus in accord with a universal principle, the descent of the soul can be said to be both a matter of necessity and of the will of God; and since it is also what the soul desires, it can be said to be by choice. And there is no essential harm in this, so long as the soul does not forget its true nature and its true home. But there is great danger lest it should become bewitched by the charm of sensuous nature and become entangled and immersed in the material. It beholds itself in the mirror of Matter, and like Narcissus, falling in love with the mirrored image, plunges in after it. "This is the fall of the soul, this entry into Matter . . . the cause of the weakness of the soul and of all its evil is Matter" (1. 8. 11).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Timaeus*, 30B, 34B.

<sup>2</sup> "Life in the body is itself an evil" (1. 7. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus holds that the soul descends only in part; in its higher aspect it remains "above". Iamblichus and nearly all later Neoplatonists hold that it descends "entire". But in either case its essential nature remains divine and its true home Yonder.

<sup>4</sup> See 4. 8. 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 6. 1. 1: "But what is it that has caused our souls to forget God, their Father, and no more to know either themselves or him? . . . Their evil state had its beginnings from frowardness, from entry into birth . . . from the will to be their own and not his. So soon as they had clearly known the pleasure of free choice . . . they hastened by the road that leads outwards . . . lost knowledge even of their origin from God . . . thought meanly of themselves . . . set store by other things . . . so that the cause . . . lies in the price we put upon sensible things, the small account we make of ourselves."

We have now reached the nadir of the soul's experience, and the point where its cosmological descent must turn into the soteriological ascent. The soul must find its way upwards through the stages passed on the downward way. The possibility of this is explained by Plato's teaching about the ascent of the soul from the beauty of sensible objects to the Absolute Beauty.<sup>1</sup> The sense-world, which can be so grave a snare to the soul, is most unquestionably beautiful; on this Plotinus insists again and again, often in quite lyrical passages. But the beauty of sense is only an image, a copy, a shadow of the true Beauty, which is Yonder, not Here. To pursue the beauty of sense is therefore to pursue a phantom. Yet the phantom is, after all, a reflection of reality, and even in pursuing it, it is the mirrored reality that the soul most deeply desires. For the reflection awakens the soul's slumbering memory of the Beauty it once beheld Yonder, and kindles within it a longing and yearning to return thither. But return is possible only when the soul is brought by this means to recollect its own true nature and home, and to recognize the worthlessness of the things it has valued so highly in this world. Then, beginning with beautiful things Here, it must mount up to ever higher forms of beauty: from the beauty of bodies to beauties of Soul, from Soul to Mind, and from Mind to the One, which is Beauty itself. These are the stages of the upward way, leading to that Beauty which is also the Good, that which every soul consciously or unconsciously desires (6. 7. 31), and that which every soul is in fact seeking even when it pursues the phantom reflections in Matter.

The upward yearning and striving of the soul is called *eros*, or "love".<sup>2</sup> It springs from the tendency of the soul towards pure Beauty, from her recognition of it and her kinship with it; or from the intention of the soul towards its best, towards the Good. According to Plato, Eros is the child of Penia and Poros, "poverty" and "resourceful energy", and it shares the qualities of both.<sup>3</sup> For Plotinus, it is "of mixed quality", marked on the one hand by "the lack which keeps it craving", yet showing on the other that "it is not entirely destitute, since nothing void of good would ever go seeking the Good" (3. 5. 10). As "a thing of mixture," however, Eros can never be satisfied: true satisfaction is only for what has its plenitude in its own being, and where craving is due to a native deficiency there may be momentary but never abiding satisfaction (3. 5. 7). The soul, therefore, not having its plenitude in itself (but in what is above it), is always naturally accompanied by Eros—just as "in pictures and fables Eros and Psyche make a pair" (6. 9. 9). This applies to every kind of soul, so that the World-Soul contains the universal Eros and each single soul has its own particular Eros; and as the souls are eternal

<sup>1</sup> See esp. 1. 6; and Nygren, op. cit., 173 f., 177 ff., 192 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. 3. 5, 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Symposium* 203.

existences, so Eros is eternally existent. Indeed, Eros can be predicated of God himself, and it can be said that "God is Eros".

Here Plotinus seems to go far beyond Plato, who denies that the gods can feel love (*eros*), on the ground that they are self-sufficient and suffer no lack. But Plotinus says of the divine One: "He is worthy to be loved, and is himself Eros, namely Love of himself, as he is beautiful only from himself and in himself" (6. 8. 15). Plato would agree that God is "worthy to be loved", for as the Highest Good he naturally draws to himself all longing and love; but what could God himself conceivably love and long for, seeing that he has in himself all that can possibly be desired? Plotinus's answer to this question would seem to be that God desires precisely nothing but what he has and is, nothing but himself; so that God's Eros is directed to himself, he is "Love of himself".<sup>1</sup>

We must distinguish, however, as Plato does, between Heavenly and Vulgar Eros.<sup>2</sup> The former is the soul's desire directed towards the divine, towards God; the latter is the same desire directed towards earthly, sensible things. With reference to this distinction Plotinus says: "Because the soul springs from God, yet is other than God, she cannot but love God. . . . In her natural state she is hungry for union with God, entertaining towards him the noble love of a virgin for a father who is noble. But when she enters into generation . . . she leaves her father and submits herself to wantonness. Yet learning afterwards to hate the wanton dealings of this place, she journeys again to her father's house, when she has purified herself of earthly contacts, and there abides in well-being (6. 9. 9). Earthly loves and affections are not in themselves evil, so long as there is nothing unnatural about them; but in and through them all the true object of the soul's desire is not Here but Yonder, where alone the desire can be satisfied.

The final goal of all the soul's striving is the vision of God, union with God, participation in his nature, possession of God. "We must hasten therefore," Plotinus says, "to depart hence, to detach ourselves as much

<sup>1</sup> Nygren, op. cit., 568 ff., shows that there is a further development of the idea of Eros in Proclus. Proclus says: "Eros descends from above, from the Intelligible sphere down to the cosmic, and turns all things towards the Divine Beauty." This would have been incomprehensible to Plato, but Proclus asks: "Whence could come love among men, if it were not first in the gods themselves? For everything good and saving that is found in souls has its determinate cause from the gods." He then develops still further the Plotinian idea of a multiplicity of *erotes* corresponding to the multiplicity of souls. He fills the universe with *erotes* ("loves") of different kinds, which he conceives as links in a great Eros-chain that unites heaven and earth. By this means divine Eros streams down through the whole hierarchy of existence, enabling it to secure participation in the higher life towards which its desire is turned. This idea was subsequently of no little importance in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius *On the Heavenly Hierarchy* and *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*; and together with the theurgic notions deriving from Iamblichus (see above, p. 52, n. 1), it affected Christian thought about grace. The idea of an Eros that descends may itself indicate some influence of Christian thought on Proclus, of course.

<sup>2</sup> *Symposium* 180 D; Nygren, op. cit., 49-52.

as we can from the body to which we are unhappily bound, to endeavour to embrace God with all our being" (6. 9. 9). A man must "withdraw into himself . . . turning away for ever from the material beauty that he once made his joy. . . . You must close your eyes and waken in yourself that other power of vision, which all have but few use. . . . Withdraw into yourself and look" (1. 6. 8-9). Detachment from the body and the senses by a certain asceticism of outward life and by the cultivation of virtue in the soul and wisdom in the mind, is the method that Plotinus prescribes for attaining the vision of God. Proclus teaches similarly, that the knowledge of God begins with self-knowledge: recognition of one's own true nature is the pre-requisite of the ascent to the divine. The upward way then leads successively through purification of the soul and illumination of the mind to union with God; and the soul can travel this way because it is a microcosm of the divine world and itself essentially divine.<sup>1</sup>

According to Porphyry, Plotinus claimed to have enjoyed the beatific vision only four times in his life; and Porphyry claims it for himself only once. Permanent and uninterrupted vision is possible only when, on the dissolution of the body, the soul is freed from the trammels of this lower world; and even then there is no necessary and automatic liberation. The Neoplatonists, like Plato himself, hold a doctrine of the transmigration of souls (4. 3. 5, 24; 3. 4. 2). Only those souls that have purified themselves and fitted themselves for the vision of God can escape the cycle of rebirth; the rest are sent each into the kind of body for which it is most fitted. But reincarnation even in the noblest of bodies is a doom to be shunned, and salvation means disembodiment. Proclus denies that the soul can ever obtain final and permanent release from embodiment; its periodic descent and ascent belongs to the very nature of things and the harmony of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Plotinus appears to believe that final release is possible; yet he maintains that the cosmic process is cyclical, and that when all things have streamed forth from the One and back to the One, everything begins all over again (5. 7. 3).<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the vision can be attained even in this life; and when it is, Plotinus tells us, "then we can see God and see ourselves: ourselves made radiant, filled with Intelligible light . . . having become, nay rather being, God" (6. 9. 9). Here we have passed not only beyond sense, but beyond virtue and beyond reason; for "vision and the visionary power is not reason, but greater and prior to reason, as is the object of vision". In this state, "the seer does not see or distinguish two things", himself and God, for "he belongs to God and is one with him" (6. 9. 10); and this means that he has passed even "beyond being". "For the self of a man, in respect of its fellowship with God, is not Being, but beyond

<sup>1</sup> Nygren, 572 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Elem.*, prop. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Inge, *Plot.*, I. 189.

Being": it is united, indeed identified, with the all-transcendent One. Admittedly, this blissful state cannot last; a man will lapse again from it. "But let him again awaken the virtue that is in him . . . and he shall again be lightened of his burden, ascending through virtue to the Mind, and thence through wisdom to the Supreme. This is the life of gods and of the godlike and happy men; a quittance from things alien and earthly, a life beyond earthly pleasure, a flight of the alone to the Alone" (6. 9. 11).

### III

St. Augustine, whose own thought was cast in a Neoplatonic mould, believed that very little change in outlook was required of a "Platonist" who became a Christian.<sup>1</sup> Christianity did not set aside what the "Platonists" possessed, but rather supplied what they lacked. Their writings showed that they knew about God and man's deep need of God, and about the Word that was in the beginning with God, the Son co-eternal with the Father; "but," says Augustine, "that the Word became flesh . . . that he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . that in due time he died for the ungodly . . . those books do not contain."<sup>2</sup> What St. Augustine did not see, however, since he read his Bible through Neoplatonic spectacles, was that in certain quite fundamental respects Christianity and Neoplatonism in their pure form are entirely incompatible. This fact may be illustrated by a consideration of the teaching of each with regard to the need for salvation, the way of salvation, and the nature of salvation.

(1) *The need for salvation.* Neoplatonism teaches that all existence emanates from the Divine One; but emanation is in effect degradation, since each succeeding stage is inferior in reality and value to its prior; and Matter, as the lowest, is the root of all evil. Empirical man is a double being: an immortal, divine soul in a mortal, material body, which is a drag and hindrance to the soul, and from which the soul longs to be free.

The Bible teaches that the world and man are the good creation of God. The basic biblical contrast is not between God and Matter, but between God and the devil; and not between body and soul, but between spirit and flesh.<sup>3</sup> Flesh is human nature in its totality of body and soul, while spirit is the activity of God (or the devil). Flesh is not in itself evil, but dependent and frail. It can be "possessed", come under the control of spirits—holy or unholy. Man's tragedy is that he has yielded to the seductions of an unholy spirit (the devil), and is a sinner in rebellion against God. What he needs, therefore (whether he longs for it or not)

<sup>1</sup> *Ep.* 118, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Conf.*, vii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> See P. S. Watson, "The Holy Spirit and Man" in *Expository Times* LXI, 6, March, 1950.

is deliverance from the grip of the evil spirit and reconciliation to God.<sup>1</sup>

(2) *The way of salvation* is, for Neoplatonism, the way of Eros; for Christianity, of Agape. These are two quite different kinds of love.

Eros is acquisitive, self-centred love. It is a hunger that I feel, a desire to get and possess an object which I conceive as "good", i.e. as capable of satisfying my wants and needs. It is evoked by the desirable qualities of its object, and basically it is always a hunger for God as the "Highest Good", which alone can completely and permanently satisfy the human soul. (When Plotinus says that "God is Eros", he adds, "that is, love of himself", and explains that God alone is a worthy object of his own desiring; here God's love is patterned on man's.)

Agape is self-sacrificing love that gives and forgives. It is primarily God's own love, shown towards us in Christ. "God is Agape" (1 John 4: 8, 16); and this means, not that he loves himself, but that he loves the world (John 3: 16). Agape is not evoked by the worthiness of its object, for it is shown to the ungodly, to sinners and enemies of God (Rom. 5: 6 ff.); indeed, it is prior to all objects, since it is the nature of God their Creator. It is, moreover, reflected in creation; for we are bidden to love as God loves, who lets his sun shine and his rain fall on the just and the unjust, and is kind to the unthankful and the evil (Matt. 5: 43 ff.; Luke 6: 35). (When Agape-love is attributed to man, it is derived from God's own; and it is directed to our fellow-men: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" [1 John 4: 11]).

The way of Agape is God's way to man: the way of the Incarnation and the Cross, by which God has proved his love to us. Agape means the "coming down" of God into the midst of the world's sin and misery, in order by his Spirit of holy love to break the grip that the unholy, loveless spirit, the devil, has obtained upon mankind.<sup>2</sup>

The way of Eros is man's way to the Divine: the upward way of flight from the world—for Eros is never directed to that which is beneath it. It is true that Plotinus says that the higher cares for the lower and "sets it in order and adorns it"; but it does so only by "passive rule" (4. 8. 2), and without ever leaving its heavenly height or issuing forth from its sublime repose (6. 7. 41; 5. 1. 6).<sup>3</sup> There is no Incarnation here, no help

<sup>1</sup> While the Neoplatonizing St. Augustine describes fallen man as *curvatus ad terram*, "bent down to earth", the Biblical theologian, Luther, describes him as *incurvatus in se*, "bent upon himself". The contrast is instructive.

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine thinks of man as needing to have his "love" (*amor*, i.e., *eros*) directed away from earthly things to God. Luther thinks of him as needing to have his self-love eradicated and replaced by true love: Eros must be driven out by Agape. The nature and purpose of the Incarnation are differently construed in each case.

<sup>3</sup> It is true that Proclus speaks of Eros as descending (see above, p. 60, n. 1), and here he has almost certainly been influenced by Christian thought; but he is still remote from the Christian idea of Incarnation. G. Nygren, *op. cit.*, 569.

from on high; God cannot be allowed to come into contact with Matter.

(3) *The nature of salvation.* In Neoplatonism man strives upwards to escape from the world; the way of salvation is the way of world-flight, the quest for disembodiment. Its goal is a vision of God in which the distinction between seer and seen is transcended and the soul is one with the Deity. It is a way of self-salvation, leading not to a communion of persons, but to a state of the self; and it is purely individualistic—a “flight of the alone to the Alone”. But there is no final salvation; for when all things have returned to the One out of which they have emanated, the whole cosmic process begins again.

According to Christianity, God has come down in order to redeem the world, and has given us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. This “vision of God” we have even now by faith, and through him we already have a foretaste of eternal life. Salvation is something that begins here, but is to be consummated in the future. “Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be . . .” (1 John 3: 2). We look forward, therefore, not to the disembodiment of the soul, but to the resurrection of the body; for the whole man, and not merely part of him, is redeemed. The whole man, moreover, is no isolated individual; for the salvation he enjoys already is a salvation he shares with the whole company of the redeemed, and its consummation will mean a perfected community of persons—in a transfigured universe. For the whole cosmos is involved in the redeeming purpose of God, so that “we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Peter 3: 13).