Book Reviews

John Dillon and Andrei Timotin (eds)


Before being sent an offprint from this volume it had not occurred to me that there was such a thing as a Platonic theory of prayer, let alone several such theories. But Layne’s essay on ‘Cosmic Etiology and Demiurgic Mimesis in Proclus’ Account of Prayer’ was immediately recognizable as dealing with an aspect of Procline theory, which was fully Platonic insofar as it was rooted in Timaeus’ prayer at the beginning of his monologue in Plato’s dialogue; fully philosophical insofar as it dealt with that passage as an integral part of Plato’s study of natural philosophy, bound up as it was with the three primary causes and two secondary causes, as well as with his important theory of reversion upon the cause; and fully about a religious phenomenon labelled ‘prayer’ in the Platonic text. Hence there was at least one instantiation of a ‘Platonic theory of prayer’: one that deviated considerably from ‘prayer’ as usually understood in antiquity, though in accord with the editors’ initial definition. Had it not been for Proclus we might not have had this book at all. Proclus’ treatment of the prayer early in the second book of his Commentary on the Timaeus is central to several essays, and of the sixteen columns of the Index Locorum almost four relate to Proclus’ corpus, half of that to the Commentary on the Timaeus, all of that to the first Teubner volume and nearly all of that to book two. Some 37 passages (51 separate references) are to that single passage.

Dillon’s essay on ‘The Platonic Philosopher at Prayer’ had begun the volume, mentioning at the outset the prayer to Pan that concludes the Phaedrus and the prayer with which Timaeus had commenced. So beginnings and ends seem important, particularly if one is to believe Dillon’s next passage, Laws 801a-b, but Plato was acutely conscious that great care is needed when one prays. The bulk of Dillon’s essay, however, is given over to what ‘prayer’ could mean to the Neoplatonist, and what devotion they could practise in their efforts to achieve their highest wish, divine illumination. It becomes clear that Dillon had long
thought about such matters, and done so from a recognizably Platonist point of view.

In Dorival’s ‘Modes of Prayer in the Hellenic Tradition’ we begin rather with Plato’s *Euthyphro* and the *Second Alcibiades*: a work of doubtful authorship but subtitled *On Prayer*, for which reason one might have liked more treatment of it. Surely it merits more than one entry in the *Index Locorum*, and indeed Dorival cites three passages from 142c to 143b. The article is packed with information and includes an important section on the ‘transformation of petitionary prayer’, in which the god is left to decide what is good.

There follow Luz on Philo and Carl O’Brien on Maximus Tyrius, the former distinctly atypical, the latter more like a regular Platonizing author late in the second century. O’Brien’s article was one that was needed, able to underline the way that petitionary prayer as practised sits uneasily with the notion of divine providence and verges on an attempt to bribe immutable gods, often without the recognition that our difficulties are indeed better for us. Prayers uttered in the correct frame of mind, however, may be useful and accord with philosophy. Luz’s contribution perhaps reflects a different tradition altogether, in which we meet the idea of prayer as thanksgiving and also that of scriptural study as prayer, but such ideas already illustrate how the very notion of prayer must somehow be transformed to become attractive to the Platonic mind.

Wakoff in ‘Awaiting the Sun: a Plotinian Form of Contemplative Prayer’ offers an interesting if not entirely convincing exploration of the possibility that sunrise and sunset experiences may influence Plotinus’ picture of contemplative experiences. But what in Plotinus qualifies as prayer? A little too much is here made of some familiar imagery, though Plutarch, an author who only features in the *Index Nominum*, might suggest that associations of the Sun with divinity (and desire) are typically Egyptian (*Eroticus* 764a-e).

Timotin chooses ‘Porphyry on Prayer: Platonic Tradition and Religious Trends in the Third Century’, with emphasis on Porphyry, often as tentatively reconstructed from Iamblichus: but also involving Origen, Maximus, and Plotinus. And here prayer can be silent, wordless. I am in this article credited with translating book two of Proclus *On the Timaeus*, but that credit belongs to Runia and Share (as elsewhere in the volume that Timotin has co-edited!). I should add that even this important material did not really need to be given both in translation and in Greek quite so extensively in the volume.

Brisson is much as one might expect in ‘Prayer in Neoplatonism and the Chaldaean Oracles: Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus’. Sound, systematic, and concerned with the interplay of the virtuous life and the approach to the divine. Unusually there isn’t quite enough Greek here, specifically in discussion of the
roles of hope, faith, truth and love. He concludes that prayer here is ‘not a matter of supplication or vows, but a mean[s] to ensure the soul's salvation’ [129].

In ‘The Transmission of Fire: Proclus' Theurgical Prayers’ Redondo brings us back to fire-imagery, and to the specifically religious side of Proclan philosophy. Certainly the contribution does concern ‘prayer’ as defined, but it more centrally concerns the rather fashionable subject of theurgy. Finally Vlad offers a stimulating essay ‘Damascius and Dionysius on Prayer and Silence’, similar insofar as they offer a god beyond language, but differing insofar as Damascius tends to despair of finding a role for words in finding the ultimate silence, while Dionysius prefers to see all words as having an important role to play even here. While ultimately, at a second level of silence, ‘wordlessness’ or ‘voiceless discourse … answers God's own silence’ (207), Dionysius actually ‘prays God to give him the right words to praise him’ (204). How 'Platonic' all this is will remain a matter of debate, but the heart of late antique Platonism will remain elusive unless one allows oneself to explore such theories.

Indeed, this book's virtue is that it has the potential to open up a world somewhere between religion and philosophy, and theories of prayer that are suspended somewhere between prayer and non-prayer. It has even the agnostic asking himself 'Do I pray after all?' Some essays are a little like a devotional exercise in their own rite—an exploration of an area that by its very nature is such as to make us ask questions about the language. Yet in the end my own preference is for essays such as Layne's, about ideas that are fully philosophy and fully devotional, ideas aimed at some creative fulfilment in imitation of the Demiurge himself: essays where the emphasis is on 'both' rather than 'neither'.

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