

Arthur Versluis

Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art.

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Arthur Versluis' brief but powerful, comprehensive and very accessible book (Introduction, 8 Chapters, and Conclusion) is a major contribution to the history and interpretation of Platonic mysticism and a much needed corrective to the tendency to dismiss Platonism in all its forms that has been growing steadily over the past 100-200 years.

The word 'mysticism' has virtually become synonymous with delusion or airy-fairy nonsense in much contemporary discourse, particularly in the study of religion, philosophy, psychology. Arthur Versluis prefers some other variants such as 'contemplative science,' 'mindfulness' etc. that have less baggage than the word 'mysticism', but since the word mysticism emphasizes direct inner spiritual knowledge of the transcendence of subject and object, he accepts the necessity of the term and argues that unless we recognize the fundamental importance of its Platonic history and context, the term 'mysticism' as a descriptor becomes intellectually incoherent.

In his Introduction, Versluis first makes clear that by 'mysticism' he refers broadly to "religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object" (p. 3), a definition which indicates that mysticism is a type of direct cognition, not an instrumentalizing rationality that infers what is true, and a definition broad enough to include both apophatic and kataphatic or visionary experiences. This last terminology, derived from Dionysius the Areopagite, indicates, for Versluis, that such mysticism is not "a nebulous catch-all for all kinds of phenomena ... in many or all religions" but is rather "Christian mysticism ... in the tradition of Platonic mysticism" derived from Plato but including middle and later Platonists from Plotinus to Damascius, Eriugena, and reaching into every period of human history, even if have become woefully unaware of its powerful influence. Versluis thus sees Platonism in this sense "as a conceptual map for understanding contemplative ascent and illumination" (p. 5), that is, a metaphysical and experiential cartography "of contemplative ascent and illumination ... independent of any confessional or religious context" (p. 6). Thus, the importance of Dionysius the Areopagite in Versluis' view owes something, I think, to the instantaneous translation of pagan into Christian thought without any loss on either count.

Versluis' understanding of such mysticism is not narrow, but instead very open-ended across a range of important figures throughout history (in Chapter One, Platonic Mysticism), a range increasingly swamped by the rise of dogmatic scientific materialism in Modernity. What Versluis emphasizes in this Platonic-Dionysian mysticism is a movement, so often sidelined by various forms of orthodoxy, that centers Christianity 'not on beliefs or articles of faith, but on direct inner knowledge and illumination' (p. 15), a movement that can inhabit other traditions (e.g., Sufi) and that gives rise to contemporary figures such as Willigis Jäger, a German Roman Catholic monk trained as a Zen Master in Japan, but thoroughly aware that 'the whole of Christian mysticism' is founded in Platonic philosophy (p. 33), someone who espouses a 'transconfessional spirituality'—a recognition not of a religion beyond religion, but of 'a religiosity beyond religions' (p. 33). This part of Versluis' thesis will undoubtedly meet opposition, and the word 'religiosity' may not help matters, but neither he nor Jäger intends a form of syncretism. Rather, what Versluis rightly points out is the strange current state of affairs. On the one hand, Platonic mysticism is a coherent part of a long tradition that can reach almost seamlessly into different epochs, disciplines, religions and forms of life: "In brief, Jäger confirms ... that Platonism provides the non-dual [cognitive] metaphysics constituting the often-secret architecture of Christian mysticism throughout its long history" (p. 33). On the other hand, "this Platonic infrastructure of mysticism was never more secret than it is today" (ibid.).

In the following chapters, Versluis explores why this should be so. In Chapter Two he traces the mapping of mysticism through many influential works of the 19th to the early 20th Centuries (especially Cuthbert Butler, Dean Inge, Richard Bucke, William James and Evelyn Underhill) before the metaphysical unity provided by the Platonic tradition "gave way before the centrifugal forces of modernity" (p. 39) which he then charts, first, in the eclipse of Platonic mysticism in Chapter Three and, second, in the strange banishment of Platonism in the new field of esotericism that one might reasonably have thought would have embraced it, in Chapter Four.

In the first instance, he traces the eclipse of Platonism partly to the development of an otherwise positive cross-cultural or comparativist approach that connects traditions but also "disconnects ... from the specifics of particular traditions," in which the influence of Platonism is often either hidden or expunged. Also responsible, of course, is the growing materialism of our age, especially the ubiquitous anti-foundationalism, anti-essentialism, anti-platonism that can be encountered on a daily basis over the past half century, a position summed up by Richard Rorty's view that truth "is not a goal of inquiry" but a position based upon nothing more than *ex cathedra* pronouncement (p. 62).