Divine Word and Divine Work: Late Platonism and Religion

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Neoplatonism was the last major philosophical movement to emerge out of antiquity. Its beginnings can be traced back to ca. 245 CE when Plotinus, who had received his education in Alexandria, moved to Rome and began to lecture to a group of intellectuals and politicians. Platonism, already the dominant strand in late antique intellectual life, came to be interpreted by Plotinus as a rich and tightly integrated worldview. Plotinus, together with his prolific and influential student Porphyry, furthermore incorporated Aristotelian and Stoic elements into their reading of Plato’s intentions, lending the resulting synthesis yet wider appeal. The efforts of these two figures and other late antique Platonists — foremost among them Proclus, the appointed successor (diadochos) at the Platonic Academy at Athens during the late fifth century — thereafter found a ready reception in Latin and Arabic medieval culture. The Platonisms of Plotinus and Proclus reverberate all the way to German Romanticism and the Transcendentalism of nineteenth-century America.

The purpose of this double issue is to examine Neoplatonism’s many ties with Western religious life — the way in which religion was woven into the fabric of Neoplatonism itself, but also the manner in which Platonism came to exercise an influence on the monotheistic religious traditions of the Mediterranean. (Note that, for our purposes, Western culture shall include Islam, as indeed it always must where the history of religions is concerned.)

One starting point is to recognize that while Neoplatonism rose against a Graeco-Roman and hence pagan background, the school coexisted and grew side by side with the other intellectual and religious movements then
proliferating across the Mediterranean cultural area. Furthermore, because Neoplatonism, instead of settling into a thoroughgoing dogmatism, continued in the tradition of discussing philosophical problems and commenting on the classical philosophical texts of Plato and Aristotle, there were built-in mechanisms for some of its distinctive approaches and analytical categories to be adopted into the conceptual schemes of the continually evolving monotheisms of the Mediterranean. The latter, after all, had already absorbed strains of the preceding waves of Platonic thought (what scholars have later termed “middle Platonism,” in a blatantly post facto choice of label).

Neoplatonism’s close neighbors, conceptually as well as in sociological terms (at least when it comes to the relatively elevated realm where literary production was going on), included Gnosticism and Christianity. In both instances the relationship was complex. Older scholarship tended to emphasize Plotinus and other Neoplatonists’ hostility towards Gnostic teachings, an attitude famously on display in Enneads II.9 [33]. This portrayal, however, has been found wanting in many respects, and the current research offers a more nuanced view whereupon each of the two movements took ideas and practices especially from Platonism’s Alexandrian interpretation while diverging on where to take this influence.

As regards the Christian movements, we are faced with a different situation. Christian thinkers do not appear to have had an influence on the content of late antique Neoplatonism, whereas Christianity’s theological and systematic side grew largely as a response to interaction with, and considerable push from, pagan Platonism. Early Neoplatonists seemed to regard as problematic the lack of an argumentative and systematic side to their competitors’ world-view, as is visible in the critique of Porphyry in his Against the Christians.

Later, when Christianity became the dominant religion in the old centers of Neoplatonism (Athens, Alexandria, and Rome), the pagan form of teaching survived for a relatively long time. The coexistence was not always peaceful, and the pagan approach to a divinely inspired wisdom occasionally came under attack, as is memorably encapsulated in that rare combination of a female philosopher, mathematician, and pagan martyr, Hypatia, who was torn to pieces by a Christian mob in 415 CE. In the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian finally prohibited pagans from occupying official state positions, demanded that the philosophers convert to Christianity, and banned the teaching of pagan philosophy. (There is some question as to whether vestiges of pagan Neoplatonism, complete with practices and rituals, survived in Harrān in present-day Turkey deep into the Muslim period of dominance.)

Yet to portray Neoplatonism as a philosophical school competing with, then ultimately being defeated by, dogmatic religious movements would be false,