GREEK COSMIC LOVE AND THE CHRISTIAN LOVE OF GOD
BOETHIUS, DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND THE
AUTHOR OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

BY
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Not long ago Prof. G. Quispel published a comparatively small article on the above almost excessively large subject. He presented his communications on this vast theme under a both concise and provocative title: GOD IS EROS.¹ Provocative no doubt for most theologians, since in their guild the tradition that opposes "Greek eros" to "Christian love", a notion which they use to indicate by the Greek word "agápe", is still alive. Quite a problematical tradition, to be sure. At the moment, however, I wish to pass over the problems involved in it and follow Q.'s argument.

He starts with Boethius' metrum 8 in the Consolatio Philosophiae, book II, which he quotes in a now and then modified form of the 17th century English translation printed in H. F. Stewart's edition in the Loeb Class. Library.² Not disturbed by any philosophical problems Q. declares: "The love of which Boethius speaks is a cosmogonic Eros." By introducing this term rather emphatically Prof. Q. orients us immediately in the direction he wishes us to take: not to the explanations of philosophers – which in Boethius' case might seem natural, after all, since he was a philosopher and in his deep depression let himself be led by the lessons of Lady Philosophia – but to the earlier origin of Greek thought, the cosmogonies of mythology. Of course it is quite true that the Eros introduced by Plato in his Symposium in such an impressive way as the son of Penia and Poros, makes his appearance at a fairly late stage of Greek thought. The beginnings of the Greek Eros, conceived as a god, reach back into the 7th-6th centuries, in the Orphic myth of the world-egg. Nobody is willing to deny this.

Whether the Orphic myth was actually in Boethius' mind, when he wrote his song on the amor quo caelum regitur, remains another question. Let us grant for the moment that it may have been somehow
“behind” his mind, or in the back of his thoughts. This much is clear, Prof. Q. is so much interested in the Orphic myth because it is exactly this kind of cosmogonic fantasies he is finding again and again in the Gnostic writings of the first centuries of our era. In the Chaldaean Oracles, of which the written form is said to date from the second part of the second century A.D., there is most clearly a divine cosmic Love descending to the lower levels and holding the world-order together. This is the cosmogonic Eros of Orphism, a downward-flowing divine Love, such as we find in Proclus as well, in particular in his commentary on Plato’s Alcibiades.3 Proclus took his concept of ἐρως προνοητικός from the Orac. Chald., declares Q. – somewhat one-sided, no doubt, for it is fairly clear that the Oracles were by no means Proclus’ only source in his reflexions on “divine love”. Anyhow Q. is not at all “at variance” with me, neither in mentioning the Oracles as one of Proclus’ sources nor in finding the concept of “pronoetic love” in the Commentary on the Cratylus as well. What I said in my commentary on Boethius’ m. 8 of Cons.II, in the opening nr. of Vivarium, 1963, was not that Proclus’ love terminology would occur only in the Alcib. commentary, but that it is absent from the theological treatises in the strict sense. This I called a remarkable fact, – and I do think it is. I mentioned both the Elementa Theologiae and the Theologia Platonica and, somewhat tentatively, offered an explanation of the absence of the term ἐρως in those writings which for Proclus were the scientific expression of his theology. My suggested explanation was that, in writing those works, apparently the idea of divine Love was not very much alive in his mind. The fact that he omitted the term ἐρως precisely in these works led me to the conclusion that, apparently, the idea of divine Love did not take an essential place in Proclus’ theology.

Prof. Q.’s reaction – which is somewhat out of proportion and apparently a fruit of rather careless reading4 – makes it clear to me that I have to formulate the above conclusion more precisely. Indeed I have to thank Prof. Q. for the fact that by his very way of arguing in the present article he makes me do so and thus to correct a previously used formula which apparently could give rise to misunderstanding. I shall come to that later on and continue following Q.’s argument.

From Boethius’ amor quo caelum regitur Q. passes immediately on to ps.Dionysius the Areopagite, De div.nom. IV 11.5 He is just delighted with that passage (11-18). It is “one of the most daring and delightful in Greek literature”, so he declares. To which he adds: “No wonder