PLATONISM AND CHRISTIANITY:
A MERE ANTAGONISM OR A PROFOUND COMMON GROUND?

BY

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To the memory of Heinrich Dörrie, a good and highly respected friend.

It belongs to the heritage of Martin Luther to say that the pagan Aristotle has nothing to do with the gospel of Christ. In that perspective no doubt Plato fared no better. The view of that generation in the circle of Luther’s followers was pictorially expressed by Hans Holbein in a drawing, which was reproduced in a woodcut bearing the caption Christus das wahre Licht. The picture shows in the middle Christ on the mountain addressing the people. On the other side a row of monks advancing hesitantly with blind eyes, at their head the pope crowned with a tiara, walk behind the Greek philosophers: Plato has already fallen down a deep precipice, and Aristotle right behind him is going to follow.¹

That is how the first generation of reformatorian Christians thought of Greek philosophy. No doubt this was a reaction against a rather generally accepted Aristotelianism among professional theologians. In recent decades (after 1960) we have seen something similar in the Roman Catholic Church. In those years I happened, whilst lecturing on a subject touching on the relation of Greek philosophy and Christian faith, to mention the Holbein picture and show a photocopy of it. Among my students was a young Franciscan, wearing a sky-blue shirt and crowned by a wealth of long golden curls. He was fascinated by the picture and begged me instantly for a copy of it.

Thus, Plato was the first to fall into the precipice. Some present-day scholars look at the problem in the same way. One of them is N. Hyldahl, in the work Philosophie und Christentum. Eine Interpretation der Einleitung zum Dialog Justinus (1966).² The author holds that there is no continuity at all between Justin’s Platonism and his Christian belief, as had rather generally been admitted. Another was the late Heinrich
Dörrie, a philologist who spent a lifetime in studying the Platonism of the first centuries in a long series of publications, extending from c. 1955 to 1981. Dörrie describes the Platonism of the first centuries as for the greater part a philosophy of an immanent logos. Only exceptionally does the idea of a transcendent nous make its appearance, and then—he is thinking of Albinus—it is drawn more from Aristotle than from Plato.

The question of “What was the Platonism of late Antiquity” was answered by Dörrie in a paper of 1971. Platonism, so he remarks, was not a “secularized” philosophy in the modern sense. Certainly it was not just a religion for intellectuals either (“eine Gebildeten-Religion”); that would be too narrow a definition. It was a philosophy too; but a philosophy the metaphysics of which implied a doctrine of salvation. And exactly therefore Christians could not accept Platonism. It was another religion. What had actually been taken over were in no sense the essentials of Platonism but only peripheral things: Platonic language, metaphors, comparisons, literary questions. All this created the appearance of a cultural continuity which was important to intellectuals, easing for them the change from paganism to Christianity. But from accepting “the substance” of Platonism Christian Fathers very wisely refrained. As an example Dörrie cites the great Athanasius: while accepting the “good God” of Plato’s Timaeus, he definitely rejected the idea of an agathon that would have been above it.4

Generally speaking, in so far as Platonic elements were accepted, they always were transformed and never accepted in the sense they had for Platonists. It can even be said that wherever a Platonic phrase was accepted, a de-platonisation took place: the word was used to serve “a clearly marked anti-Platonism”, the belief in one God, Creator of the heavens and the earth.

Platonism and Christianity were opposed the one to the other as two sharply defined and incompatible theologies. Christians therefore were always anti-platonists. There has been too much talk about continuity: it is our scientific duty to distinguish the differences. Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Ambrose and Augustine opposed Platonism with all their might (“haben alles darangesetzt dem Platonismus seinen Rang und seine Wirkung streitig zu machen”).5 The so-called continuity was nothing but a continuity of words. A “Christian Platonism” has never existed. In fact, there was a hard struggle of two well-defined confessions.