THE PLOTINIAN DOCTRINE OF NOUS IN PATRISTIC THEOLOGY *

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Nous, the Divine Mind, in the philosophy of Plotinus is the first stage in the necessary and timeless outgoing of spiritual being from its First Principle, the One or Good (which corresponds in the thought of Plotinus to what we mean by God). This outgoing is governed, according to Plotinus, by the following principles, which are simply assumed as axioms throughout the *Enneads* ¹. (i) Spiritual being is essentially self-communicative and creative; there can be no limits to its activity; it must actualize all possibilities and bring into being everything that can in any degree be. (ii) This process of going out, giving, illuminating, which produces the lower levels of being, leaves the higher unaffected and undiminished. (iii) The product is always necessarily on a lower level of being than the producer; each stage in the outgoing is lower and weaker than the one before. Plotinus often expresses this progressive inferiority of product to producer in terms of decreasing degrees of unity. Thus Nous is no longer Unity-Absolute, but an infinitely rich unity-in diversity, Mind indissolubly united to its object, the World of Forms, which are themselves ‘awake and alive’, Mind as well as Forms, intelligences as well as intelligibles; in it our own selves exist at their highest level. It is of the utmost importance for the correct interpretation of Plotinus that we should understand that in his thought we ourselves at our highest are Nous, but we are not the One. The One or Good transcends and is wholly other than us and all else, though we may, very rarely, rise from the level of Nous to experience mystical union with Him (the use of the masculine pronoun is deliberate and in accordance with Plotinus’s own usage). This multiplicity in Nous arises precisely from the fact that in its return upon the One in contemplation it cannot apprehend Him

¹ They are clearly stated at III 8. 5. 12—17.
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in His absolute unity but only in a multiplicity of images, the Forms.\textsuperscript{2}

It has often been observed that this powerful, extremely fertile, but to a Christian mind rather confusing conception of \textit{Nous} was taken into account by the Fathers in working out their theology of the Trinity. We are familiar with the remarkably close parallelism with Plotinus in some points of his contemporary Origen's doctrine of the Word and with the determination with which St. Augustine reads orthodox Trinitarian doctrine into the Neo-Platonic philosophers. We know too how clearly St. Athanasius\textsuperscript{3} and St. Gregory of Nyssa\textsuperscript{4} see that one of the most fundamental differences between pagan Greek and Christian thought lies in the orthodox Christian rejection of the principle underlying Plotinus’s third axiom, that there can be degrees of divinity, that it is possible to be more or less God. As the result of this rejection Nicene and post-Nicene Trinitarian thought proceeds on precisely the opposite assumption to that of Plotinus, namely that in the Divine and eternal spiritual generation the Product is equal, not inferior to the Producer. I wish to emphasize this point because of its immense theological importance, and to bring it into connection with another passage of St. Athanasius the significance of which has well been brought out by Père Bouyer.\textsuperscript{5} Here St. Athanasius says (I paraphrase) ‘How can God create if He has no Eternal Son, Word, Wisdom; if the Divine Essence is sterile, alone, a light which does not shine, a dry spring?’ (Note that he uses the Plotinian metaphors for spiritual production, here and elsewhere, but with the fundamental change in their significance just noted). Here creation appears as a superabundance, an extra, superfluous, act of pure spontaneous generosity, springing from that primal creativity which finds its necessary and fully satisfying expression in the eternal Generation of the Word. The principle that the Divine Nature is essentially creative, the Divine Goodness essentially self-diffusive, as Plotinus saw, is fully main-

\textsuperscript{2} cp V. 3. 11. VI. 7. 15.

\textsuperscript{3} Contra Arianos III. 16.

\textsuperscript{4} cp. Professor Ivanka’s account in \textit{Hellenisches und Christliches im Frühbyzantinischen Geistesleben} pp. 45–6 and the references there given.