

including many Christians, who have continued to hold to the older tradition of Hellenic theology, still so finely exemplified in Plotinus and his circle. And if we look back to that circle we may find it possible to give a properly honourable place to ritual and sacramental religion without accepting an Iamblichean or any other kind of supernaturalism which would lift its scriptures, teaching and ruling authorities, and practices beyond the reach of continual critical discussion. We do not have to set the purely intellectual and spiritual religion of Plotinus and Porphyry against the theurgic religion of Iamblichus and his successors as if they were two different religions: The later Hellenic Neoplatonists certainly did not do so. We should remember Amelius, the "lover of sacrifices" (*philothutès*)²⁵ — an epithet which would suit Iamblichus or his disciple the Emperor Julian admirably—whose recognised position in the circle was so high that that acute observer and courteous opponent Longinus couples his name with that of Plotinus,²⁶ and who seems always to have remained on quite friendly terms with Porphyry. If we do so (taking into account of course what Amelius may have thought of Plotinus as well as what Plotinus may have thought of Amelius, and not necessarily feeling bound to observe the group from the religious standpoint of Porphyry), we can find here a mutual recognition of those two ways to God, without domination or exclusion of either, which conforms well to Indian teaching about and practice of the Yogas,²⁷ and is by no means incongruous with the teaching and practice of many Christians in our own time, and some throughout the Christian centuries.

25. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 10, 33.

26. *Op. cit.* (n. 25), 20, 32-3 and 71.

27. A. H. Armstrong and R. Ravindra, *Buddhi in the Bhagavadgītā and Psyche in Plotinus*, in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought* (Ed. R. Baine Harris, Norfolk, Virginia, International Society for Neoplatonic Studies 1982, p. 63-86, especially pp. 71 and 82-3. [Reprinted from *Religious Studies*, 15 (September 1979), pp. 327-42.]

THE NEGATIVE THEOLOGY OF NOUS IN LATER NEOPLATONISM

Dr. HEINRICH DÖRRIE, whose birthday we are celebrating, is justly renowned for his work in one of the most lively and growing fields of contemporary scholarship, that of the study of later Greek philosophy and its intricate relationships with Christian thought. It is therefore most appropriate that we should honour him with a volume whose theme is »Platonism and Christianity«. For my own contribution I offer a discussion of a late Platonic way of thinking which perhaps helped to make easier the acceptance by so many Christian thinkers, especially »Dionysius« and those influenced by him down to Cusanus¹, of the negative or apophatic theology of Plotinus and his successors. Its importance in this context is only secondary. The main reasons why Christian thinkers found it possible to accept Neoplatonic apophatic theology so whole-heartedly are to be found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition itself (which I do not propose to discuss) and in some aspects of Neoplatonic thought about the First Hypostasis, the One or Good. Nevertheless a way of thinking about the Second Hypostasis, Divine Intellect or Being, which can be called apophatic did exist, and does not always, perhaps, receive due attention.

It has been solidly established by recent studies of the relationship of Christian to Hellenic Neoplatonist thought that one of its most striking features is the way in which the Christians bring together and apply to God what is said by the Hellenic Neoplatonists about the first two hypostases (or, in terms of the traditional interpretation of the Parmenides, the first two hypotheses): or, to be more precise, apply some of what is said about Nous to God along with what is said about the One and use other statements about Nous, especially those in which its multiplicity and derivation are stressed, in constructing their account of the angelic world, which they sometimes refer to as the κόσμος νοητός². And, since HADOT's rediscovery of the metaphysics of Porphyry³, we can see this Christian development as in some way related to a movement of thought within Hellenic Neoplatonism

¹ I have not the competence to discuss what happened to the negative theology after Cusanus. But there is a remark of WERNER BEIERWALTES in the chapter on Hegel in his *Identität und Differenz* which I find particularly interesting and stimulating. He says, in distinguishing the aim of Hegel's religious philosophy from that of the conjectural philosophy of Cusanus and the negative dialectic of Neoplatonism: »Die Überzeugung von der Durchschaubarkeit und Formulierbarkeit der Sache selbst bleibt das Trennende, wenn Hegel durch Denken das Mysterium lichten zu können meint.« (*Identität u. Differenz = Philosophische Abhandlungen* B. 49 Frankfurt 1980, p. 249).

This leads me to wonder how far the revolts, not only against traditional metaphysics but against any form of theistic belief, which have played such a notable part in the intellectual life of our times, are to some extent due to the neglect and eventually virtual disappearance of the negative theology. Are they, at least in part, reac-

tions to claims to know too much about God?

² This development is one of the main themes of STEPHEN GERSH's excellent and comprehensive study of the relationship of Christian to Hellenic Neoplatonism, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena* (Leiden 1978): see also W. BEIERWALTES *Identität in der Differenz* (in *Identität und Differenz*, Frankfurt 1980 pp. 24-56). For accounts of the angelic world in terms of the Neoplatonic κόσμος νοητός see Basil of Caesarea *Hex.* 1, 5, (PG 29, 13A), Gregory of Nyssa *In Cant.* 6 (PG 44, 893A-B) Augustine *Confessions* 12, 11-15 and *De Gen. ad litt.* 1, 1 (with my *Spiritual or Intelligible Matter in Plotinus and St. Augustine*, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* [London 1979] 7).

³ P. HADOT, *La Métaphysique de Porphyre in Porphyre = Entretiens sur L'Antiquité Classique* T. 12, *Vandœuvres-Genève*, pp.127-157 and *Porphyre et Victorinus* (2 vols. Paris 1968).

itself. (I am aware that some very difficult and intricate questions arise here, both about the relationship of the fourth-century Commentary on the Parmenides to the thought of Porphyry himself and about the, perhaps never precisely determinable, degrees of influence on this development of Christian tradition, the survival of Middle Platonist ways of thinking, and Porphyrian metaphysics. But it seems now established that the bringing together of the hypostases in this way is a development which did in fact occur within Hellenic Neoplatonism without Christian influence.)

The survival of the negative theology, with undiminished vigour, in this uniting of the One beyond being and the One-Being is explained primarily, on the Neoplatonic side, by the fact that the assimilation of the hypostases took place, to parody with pious intent the Athanasian Creed, »not by the conversion of the One into the One-Being, but by the taking of the One-Being into the One«. HADOT's rediscovery of Porphyry, and the attention which this has focussed on the Turin palimpsest Commentary on the Parmenides, a master-work of Neoplatonic negative theology, have enabled students of Plotinus to understand better the full significance of the strongly positive and affirmative statements which he sometimes makes about the One and to see Porphyry's metaphysics as a legitimate development of one side at least of the thought of his master. If we read 6 8 [39], where the theology is more kataphatic than anywhere else in the Enneads, closely, as we should, with its neighbour in both the Enneadic and chronological order 6 7 [38], and pay proper attention to the Plotinian οὐδόν, we can see its strongly positive affirmations about the One, which seem to point forward almost inevitably to Porphyry's assimilation of the First and Second Hypostases, as part of the exercise of the most radical negative theology, that of the *negatio negationis*⁴, so well exemplified in the Parmenides commentary. They are part of the dialectic which leads the mind exercising it, not to total negativity or super-affirmation or higher synthesis, but to fruitful and illuminating silence before that for which the mind is not big enough, that which is absolutely beyond us. It is first and foremost this ultimate radicalism of Neoplatonic thought which could make possible the application of the affirmations of the Second Hypothesis to God without weakening the negative theology. It explains why »Dionysius« and his followers, though rather »Porphyrian« in their positive statements about God, can be »Proclan« or even »Damascian« in the radicalism of their negations.

But there is a secondary, but still important, reason for this. There runs through Neoplatonic thought about the Second Hypostasis a profound doubt of the adequacy, or even the applicability, of the discursive, analytic, defining thought and language which belong to ἐπιστήμη here below to the unity-in-diversity of the One-Being, the eternal life of the Intellect which is the World of Forms. The foundation-text in Plato for this is the philosophical digression in the Seventh Platonic Letter (341A-344D). It is clearly apparent in Plotinus, where it has been very fully and carefully studied by KLAUS WURM⁵. But the generally informal and unsystematic character of his thought and writing make it somewhat less noticeable than it is in his more systematic successors, and sufficient attention has not always been paid to it. It is considerably more striking when it appears in Proclus,

⁴ The *negatio negationis* is not often explicit in Plotinus. But it is clearly stated at 6 8, 9, 39-41: ἄλλ' ἔστι τῷ ἰδόντι οὐδὲ τὸ οὕτως εἰπεῖν δύνασθαι οὐδ' αὖ τὸ μὴ οὕτως: τί γὰρ ἂν εἴποις αὐτὸ τῶν ὄντων, ἐφ' ὧν τὸ οὕτως.

⁵ KLAUS WURM, *Substanz und Qualität* (Berlin-New York 1973). See also A. SMITH, *Potentiality and the Problem of Plurality in the Intelligible World in Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought*, London 1981, pp. 99-107.

who is generally, and rightly, regarded as the most rigorously systematic of Neoplatonic thinkers, one who pushes defining logical discourse far further than on his own assumptions it should go, even above the intelligible level to the Henads. Yet there are several passages in his works where he states, clearly as common and accepted doctrine, the inadequacy of discursive ἐπιστήμη to apprehend or express the intelligible⁶, and one in particular where he develops this theme with such vigour as to give good grounds for speaking of a »negative theology of Nous«.

The passage in question is from the exposition of the doctrine of the Demiurge in the Commentary on the Timaeus⁷. The text being commented is Timaeus 28C. The Demiurge in Proclus ranks comparatively low in the hierarchy of divine intelligences; he is noetic, not noetic⁸. This makes the language used here about our attainment of him and the utter inadequacy of our thought and speech to attain to him particularly remarkable.

The first part of the passage is a comment on »It is a hard task to find the maker and father of this universe«. Proclus strongly and repeatedly insists that this is not a task which can be performed by epistemic reason: and the language he uses is strikingly close to the language which Plotinus uses about vision of and union with the One, though it is made clear that we are dealing with a reality of the order of Intellect. »For this is the finding, encountering him, being made one with him, keeping company alone with him alone, encountering his immediate self-revelation, snatching itself away from all other activity; when the soul has done this it will think that epistemic reasonings are just stories, when it is in company with the Father and feasts with him on the truth of being and »in a pure light«, purely, »is initiated to the beholding of complete and changeless visions« (302, 1-8). »... for after the wandering of coming to birth and the purification and the epistemic light the intelligent activity shines out, and the intellect in us, which brings the soul to harbour in the Father and settles it unpolluted in the demiurgic intellections, and joins light to light, not like the light of epistemic reason, but more beautiful and more intelligible and more like the One: this is the Father's haven, the finding of the Father, the unpolluted union with him« (302, 17-25)⁹. Though the hierarchy is formally preserved, and the passage is not at all »Porphyrian«, the assimilation upwards of the vision of and union with the Demiurge to vision of and union with the One is very noticeable, and appears to be deliberate. And it is made very clear, and becomes clearer still in the continuation of the passage, that this union is not epistemically thinkable and is not properly expressible in any sort of language. The remark »When the soul has done this it will think that epistemic reasonings are just stories«¹⁰ should be noted. Some implicit reference is perhaps intended to the passage in which Plotinus speaks of the inadequacy of both myths and discursive reasonings to express eternal reality because of their separative and divisive character¹¹. And these passages of Plotinus and Proclus seem to make clear that the Neoplatonists' awareness of the inadequacy of philosophical discourse did not lead them to give any preference to the language of myth and symbol as more suited for expressing the nature of eternal realities. They may often seem to modern philosophers to be using »the

⁶ *Platonic Theology* 2, 10 (2 64, 7 SAFFREY-WESTERINK): In Alcibiadem 245-249 CREUZER (113-115 WESTERINK): In Parmenidem 1015, 33-40 GOUSIN.

⁷ In Timaeum 2 92C-93A (1, 301, 23-303, 25 DIEHL).

⁸ On the place of the Demiurge in the hierarchy see DODDS's commentary on Proposition 167 of the Elements of Theology (E. R. DODDS Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*², Oxford 1963, pp. 285-287).

⁹ All translations of Proclus are my own.

¹⁰ ὅτε καὶ τοὺς ἐπιστημονικοὺς λόγους μύθους ἡγήσεται ... 302, 4-5.

¹¹ 3 5 [50] 9, 24-29; for the discursive inadequacy of λόγος cp. 6 7 [38] 35, 27-30.

language of poetry and religion¹² rather than of philosophy. But this does not mean that they regard language of this kind as in any way privileged in comparison with the abstract logical discourse which they all, including Plotinus, use most of the time. When the inadequacy of language is most clearly perceived, it is the inadequacy of all language, not of logical discourse as compared with poetic symbolism. This, of course, leaves open the possibility that both kinds of language, though inadequate, can be helpful in bringing us to the point where we can see¹³.

The second part of the passage is devoted to the exegesis of »and having found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind«. Here the Seventh Letter is brought into play and the scepticism about language becomes radical: though this does not prevent Proclus from continuing at considerable length thereafter his epistemic discourse on the theology of the Demiurge. »For the finding did not belong to a speaking soul, but to one keeping holy silence and lying open to the divine light; it did not belong to a soul moving with its own motion but to one which keeps a kind of silence: for since the soul is not naturally adapted to grasp the substances of the other things by a name or a limiting definition or epistemic reasoning, but only by a direct intelligence, as he says himself in his Letters, how could it find the substance of the Demiurge in another way than by immediate intelligence? But how, when it has found in this way, could it express its vision by nouns and verbs? For discourse which moves in composition is unable to present the simple nature which is like the One?« »Well then«, someone might say, »do we not say a great deal about the Demiurge and the other gods and the One itself? We do indeed speak about them, but we do not speak each one's real self, and we can speak epistemically, but not intelligently: for this is finding, as we said before. But if finding belongs to the silent soul, how could the talk which flows through the mouth suffice to bring to light what we have found?« (303, 5–23). This is one of the most powerful developments to be found in the writings of the Neoplatonists of the great Neoplatonic theme of silence; and the incurable discursivity and separateness of *all* speech and its consequent complete inability to express *any* eternal reality could hardly be more strongly stated. A gap has opened between the object of philosophy and philosophical discourse which Proclus seems to find disconcertingly wide, as he certainly should in view of his normal practice, but which he recognises none the less. And it is this sense of the gap which is common to, and is the driving force of, all forms of Neoplatonic negative theology.

The passage from the Platonic Theology which states the same doctrine¹⁴ is a simple, though very strongly worded statement that every kind of knowledge will destroy itself¹⁵ if applied to an object which does not concern it. The passages from the Commentaries on the Alcibiades¹⁶ and the Parmenides¹⁷ which are related to the passage under discussion stress the inadequacy of epistemic reasoning less strongly and give an account of why, in spite of its incapacity to attain the intelligible, the philosopher must continue to use it,

¹² A. C. LLOYD in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy* (Cambridge 1970) 4 *The Later Neoplatonists*, Epilogue p. 324.

¹³ In 5 8 [31] 6 Plotinus does suggest that hieroglyphic picture-writing is helpful to the understanding of noetic non-discursiveness: but this is by no means equivalent to saying that poetry, pictures or music express the intelligible better than philosophical discourse.

¹⁴ 2, 10 (2 64, 5–9 SAFFREY–WESTERINK).

¹⁵ ἑαυτὴν ἀναιρήσει: the language becomes even more violent when the level of the One is reached: ὅστε καὶ εἰ λόγος εἴη τοῦ ἀρρήτου, περὶ ἑαυτῷ καταβαλλόμενος οὐδὲν παύεται καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν διαμάχεται.

¹⁶ In Alcibiades 245–249 CREUZER (113–115 WESTERINK). Festugière notes the resemblance in *Commentaire sur le Timée 2* (Paris 1967), p. 154 note 4.

¹⁷ In *Parmenidem* 1015, 33–40 Cousin.

which is worth some consideration. They present it as a γυμνασία, an exercise, and a fine sentence in the Parmenides commentary extends this to the whole life of the philosopher. »All our life is a training-ground for that vision [of intelligible truth] and our wandering through dialectic hastens to that haven«¹⁸. This belongs to that way of looking at philosophy which was so important to the ancients and which has been excellently expounded by HADOT¹⁹, philosophy as »spiritual exercise«. Ancient philosophers hardly ever regarded their philosophy as simply the theoretical pursuit of conclusions by a process of abstract reasoning. It was rather a process of training and exercise aiming at total self-transformation, at final enlightenment and liberation. (This brings our own ancient traditions much closer to the thought of India than is always realised by those who seek from Hindu or Buddhist masters what they may indeed find there, but might find in a less exotic and more easily assimilable form nearer home.) It is a way of thinking which still deserves serious consideration, especially perhaps by those of us who continue to wish to call ourselves Platonists, because the commoner alternative way in which the Neoplatonists consider and pursue normal philosophical activity does not seem to be altogether coherent or satisfactory.

Their normal way of proceeding is, while making a very sharp distinction between νόησις and διάνοια and insisting sometimes, as we have seen, on the inability of the latter to grasp or express noetic reality, to continue reasoning about the intelligible realm in a manner which may be sharply distinguished as higher Platonic dialectic from lower Aristotelian logic²⁰, but seems in practice to be attempting to operate discursively within quite ordinary logical rules. The supreme examples of this are the Elements of Theology of Proclus and the Periphyseon of Eriugena. But this way of proceeding has very considerable difficulties. It is extremely difficult to see how there can be any kind of thought about an eternal reality which is not only one but discrete and diversified, with very complex internal relationships, which is not so incurably discursive that attempts to raise it to the level of its subject can only result in paradox and incoherence. As A. C. LLOYD says »It is very difficult, though it has to be done in Neoplatonism, to call the »single-mindedness« attributed to Intellect intellectual«²¹. A courteously-worded judgement on Eriugena by a scholar who looks at the Periphyseon from the point of view of modern Cambridge philosophy may help to make what I am trying to say clearer. »The conclusion to be drawn from these remarks is not that Eriugena was not a philosopher, but that he was not the creator of a philosophical system. The thought of the Periphyseon does form a system, but one which could be called »philosophical« only in an unhelpfully broad sense of the word. It is a system which does not attempt to provide an explanation of reality by means of reason, but rather to make an imaginative whole of ideas, arguments and dogmas taken from a variety of sources, including Holy Scripture«²². It does not seem that the application of logic or dialectic to intelligible or spiritual reality produces results which are very satisfac-

¹⁸ Πᾶσα τοίνυν ἡμῶν ἡ ζωὴ γυμνασίον ἐστὶ πρὸς ἐκείνην τὴν θέαν, καὶ ἡ διὰ τῆς διαλεκτικῆς πλάνη πρὸς τὸν ὄρμον ἐκείνον ἐπείγεται (1015, 39–40).

¹⁹ P. HADOT, *Exercices Spirituels* (Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, 5^e Section 84, 25–70) = *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique*, Paris 1981, 13–58.

²⁰ Plotinus *On Dialectic* 1 3 [20] 5.

²¹ *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early*

Mediaeval Philosophy (Cambridge 1970) 4 *The Later Neoplatonists*, Epilogue p. 324. For a fuller discussion see A. C. LLOYD, *Non-Discursive Thought – An Enigma of Greek Philosophy* in *Proc. of the Aristotelian Society* 1970, p. 261–274.

²² J. MARENBO, *John Scottus and the Categoriae Decem in Eriugena: Studien zu seinen Quellen* ed. W. BEIERWALTES (Heidelberg 1980), p. 131.

tory or convincing to logicians: unless of course they have been trained to accept this way of proceeding rather uncritically for extra-logical reasons.

This in itself should be enough to make reasonably open-minded adherents of traditional philosophy rather uneasy and dubious about presenting our metaphysics as the total, certainly and universally true, explanation of reality by means of reason. But even if we are less sensitive than we should be to contemporary criticism, there are reasons very deep in our tradition why we should pay serious attention to the very far-reaching doubts which, as we have seen, arise in the minds of ancient Platonists about the competence of epistemic reason to apprehend or express even the lower levels of eternal reality. An important reason why we should do so is that overmuch confidence in metaphysical or theological discourse, especially of a controversial or polemical kind, inevitably leads to the negative theology being pushed very much into the background, or even eliminated altogether. And without the negative theology our representation of reality loses all depth and becomes abstract, flat and unreal. We can detect in the later Hellenic Neoplatonists, who were quite as dogmatic and concerned to prove other people wrong as Christian theologians, a move very like that which MAURICE WILES has detected in Christian theology. In considering the move within Arianism from Arius's insistence on the incomprehensibility of God to Eunomius's insistence on his comprehensibility and definability WILES says: »The move to Eunomius's position would be one that follows a pattern not uncommon in the history of Christian theology – but none the less regrettable for that. If a theologian stresses the mystery of God, it is bound to be more difficult for him to show that his opponents' beliefs must be false. In his desire to exclude what he believes to be false teaching, he is likely to be tempted to claim greater precision (and therefore greater power of exclusion) for his formulations than the evidence warrants or even than he himself in his heart of hearts wants to claim«²³. A proper consideration and development of the radical doubts which we have been examining in these same Hellenic Neoplatonists (and they continue in the Christian Neoplatonist tradition) may save us from making this regrettable move. And a similar study and development of their thought about *ἐπιστήμη* as *γυμνασία*, about reasoning as a training for vision and liberation, will give us very positive grounds for insisting on the continual necessity of reasoning for the most radical negative theologian, and may also help us to recover something of the ancient understanding of philosophy as not only a way of thinking but a way of life.

I conclude with two aphorisms which seem relevant from one of the few professed Christian Platonists of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the late Mother Maria (Lydia Gysi), whose whole spiritual life was founded on the double negation, and who lived her philosophy to the ultimate point²⁴. In a selection of her occasional writings and notes published by her community there appear the following:

»We will not accept a logical plane between Mystery and event upon which the super-logical Mystery would be projected down and the sub-logical event projected up.«

»When the mind is like an animal craving for food it will make a noise, but if it is fed and worked hard, it will gladly be quiet. Therefore »down reason, down«. But if this is

²³ From a paper given to a seminar at Oxford in the summer of 1980.

²⁴ This phrase is taken from the letter (November 1974) in which she told me that she was dying of cancer.

»Is it a grace, to be allowed to live, or try to live, or

make it one's »work« to live one's philosophy to the ultimate point? I take it as an infinite tenderness of God; although at times I have to take a deep breath not to yield to fearfulness.« (Mother Maria, *Her Life in Letters*, edited by Sister Thekla, London 1979, p. 108).

enacted by asserting theological statement of paradox as the higher wisdom of God, there we would say that paradox is but a negative logic – a non-logic – which is however on the same plane as flat logic«²⁵.

²⁵ The Fool, Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption, Normanby, Whitby, North Yorkshire, England, 1980, pp. 106 and 108. Though she knew nothing of Indian thought, her Platonist estimation of »mind« or »reason« here (and elsewhere) is strikingly like some

Indian estimations of that tricky and unreliable constituent of our lower selves *manas*. (On *manas* and *buddhi* in the *Gita* see A. H. ARMSTRONG and R. RAVINDRA, *The Dimensions of the Self in Religious Studies* 15 [1979], pp. 329–330).