

Post-Hellenistic Philosophy, Neoplatonism, and the Doxastic Turn in Religion: Continuities and Ruptures in Ancient Reflections on Religion

Tuomo Lankila

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Theology, P.O. Box 4, 00014, Finland
tuomo.lankila@helsinki.fi

Abstract

This article is inspired by Peter Van Nuffelen's comparison between post-Hellenistic philosophy and Neoplatonism. The article defends the thesis of a fundamental break between ancient religions and new universal religions which became prevalent at the end of late antiquity. This break concerns not only fundamental doctrines but also the principles of how religious communities were constituted. There was a shift from the world of practice-oriented and reciprocally recognizing cults to the world of exclusive theocracies whose mindset emphasizes doctrinal confession. Some seeds of such a “doxastic turn” are to be seen in the post-Hellenistic philosophy and especially in the dogmatic tendencies of Middle Platonism. Thus, there is an observable route from the post-Hellenistic thought towards late ancient universal religions.

Neoplatonism's role in this historical drama is not that of precursor but, rather, it represents a deviation from the main line.

Keywords

Neoplatonism – Proclus – Late Antiquity – “doxastic turn”

Peter Van Nuffelen (2011) has recently charted the relationship between philosophy and religion in post-Hellenistic thought. Following upon Van Nuffelen's analysis, the present article reconsiders Greek Neoplatonism's relation to religion. In the context of a broader historical perspective, I argue that Christianity and Islam are perhaps more direct heirs to post-Hellenistic thinking than they are to Neoplatonism.

This seems especially obvious in light of many doctrinal issues. First, there was a monotheistic tendency in post-Hellenistic philosophy against which Neoplatonism reacted. Post-Hellenistic philosophy also incorporates creationism as well as the ontotheological notion of God as the supreme being, in contrast to Neoplatonism, with its supraessential One and non-intentional cosmogenesis.

Matters of doctrine are not my main concern, however. My focus is on the Neoplatonic conceptualization of religion itself and its relation to the great historical shift that occurred at the end of late antiquity. (In this contribution, Neoplatonism refers mainly to the later, post-Iamblichean version of scholastic Platonism, as espoused by the Athenian school of Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius.) At this point, religion transformed itself from a form of social “practice” into more of a “belief” system and became more recognizable as an autonomous dimension of social life. Pre-Plotinian philosophy already shows the first signs of this “doxastic turn” and the subsequent emergence of confessionalism. Neoplatonism’s relation to this development therefore needs to be clarified.

Van Nuffelen notes how many scholars not only commit the methodological fallacy of constructing a unified religious outlook based on widely differing sources, but also how they prioritize philosophical texts over other sources. This is an important reminder, as these do not necessarily testify to the presence of a given religious mentality in society as a whole. Indeed, modern studies of ancient religion seem to show that, although philosophers were revising their conception of all things divine during the Post-Hellenistic period, at the same time cultic and performative practices continued in many of their traditional forms.

Van Nuffelen criticizes interpretations which treat the whole period as *praeparatio neoplatonica*. Although there are great affinities between the two, post-Hellenism and Neoplatonism conceptualize religion in markedly different ways. Van Nuffelen specifies three key elements that distinguish Neoplatonist thought from the former period — its emphasis on the divine origin of religion, its attempt to map all deities onto one overall hierarchy valid for all different religions, and its claim to be a religion transcending all local religions (2011: 237).

Post-Hellenistic philosophy recognized two means of acquiring knowledge of the gods: one was through revelation, another through rational reasoning. According to post-Hellenistic philosophy, myth is a form of narrative that provides a human way to talk about the divine. This is very different from the idea of two incommensurate truths, which is how the relationship between philosophy and religion has commonly been seen in the modern era. Truth

is indivisible, whereas mythical thinking provides only a confused image of it. Post-Hellenistic philosophy accepts the authority of revelation and religion only when it is brought to heel through philosophical inquiry.

A crucial novelty in the post-Hellenistic revision of religion is the notion that religious cults were intentionally founded by the wise men of old. As the founding fathers were already in possession of leading principles, philosophy could then be said to have preceded religion. Being thus born in history and through human agency, the cultus probably became partially adulterated in later days, even though it should have been preserved as much as possible in its traditional form. While the Middle Platonists, as well as post-Hellenistic philosophers in general, understood humans to act as agents during the rites, Neoplatonists regarded the gods, not humans, as the real agents.

I agree with Van Nuffelen that post-Hellenistic philosophy does not reduce to a kind of proto-Neoplatonism. In what follows, I shall examine these themes from the perspective of late Neoplatonism.

Tradition and Innovation in Neoplatonism

Going back to Van Nuffelen's three key differences between these two phases of philosophy, the idea that all deities could be located along a single hierarchy was indeed a key endeavor for later Neoplatonists, keen on the idea of ordering multiple divinities into a quasi-mathematical series. There were still some reservations, for example, concerning reciprocal translatability between ethnic pantheons. The assertion that Neoplatonism was aiming to be a super-religion is also relatively valid, though not quite precise. Neoplatonism takes its religious trappings from Platonic philosophy, which was in many ways a form of mystagogy, not only because exegesis, as such, was felt to be a form of adoring the gods, but because historical conditions later forced Neoplatonism to act as a substitute for persecuted polytheism. Later Neoplatonism understood itself as a spiritual movement engaged in rediscovering and re-establishing Platonic scientific theology. Perhaps because this science is, on a metaphysical level, independent of any particular pantheon, there could be cause to see it as positioned above particular religions. Nevertheless, Platonic theology harbored no pretensions of replacing any form of piety. The latter, after all, if authentic, of necessity had to be compatible with its pure teachings.

Neoplatonism acknowledges the same channels for gaining knowledge of the gods as did post-Hellenistic philosophy. In addition, however, there is the idea of an all-pervading divine presence in the soul. Neoplatonism considers only didactic myths to be human constructions. In contrast, a myth of the

loftier kind is a genuinely inspired expression of some of the deepest truths. Discursive reason can explain mythical content to some degree, but it is doubtful whether it could ever explain it exhaustively. This phenomenal form of myth is wrapped around its hidden message and is capable of resonating with the soul's imaginative power and invoking its passions. This is why Proclus says that every myth is demonic with respect to its surface, yet divine with respect to its ineffable vision (Proclus, *In Parmenidem* 2, 79.2–4 [ed. Cousin 1961]). The view of there being two truths is as foreign to Neoplatonism as it was to post-Hellenistic thought. Philosophy and religion concern themselves with the same truth, but with the reservation that not all philosophy regarding gods and forms of religion are genuine, and that even the genuine ones are divided into a variety of discourses (Proclus, *In Parm.* 646 21–34 [ed. Cousin 1961]; *Théologie platonicienne* 1.2.9.20–10.10; 1.4.17.9–23.11 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]). Genuine philosophy, such as Plato's, is in the privileged position of being accessible to all those who are capable of partaking in the rational understanding which is granted to humans. Other discourses might be conceptually translatable but not entirely, so that the ultimate truth remains always with the gods (henads), and thus is secret in its deepest nature, not only to human understanding, but even to the divine intellect.

Neoplatonism holds that gods not only inspire cults but also actively advocate them. This lends more credibility to arguments against corruption in the tradition itself, as the authentic kernel of the cult is healthy and divine: any damage suffered during the course of history is therefore repairable. It is not allowed that divine things be tampered with arbitrarily, but in practice, the Neoplatonic attitude to religion permits a measure of innovation. Neoplatonists are not unwilling to replace traditional forms if these are shown to be faulty or resurrect what are assumed to be authentic traditions where they are lacking. This is felt to be justified, as they are convinced that their scientific theology provides them with adequate knowledge of the divine (see Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28 on Proclus' religious intervention in Lydian cults [ed. Boissonade 1966]).

This corresponds to the characteristic Neoplatonic mode in philosophy. Middle Platonic analysis showed less sensitivity to the more enigmatic sides of dialogue — in Plato's discourse, the dialogues move from initial puzzles to purifying aporias. Middle Platonism tended to mine from Plato's dialogues a set of arguments and proofs that represented a system of tenets to be committed to memory as part of a philosophical education. But according to Neoplatonists, the task of a Platonic exegete was actually far less straightforward than pre-Plotinian philosophers had thought. The Neoplatonists argued that every one of Plato's dialogues should be mappable to a specific place in an ascending series, one that brings with it a commensurate higher awareness and brighter

virtue. Each part of every dialogue has to relate to the scope (theoretical subject) of that dialogue. However, being at the same time mirrors of the universe, dialogues must also reflect the All, so that each of them is additionally possessed of a theological dimension and thus teaches something about specific divine order. Neoplatonists argue that all things pronounced by any participant in a discussion and the terms they use should be carefully scrutinized for their implications. This applies even to digressions into the mythical or stories such as those used by Plato to frame his dialogues in dramatic fashion.¹

Such requirements for painstaking exegesis not only contributed to a higher technical level of Platonizing. Paradoxically, they also provided opportunities for innovative insights, even if the interpretive work was understood essentially as a more precise explication of knowledge already acquired. Such exhaustive commentary vindicates the idea of an aporetic ascent implicit in the dialogues. The task of philosophy, as a form of assimilation with the divine, is not to inculcate human tenets, but to free the soul of misunderstandings that frustrate its primordially given communion with the gods (see Erler 2006: 387–408).

Even if Neoplatonism does not see religion as a human creation in the same way that post-Hellenistic philosophy did, it nevertheless gives a significant role to the founding fathers of traditional wisdom. Orpheus, for instance, was seen as a kind of philosophical prophet. Proclus really believed that Homer propounded practically the same doctrine of soul as Plato, and that he deliberately introduced this philosophical concept into the epic cycle in the form of poetic expressions (Proclus, *In rempublicam* 171.8–172.30 [ed. Kroll 1965]). However, such a divinely-inspired soul was not only a thing of distant history. Proclus views Socrates, Plato, Plotinus, and Syrianus as similarly godly souls, sent to the world for the benefit of humankind. In all these cases, the decisive factor is to have received divine inspiration (Proclus, *In Parm.* 618 [ed. Cousin 1961]; *Theol. Plat.* 1.5.16–6.9 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]).

The idea that specific cults were founded by intentional human agents is not alien to Neoplatonist thinking. Real theurgists would collect different divine tokens and symbols and form new receptacles of the divine presence from them (Proclus, *De sacrificio et magia* 150.25–151.23 [ed. Bidez 1928: 148–151]). One example is the cult of Serapis, which by general acknowledgement was established in accordance with the will of a king who wanted to synthesize Greek and Egyptian elements of religion. Here, theurgy or hieratic art seems to refer to the action of “making a god.” However, the Neoplatonists

1 For a good account of the Neoplatonic tradition of commentary, see, for example, L. G. Westerink's introduction in 1976: 7–32.

did not think that such phenomena would be ultimately dependent on human volition. Serapis may have been a synthetic god, but he was not an artificial one, if all of this was done through divine inspiration and genuine tokens of the gods (*synthemata*).

In connection with this, one may ask how far the Neoplatonist conception of intervention in the religious domain could be taken. Some of Proclus' formulations can be read not only as a call to a "pure cult" for the few souls capable of grasping Platonic truths, but also perhaps for a more general revival in religion (Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.131.24–132.8 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]). It would seem nonetheless that the Neoplatonic view has a tragic element, in the sense that different souls are seen to have aptitudes that are hardwired to reach only a certain level of religious perfection. On the one hand, a truly pure worship of gods can thus only occur by going through the strict requirements of philosophical ascent. On the other hand, Neoplatonists hold out the prospect that all souls, without discrimination, may do better in the next round of transmigration.

Changing Terminology

Van Nuffelen reminds us of the fact that in Ancient Greek there is no word for religion in its modern sense. Ancient terminology instead puts "the focus on tradition and personal piety. Religion is thus what is embedded in tradition and custom" (Van Nuffelen 2011: 233 n. 5). This situation prevailed also in late antiquity. However, in Neoplatonic vocabulary, another term besides "pure cult" started to become more prominent. This term was *threskeia*, which was often further qualified as either "holy," "divine," or "... of gods."² This polyvalent word also came to be used in Christian discourse and thus ultimately came to signify religion in a more general sense in Modern Greek. Its increased use in Neoplatonist and late ancient texts shows an awareness of a deeper change, in which religion was evolving from a state of embeddedness into a more easily identifiable, specific, and autonomous area of social praxis. Thus, the change of terminology also mirrors a new mode of religious life.

The increase in use of the term *threskeia* may actually have been caused by the growing influence of (and reaction to) religious movements such as Christianity, which detached the individual from the role of worshipper

2 These terms abound in late Neoplatonic texts. See, for example, Proclus' *Timaeus* commentary (*In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* [ed. Diehl 1965]): 1.208.22 ("holy religion"); 1.211.13 ("holy religion"); 1.212.16 ("divine religion"); 3.41.14 ("holy religion"); 3.153.7 ("all religions").

observing customary rules. They replaced this with organizing religious life on the basis of denominational communities of like-minded individuals. Traditional units for cultic life in an ethnic or civic framework were now free to see others in terms of more or less translatability, reciprocal recognition, or things to be ignored.³ However, the formation of religious associations or spiritual clubs made it possible to identify rivals and to proclaim one's own to be not only the best (in the sense of satisfying religious feelings), but also the only one that could be described as true. Previously, "sacrilegious" had meant particular acts which offended the shared religious code of a community, but this changed in late antiquity due to this new aspect of truth. Sacrilegious now came to mean the permanent practice of a "wrong" religion, and this in turn would eventually lead to the next step for religious practitioners to feel as if it were their ethical duty to enforce truth on others.

This same process is possibly behind the shift in meaning of the term *hairesis* from the fairly neutral definition "current of thought" to the more contentious meaning of "faction" (illegitimate sect in a religious context). This semantic slide continued with the adoption of new criteria for separating "good" from "bad" in religion, when at last *hairesis* acquired the sinister connotations of heresy (see Athanassiadi 2010).

Reason and Revelation

Van Nuffelen is surely correct in emphasizing that the main difference between post-Hellenistic and Neoplatonic views on religion lies in the former seeing religion as initiated by humans towards the gods, while in the latter it is divinely initiated by the gods themselves. But how does the divine intercede for Neoplatonism in this case? My claim is that it is through the divine interface installed in the soul's structure, rather than through revelations directly received from the outside.

Contrary to what is often believed, Neoplatonism does not place revelation beyond the scrutiny of rational thought. At least in Proclus' case, revelation is

3 Oath formulas found in diplomatic treaties in the Near East testify to the recognition of foreign pantheons from as early as the Bronze Age. Adopting alien divinities was a common feature throughout antiquity. Although there were conflicts with a religious dimension, in the sense of order of precedence among the gods (for example, the Amarna period in Egypt or Nabunaid's reign in Babylonia), there are no known attempts to reject the validity of alternative pantheons until the relatively late emergence of the specifically Judaic concept of monotheism (as distinguished from monolatry).

always tempered with philosophical judgment. Although he sincerely declares that the *Chaldean Oracles* are directly sent by the gods and thus are beyond doubt, Proclus does not let revelation dictate his philosophy. His interpretation of it provides further warrant for Platonic positions whose truth has first been ascertained by rigorous philosophical study (cf. *Theol. Plat.* 4.27.6–31.16 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]). Philosophical readings should not aim to replace the revelatory message of a sacred text, but rather to supplement it by translating it into rational concepts. The philosophical argument thus works in conjunction with revelation, without challenging its authority and validity at the symbolic level.

In Platonic terms, dogmatic religious sects value faith more than philosophy. This makes them “doxastic.” This was also a classic Neoplatonic objection which was directed at Gnosticism by Plotinus, and at Christians by later Neoplatonists. Middle Platonist philosophical dogmatism disqualifies the primacy of religious revelation. Neoplatonism sees philosophy as a tool for navigating an ascent through aporetic negations, aided by gods and as much a form of truth as inspirational revelation.

Neoplatonism and Theurgy

The founding father of later Neoplatonism, Iamblichus, vehemently defended the primacy of gods as real agents in religious rites. Recent studies have played down the previously held view that there was a sharp division between theurgical and intellectual Neoplatonism, and yet it is hard to deny that these two strands of Neoplatonism valued religious rituals differently. “The best guess is that he [Plotinus] felt for it [contemporary religion] polite indifference bordering on disdain,” suggests Lloyd P. Gerson (1994: 175). Indeed, the impression given by Porphyry, who wrote a biography of Plotinus and edited his *Enneads*, is that the latter’s interest in practical rituals was marginal. But the *Enneads* are not, strictly speaking, a treatise on religion. Although there are theological and exegetical ponderings, they describe divinization in philosophical terms, anticipating the more textually anchored philosophizing of later Neoplatonism.

Porphyry obviously gave rituals a more central place, but he was reluctant to denigrate the transcendent nature of gods, or imply that they should be solely tied to rituals. Iamblichus aimed to alleviate Porphyry’s misgivings in his most famous work — now known by its renaissance title as *De Mysteriis*. The text is not a declaration in favor of irrationalism, nor is it necessarily even a defense

of “theurgy.” Nevertheless, *De Mysteriis* could be interpreted as perhaps the first attempt in Western history to form “a positive expression of philosophy of religion” (Smith 2011: 298). In other words, it was an inquiry into religious phenomena at the performative and cultic levels (among other things) from a philosophical perspective.

How did the *Chaldean Oracles* influence the Neoplatonic approach to religion? One generally accepted interpretation has been to assume that the *Oracles* contained a relatively new, ready-made set of beliefs and practices invented by its authors that became known as “theurgy.” This became integrated with Neoplatonism, hesitatingly at first and only partially through the work of Porphyry, then wholeheartedly and in earnest with Iamblichus. The phenomena that at this point were considered theurgical in actuality formed an ages-old subject of debate. The themes had been under reflection for centuries, but the “Chaldeans” of the second century were the first to invent a general term (theurgy). What appealed to Neoplatonists in the Chaldean formulation was not only the neologism itself, but the Chaldean authors’ specific theory for explaining religious experiences as mysterious actions mediated through divine symbols (*synthemata*). This account probably had its root in the ancient traditions of the Near East, but in the *Oracles* it was articulated in terms that were compatible with Middle Platonism. Additional causes for arousing the Neoplatonists’ interest in the *Oracles* were: (1) the familiarity of ideas that derived from Middle Platonism; (2) the Chaldean authors’ claims to have received teaching directly from Plato’s soul as well as the gods; and (3) the fact that the revelation of the *Oracles* was from the relatively recent historical past, which proved a valuable defense for Neoplatonists in their struggle against Christians and their own historical claims.

Some specific rites came with this Chaldean heritage, which were also valued by the Neoplatonists and to which we find occasional references in Proclus, but Neoplatonists did not apply the term theurgy exclusively to the practice of these rituals. In addition, these traditions themselves were not necessarily the invention of the two Julians who created the *Oracles*, but more likely the product of the Hellenistic Near East under a Platonic guise. The ritual of fake burial, holiest of all for the theurgist, according to Proclus, seems to be an enactment of the Platonic myth in *Phaedrus* (Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.30.18–19 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]).

In light of this, it is worth considering the overall bias in studies towards the “victors” in history. This is particularly noticeable in the way the traditions contained in the *Chaldean Oracles* are undervalued in comparison to the respectful solemnity used to treat other traditions. The *Oracles* were, after all, a form of

religious poetry that was alleged to reveal direct messages from the gods, when received in some kind of trance. This is exactly the same claim that the Islamic tradition makes for the Qur'an.

Thus, the *Chaldean Oracles* not only provided Neoplatonism with theurgy as a term; they also furnished a theory of operative providential symbols immanent in the world. This provided an interpretive perspective for the Neoplatonists based on a theory of ritual causality in cultic action, applicable to every religious tradition. It also involved reworking the *Oracles'* concepts so that, in effect, every variant or phase of Neoplatonic theology was linked to a different interpretation of theurgy.

The relationship between theurgy and magic vexed studies in Neoplatonism for a long time. Neoplatonists did not deny the efficacy of magic, but they separated it from the practice of theurgy. The latter required ethical purity in its practitioners, and a deep theoretical understanding of the network of divine symbols enabling humans to enjoy the providential effects of cosmic sympathy. In later Neoplatonism, divine work (theurgy) was given much the same significance as traditional teachings of the sacraments receive in Catholic and Orthodox Christianities. One could even argue that the emphasis on ethical purity makes the Neoplatonist concept of theurgy less "magical" than, for example, the Christian sacraments, which depend only on the practitioner's formal qualifications. In later Neoplatonism, theurgy stands for a generic term or cultic practice where communicating with the gods is realized through divinely given symbols. The core of ritual causality in theurgic understanding is based on sympathy and the optimal use of these effective symbols. Every religious act which incorporates these aspects can be seen to be theurgical. In this respect, it seems quite apt that John Dillon calls theurgy "theologized science" (2010: 374): maybe theologically informed priestly art could be an even better definition.

Let us examine once more this particularly famous Iamblichean passage on theurgy:

Granting, then, that ignorance and deception are faulty and impious, it does not follow from this that the offerings properly made to the gods, and divine procedures (*theia erga*), are invalid, for it is not (primarily) intellectual activity (*ennoia*) that connects theurgists to the gods. Indeed what, then, would prevent those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying theurgic union with the gods? In fact, however, the situation is quite otherwise: it is rather the correct performance of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of unutterable symbols, understood by the gods alone, that establishes theurgic union. (Iamblichus, *De Myst.* 2.11.14–24; trans. Dillon 2010: 374)

This passage has often been used to show that theurgy, in so far as it is the exclusive road to the One, was viewed by Iamblichus as absolutely superior to philosophy. Nevertheless, Iamblichus emphasizes in his treatise that he is attempting to answer Porphyry's philosophical questions philosophically, his theurgic ones theurgically, and his theological ones theologically. It is not quite clear how Iamblichus distinguishes between these three modes of discourse, but if we complement this with Proclus' thoughts on the matter, we might assume that philosophical discourse addresses the metaphysical and ethical, the theurgical concerns symbols and symbolic acts, while the theological looks to explain the divine with rational concepts. The distinction between these two last modes is similar to the one which Byzantine Christianity came to make between the economy of salvation (i.e., management of God's creation) and theology (divinity as such). What is dealt with here, though, is specifically the theurgic union that is achieved through ritual. Iamblichus does not deny that philosophers might attain unity with Intellect through contemplation, but he points out that the contemplative road cannot be exclusive. For this reason, Porphyry noted that we cannot trust rituals, because they have deceptive elements. In contrast, Iamblichus argues that in performative acts of religions we are able to recognize correct theurgic rituals.

Contact with the One via the One's Symbol in the Soul

It is not at all clear that the theurgic union with the gods mentioned by Iamblichus refers to the experience of ultimate unity with the One. I personally find the interpretation unlikely: whatever the case, due to our fragmentary knowledge of the sources, it remains difficult to know for certain what Iamblichus thought about the relationship between theurgy and the union with the One. Be that as it may, we do know that the Athenian school of Neoplatonism relegated the ultimate phase of deification — unification with the One and its first unities — to a kind of hypernoetic contemplation beyond the realms of both philosophy and theurgy.

Hermias describes a process whereby the human soul enters into communion with the gods under the influence of the One's symbol. An interesting feature in it is that Hermias emphasizes the soul's existential stability. In effect, it has the same essence as the logical soul, but it adopts different states of enthusiasm to make its cognitive leaps.

The logical soul has two parts, discursive and doxastic. Again it is said that discursive thinking forms the lower part, which it indeed does, but its summit is known as the intellect, at which point the soul became

intellective and thus a potential intellect. Above this summit is the other part which remains at the zenith of the whole soul, a part which seeks the good and always surrenders itself to the gods, and whatever they [the gods] want, it [the soul] is always willing to provide. It is called the One of the soul, and it bears an image of the supraessential One that unifies the entire soul . . . The One is the primal, principal, and truly divine source of enthusiasm. It is suprarational and above even the soul's intellect. There are times when the One seems to be exhausted and sleeping. But the times when it possesses the soul, the whole of life is illuminated, as is the intellect, discursive thinking, and irrational life. Even the body itself receives the image of enthusiasm. (Hermias, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia* 84.25–85.19; my trans.)

For Proclus, the ultimate union is contemplation, albeit at the hypernoetic level. It is achieved by (1) the flower of intellect representing a unified state of absolute silence at the summit of the intellect in us; and (2) by the flower of the whole soul representing union or presence of the One throughout the soul, that metaphysically existed “prior” to this silence.⁴

Because these two hypernoetic devices, or two dimensions of the One in the soul, are conceived also as sacred symbols, and because their operation is totally ineffable, Proclus admits a certain kinship between hypernoesis and theurgy. Theurgy deals with the symbols bound to the soul's embodied condition and attains a divine state under the impact of the natural and physical order; it is capable of establishing communion with the gods from an earthly level up to the boundary located in Proclus' system at the so-called third noetic triad of the gods. The consummating mystical experience enjoys intercourse with the summit of the noetic triad through these psychic flowers and illuminated henads, that is, gods, within the soul's inner configuration (the “Ones,” or henadic presence immanent in soul). This ultimate divine state, therefore, is not only a continuation of the previous phases of intellectual and theurgic ascent, but also a transcending rupture in its relation to them.

4 On this conception of mystical silence, see *Theol. Plat.* 2.65.13, 3.30.8, 4.24.8, 4.30.15, 4.31.5, and 5.105.5 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]; *In Platonis Alcibiadem* I 56.16 [ed. Westerink 1954]; *In Parm.* 117.1.8 [ed. Cousin 1961]; and *Eclogae de philosophia Chaldaica* in *Oracles chaldaïques* 4.50 (l. 210.28).

Knowing Gods Through Understanding, Experiencing Them Through Fantasy

The summit of piety only concerns the rarest of souls — it lies beyond the realm of cultic or performative acts of religion. However, the Neoplatonists claim that every soul is capable of contact with the divine, with each one playing a role appropriate to its nature. To clarify the issue further, we should perhaps look in more detail at the Neoplatonic theory of those powers that deal specifically with knowledge related to cultic acts. It helps to see the process as having two stages: the first involves a dialogue between rational understanding (*dianoia*) and the intellect (*nous*) and results in theoretical knowledge relevant to religion, while the second consists of a circular movement between the intellect and the imagination (*phantasia*). This latter stage concerns religion in its practical, performative, and cultic aspects. Thus, the two faculties of the soul that have pivotal importance to religion are (1) engaging in the divine in the form of rational concepts, i.e., scientific theology, through discursive reason (*dianoia*); and (2) imagination through which the soul can commune with the divine through experience (*theurgy*).

A notion that is fundamental to Neoplatonism is that the principles used to understand and expound discourse surrounding the divine Intellect are images or *logoi* that need to be revealed. Thus, the soul is not a blank slate, but one that has already been written on (Proclus, *In Euclidis elementorum* 16.8–13 [ed. Friedlein 1967]). This self-constitution, or “writing” of the innate principles of the soul, reveals the primal creative activity of the Demiurge within each human. In other words, the reason-principles (*logoi*) presenting content of intellect to *dianoia*, are provided “beforehand” and only deciphered by the powers of discursive reason through arduous effort.⁵

In the ascent towards truth, discursive reason is but an agent, or vessel, for the soul’s odyssey. This rules out any claims to divine knowledge made by the lower faculties of the soul (i.e., dialectic as purification). Ultimately, reason recognizes its own limits, and sees its own activity as a form of mental gymnastics, that has the ability to express truth and yet cannot possess it in a total, indivisible, and unitary way. Recognizing this, it understands that intellect instead has this unitary power, having received its unitary and divine nature from the ineffable One. In the phase of descent, after having grasped the intellect’s power and in some cases having at least touched the sphere of Oneness beyond, the soul returns to its own congruous level of existence. The faculty of rational

5 Commendably clear accounts of Proclus’ concept of innate forms are Steel 1997 and O’Meara 2001; see also Nikulin 2008.

understanding then accounts for what has happened by forging a systematic structure of scientific concepts (Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 61.19–65.26 [ed. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]).

Proclus thought that Plato's *Parmenides* tells us such a story of the soul's ascent and descent, and from this he learnt about the operations of the circle that produces theological wisdom accessible to humans. Proclus then uses this story in three different contexts: (1) as part of a rigorous stream of propositions and demonstrations in the *Elements of Theology*; (2) as part of a comprehensively close reading of Plato, with fascinating digressions into the history of interpretations contained in the *Commentary on Parmenides*; and (3) in his *Platonic Theology*, as an expanded plot description of the *Elements*, so that it includes an exegesis of the Hellenic religious tradition.

These cycles of knowledge feed into larger ones, going from the One at the hyperintellective level right down to the lowest traces of cognition in the senses. At every level of the soul and the universe there are gods, who constitute the participated sphere of the One and are present as illuminations — Proclus' technical term for these are henads (i.e., units). The faculty of fantasy allows the soul to recognize the divine in the figurative symbols sown by the Intellect and the One throughout the whole cosmos. Late Neoplatonism takes a particularly radical view of deification, seeing all that exists as rooted directly in the gods through unitary illuminations present in each object. This new view of causation seems to have been raised by Syrianus as Hermias, too, states in another part of the passage mentioned earlier that “the logical soul is made up from all its antecedent causes, coming from the Intellect and the gods, but it also consists of itself, as it completes itself” (Hermias, *In Phaedr.* 85.1–2; my trans.). Proclus adds to this his famous rule of procession, which states that the preceding causes go further than the later causes (Proclus, *Institutio theologica* 25.28.30–1; 57; 60 [ed. Dodds 1963]; *In Parm.* 904.18–24 [ed. Cousin 1961]). The One and the Intellect are both sources for the Soul, but the One acts as the sole source of ultimate matter. Intellect has nothing to do with it.⁶

From this perspective, *dianoia* affects opinion and enables rational beliefs. As for the lower layers of fantasy, they are separated from rational reason in view of the fact that fantasy is linked to the body. Proclus' rule requires, however, that in some sense fantasy is also derived from the Intellect. Fantasy is sub-discursive in the way that intellect is suprarational. Proclus surely sees *fantasy* as the lower Intellect's counterpart to rational understanding. In his *Commentary on Plato's Cratylus*, Proclus depicts fantasy as the Intellect acting

6 The expression “Proclus' rule” came from Olympiodorus *In Alcib.* 109.18. A helpful discussion of this can be found in Lloyd 1990: 106–121, 161–162.

figuratively, using the relation of bronze to gold as an analogy (*In Cratylum* 129.7 [ed. Pasquali 1908]). The human soul receives a stream of data from the sense organs at the same time that it is fed by the Intellect with innate principles. This enables its doxastic faculty to filter out suitable topics for discursive reason brought to it by the senses. The faculty of fantasy has access to sensory data, but perhaps it is also nourished by information from the Intellect which bypasses dianoetic understanding (Proclus, *In Parm.* 718, 10–18 [ed. Cousin 1961]).

For Proclus, imagination's proper task is to act as a faculty for metaphor, which allows shapeless things to be internally "seen" on the screen of the Soul. In his commentary on Euclid's *Elements*, Proclus tells us how fantasy functions in just such a fashion in geometry (Proclus, *In Eucl.* 55.6–56.4 [ed. Friedlein 1967]). Likewise in the theory of divine epiphanies, Proclus explains that these phenomena occur because divine symbols in nature and the soul are invoked, thus making gods and demons manifest to us in a visible and corporeal form:

Seeing what has no body in an embodied form, or something with no location in a certain place and extended in space, and to understand the unmoved through movement, is by no means extraordinary. The theurgists already taught us long ago that the gods' self-revelation necessarily happens in such a way that the formless takes form, and the shapeless takes shape, with each receiving a firm and simple vision of the gods according to their soul's particular nature, using fantasy to connect a form and shape to these visions. Every participation retains qualities of the participated and the participants, being somehow an intermediate for each. (Proclus, *In remp.* 2.241.22–242.1; my trans.)

Where this actually happens in the human composite of soul and body is in the ethereal luminous vehicle of the soul, i.e., visions appear within one's primal body consisting of the purest light. According to Jean Trouillard's interpretation, Proclus equates fantasy with this sublime vehicle, or, to put it more moderately, imagination is an activity of the vehicle (1982: 41).

The Late Neoplatonic Concept of Faith

With paramount roles being given to discursive reason in the development of scientific theology, and to fantasy in the appreciation of theurgic phenomena, the Neoplatonic framework presents itself as thoroughly rational, and yet also open to the ineffable mysteries and emotionally loaded practices

of religion. If the demands of rational reason and fantasy are both thus satisfied, what about faith? It is well known that Plato gave it a low rank among the states of the soul (Plato, *Respublica* 511). Proclus has a different non-doxastic concept of faith, one that operates as the supreme member of the ascending triad, along with truth and love. This concept has understandably been interpreted as being radically innovative and deeply un-Platonic (Wallis 1973: 154). This metaphysical faith represents salvific virtue present in the soul's highest faculties, as well as defining a metaphysical class among the hierarchy of divinities.

For Proclus, the necessity to posit such a class resulted from his exegesis of Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is this metaphysical faith, operating at the summit of the noetic-noeric triad, which triggers the soul's pure vision of gods in Proclus' system. "The initiation is not accomplished by thinking and reasoning in general, but by the silence beyond and higher than all modes of cognition, which faith gives us, establishing not only universal souls, but our souls as well, into the ineffable and unknown class of the gods" (Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 4.31.10–16 [trans. Saffrey and Westerink 1968–2007]). Whatever the Platonic credentials for this concept, this form of faith is not a direct descendant of the faith mentioned in Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus*.

Proclus' metaphysical faith is somehow akin to its humble counterpart in the world of becoming, that is to say, the belief that underlies rational understanding. But it may have even more in common with sensation, especially the sense of touch. For Damascius, who posits the absolutely ineffable above the Proclean One, the unitive knowledge required to grasp it is kindred to Plato's *eikasía*. For Proclus, "god" and "one" are always the same thing, so that every god *qua* god is a henad. In this way philosophy and religion go together. "One" is the philosophical name for god, as gods are not only objects of religious adoration, but the metaphysical causative principles behind all reality. Damascius, for his part, situates his Ineffable even above the One (Combès 1976: 115–117). Gods are to the One what the One is to the Ineffable. The One constitutes itself as the first and absolute God in its self-differentiation from the Ineffable: therefore, for Damascius, the One is a secret sign of recognition (*synthema*) of the Ineffable. He proposes that, in this way, we gain some kind of meta-intuition or conjecture regarding the existence of the One. This might tell us something only about the One related to gods, but not about the One itself. The primal Ineffable is totally outside all cognition, we have only a dim trace of it within us. But this inevitability is not a cause for despair for either Proclus or Damascius. On the contrary, the contact with the ultimate reality through its symbol in the soul brings forth an experience of calming certainty (Tornau 2006: 222).

Proclus preserves Plato's epistemological and psychological concept of faith at the level of the doxastic area between fantasy and discursive reason. He actually divided faith in this area into two aspects or faculties, equating faith in the *Republic* with irrational belief, if we put it crudely, and the one mentioned in *Timaeus* with the more rational belief (Proclus, *In Tim.* 1.346.3–10 [ed. Diehl 1965]; Hoffman 2000: 468).⁷ From the perspective of religious history, it is important to note that these types of faith were destined to have a crucial position in the universal claims of new religions that prevailed at the end of late antiquity.

Neoplatonism's Relation to the Doxastic Turn

Does Neoplatonism anticipate the doxastic turn in religion consummated in Christianity and Islam? It seems to me that Proclus' concept of metaphysical faith and Damascius' ineffable conjecture are not easily reconciled with a conception of religiosity where a formal confession of faith is taken as the most serious criterion for redemption. Equally alien to the Neoplatonic spirit is the notion that among thousands of theurgies practiced in the world, only one should provide the path to salvation. This dogmatic fidelity towards the teachings of the founders of a religion actually has more in common with the confessionalism and exclusivity that was present in the Hellenistic schools of philosophy. Pre-Plotinian Platonizing, for example, involves a move away from a maieutic approach towards a more dogmatic one.

We can ask whether the only real change that the new universal religions brought was a greater regard for formal confessions of faith. This change was not so much a change in mentality because the same affective elements were essential previously in religious experience; but perhaps a shift took place in the way religious practice was structured. This moved from civic and mystery cults, which practiced religion and philosophy alongside each other, to an ideological apparatus for distributing grace that was backed by a theocratic state.

7 See also Stephen Gersh (1978: 115–119) and especially Edward Butler (2008: 101–102), who discusses the topic in connection with his interpretation of henads as absolute individuals. The explanation here for the two opposite kinds of faith is that Proclus posits individuality not only as a character of sensible-particulars below the level of universality (of ontic forms), but also in a supraessential sense that transcends any universality. The individuality of each god (henad) is thus “perceived immediately by each in a founding moment of pistis” (Butler 2008: 101). All the scholars mentioned underline a higher metaphysical *pistis* as the primordial cause for the faith existing below the level of rational understanding.

Indeed, their quest for orthodoxy puts these new religions more as heirs to the dogmatic tendencies of the Hellenistic schools and Middle Platonism than Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism was doxastic in the sense that it held to belief in the existence of gods, but it was not dogmatic or creedal in the sense that it imposed one creedal system of tenets. Instead, it tried to interpret all the various traditions within the canons of its Platonic system for a system of establishing general determinations of the divine. From this perspective, Neoplatonism would seem to be stubbornly defending rationalism and a pluralistic, ecumenical, and inclusive spirit of worship. In this respect, it represents a deviation from the main course of religious history in late antiquity.

Plutarch is perhaps the first to introduce the doxastic (creedal) turn in Platonic reflections on religion when he says that “nothing is more pleasing to the gods, whether sacrifice or ritual, than the true belief of them [ἀληθὴ δόξαν περὶ θεῶν]” (*De Iside et Osiride* [351c–384c]).⁸ This might be a place of bifurcation. Plutarch anticipates the Neoplatonic call for interpreting myths in a way that is different from the Stoics, who reduced mythical truths to natural allegories, which opened the way to more metaphysical procedures. This resembles Proclus’ passages, as cited above, on how the proper interpretation of myths will contribute to forging the “pure cult.” However, Plutarch’s expression is also close to notions from the universal religions of late antiquity. Plutarch clearly does not ascribe to a *religio mentis*, a religion proper to philosophers, which is supposed to have characterized the early Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry. Nor does he place ineffable divine action as the highest part of ritual like Iamblichus. He clearly puts the emphasis on correct belief. As previously mentioned, belief played a minor role in traditional religion compared to practice, so this is a significant shift in emphasis. Plutarch sees true belief as providing suitable criteria for differentiating good and bad with regard to the divine, with deviations from piety being, as he sees it, superstition and atheism. This resembles the church fathers’ constant call to struggle against deviations from the kingly road of orthodoxy to either the “left” or “right.”

Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to read Plutarch in pre-Byzantine terms. When Plutarch raises his “alethodoxy” to the highest position, it is not a question of “orthodoxy” in the sense of later confessional religions. At the time of Plutarch it was still an unheard-of idea that a body of correct belief could be codified and sanctified by the authority of a religious institution, and adherence to it should be compulsory to one and all under threat of coercion exercised by state power. However, the Middle Platonic tendency which grants priority to doxastic belief and understands philosophy as a system of

8 English translation of this passage by Catherine Tihanyi in Brisson 2004: 65.

tenets can be interpreted as anticipating such a turn in religious history, which emerged with new universal religions, Christianity and Islam, at the end of late antiquity.

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