

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
 All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
 But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
 Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
 Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?<sup>25</sup>

### A CHRISTIAN'S TEMPTATION\*

DONALD NICHOLL

“CHRISTIAN Platonism”, if we propose to take the expression seriously, is nothing less than a contradiction in terms’ . . . ‘the discrepancies between Platonism and Christianity, when we get down to first principles, are so radical that only by complete misunderstanding or wilful blindness is it possible to profess allegiance to both.’ These unambiguous declarations on page 55 of the late W. H. V. Reade’s *Christian Challenge to Philosophy* (S.P.C.K., 1951, pp. v-xiii, 1-194; 13s. 6d.) presents us with the central thesis of a brilliantly written book, one which breathes the wisdom of a fine intellect inspired by a lifetime’s meditation upon the great tradition of European thought.

The book will prove of most interest, no doubt, to the philosophers. Many of them will find points for disagreement as they follow the author along the European tradition from Plato to the positivists. Many, indeed, will rightly challenge his own exclusion of Platonists from Christianity; for there are of course good Christians who do understand Plato and yet prefer his ideas as a means of stating the faith. Furthermore, the opinions which the author attacks as ‘Platonism’, though they may be found in the Neoplatonists, are not always legitimately attributable to Plato himself.<sup>1</sup> Such debating points, however, demand unlimited space

\*We publish this outspoken challenge to the Platonic tradition in Christianity because it poses the problem of an Eastern type of spirituality which has never perhaps been able to be assimilated into the Christian life. Yet it has had immense and beneficial effects in many ways upon our spiritual teaching—as may be seen in the pseudo-dionysian tradition running through centuries of Catholic spirituality.—*Editor*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Rock*, Chorus i.

<sup>1</sup> In his delightful introduction to the book, Mr Cyril Bailey refers to an earlier essay by the author in the *Cambridge Modern History*; the reference should be to the *Cambridge Medieval History*.

for their clarification, and are not of primary interest for the readers of this review. At the same time Reade's study affords a convenient occasion for noting those features of the Neoplatonic tradition which *are* incompatible with Christianity whilst leaving aside the question of how far the tradition itself needs to be modified before it can be accepted into Christian thought. In the following paragraphs a rough attempt has been made to sketch a few of these features so that they may be more readily recognised—their appearance being regarded as a signal to the Christian that he is on dangerous ground.

The most constant feature of anti-Christian Neoplatonism lies in its contempt for the *human* being; in particular, the Neoplatonist is scornful of the human body—or any other body, for that matter. Of Plotinus, for instance, Porphyry says, 'Plotinus, the philosopher of our time, was like one ashamed of being in a body'.<sup>2</sup> In much the same vein St Gregory of Nyssa assures us that 'if all men had been great contemplatives like Moses, Paul, Elias, Ezekiel and Isaias there would have been no need for an Incarnation at all; it was only a concession to the weakness, sinfulness, and low state of spiritual development of the majority of mankind'.<sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages the Cathari, amongst others, maintained this tradition of contempt for the human body: they were inhumanly chaste—by repudiation rather than renunciation. And in our own day we still have our Neoplatonists.<sup>4</sup> In fact, at least one spiritual director believes that one of the greatest obstacles to vocations arises from this latent Neoplatonism, which confronts the novice with the following order of values: 'a sister is firstly a member of her community, then a virgin blessed by God, then a Christian, and lastly a human being: the first principle is the rule, the second is virginity, then the commandments of the Church, next the laws of God, and lastly the laws of nature.'<sup>5</sup>

The secure place assured to Neoplatonism in contemporary opinion has led one observer to diagnose it as a special disease—the disease of 'angelism', which means wishing you were an angel in-

<sup>2</sup> Reade, p. 70, 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us'.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Prof. Armstrong, *Dominican Studies*, Vol. I, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Inge behaves in accordance with the principles of his master, Plotinus, when he expresses his disapproval of the all-too-human *Magnificat* of Mary, the Mother of the Word made flesh. He has many companions amongst contemporary neo-mystics.

<sup>5</sup> Fr Rommerskirch, S.J., *Documents*, 1950, Oct./Nov., p. 1088.

stead of thanking God for making you a human being.<sup>6</sup>

A second feature of Neoplatonism is its contempt for specifically human suffering (i.e., in-Christ-redemptional suffering) which the Neoplatonist tries to transcend as he tries to transcend his human nature. One meets this again in Plotinus for whom spiritual progress does not mean the Transfiguration of human life through suffering but transcendence both of one's humanity and one's suffering: the human person is not purified and transformed; rather, the 'soul' detaches itself from its contemptible body. This is not purification, but separation; this is not the battle of life, but flight from life.<sup>7</sup> The opposition between Neoplatonist transcendence and Christian, human, suffering was best illustrated, however, many centuries after Plotinus, on February 17th, 1600, when the Neoplatonist Giordano Bruno was going to the stake, condemned by the Roman Inquisition. Bruno scornfully pointed out that whereas Jesus Christ suffered great fear at his Crucifixion, he, Bruno, was going to his death without suffering fear. And, in fact, Bruno's conviction of his own superiority over Christ was justified if it is assumed that human beings should try to transcend their human condition.

Obviously spiritual progress for the Neoplatonist depends upon acquiring a technique which will enable the soul to separate itself from the body. Plotinus believed that he had achieved this on four occasions during the course of his life, when he went into ecstasies; and anyone is at liberty to try to achieve similar ecstasies—but they should remember that this technical ability has nothing to do with the Christian's warfare, which involves personal suffering in one's human nature.

Another characteristic of the Neoplatonist is that he looks down on such specifically human activities as laughing and weeping. These manifestations of human passion are to be transcended by the pure spirit into which he tries to transform himself. That anyone should weep at the death of a friend or laugh at a joke

6 Baudouin, *Angélisme et Faux dépassements*, in *Trouble et Lumière. Études Carmélitaines*. Baudouin is constantly pointing out that the person who pretends to be an angel finishes up by being beastly; one would like his opinion of the statement made in a most influential book, that 'the pure man is specifically spiritual. . . his nature displays a genuine transcendence of matter.' (Dietrich von Hildebrand, *In defence of Purity*, p. 49.)

7 cf. Marcel de Corte, *Plotin et Aristote*, p. 193.

strikes him as beneath his dignity. Christians, on the contrary, know that weeping is not below the dignity of God.<sup>8</sup>

So far we have been trying to single out the main harmful characteristics of the Neoplatonic tradition. If we ask ourselves why they are so harmful, the answer is clear enough. It is because they insult the Creator through insulting his creatures, who, like his Son, are embodied beings. They make a mockery of the Creation,<sup>9</sup> of the Incarnation, of the Crucifixion,<sup>10</sup> and of the Resurrection of the body.<sup>11</sup>

But, it may be objected, if Christianity and Neoplatonism are so clearly irreconcilable, how is it that Neoplatonism has been allowed to penetrate into our thought?

The answer is that Neoplatonism has harmed Christian thought by luring Christians into a most attractively 'spiritual', but essentially unsound, metaphysics. Here is the real crux of the issue: the Christian 'Neoplatonists' protest against traditional Christian metaphysics that it regards 'the natural world in itself rather than as a clue to the character of the Creator'.<sup>12</sup> But the truth is that the Christian Neoplatonist is here establishing a completely false antithesis; it is an antithesis upon which metaphysics, moral theology and spiritual teachings are equally likely to founder.

For it is precisely 'the natural world in itself', it is precisely things in their own existence, which give us the clue to the character of the Creator; existing things *are* clues to him who *is*.<sup>13</sup> It could not be otherwise, since God is nearer to us than we

<sup>8</sup> St John's Gospel XI, 35.

<sup>9</sup> The Creation is described by Paul Valéry as 'only a blemish on the purity of un-being'.

<sup>10</sup> e.g., Bruno.

<sup>11</sup> St Paul's reception at Athens, when he preached Christ's bodily Resurrection, should put us on our guard against assuming that the immortality of the soul (which his hearers were prepared for) is on the same level as the Resurrection of the Body (which they laughed at). 'Immortality of the soul, as Platonists would understand it, is not a Christian doctrine.' (Reade, 89.)

<sup>12</sup> Langmead Casserley, *The Christian in Philosophy*, p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> 'It is only after having considered the ontological dependence of creatures as THINGS in relation to the Creator . . . that one may consider them as SIGNS. . . .' Journet, *Dark Knowledge of God*, p. 22, where he goes on to criticise St Bonaventure for trying to see them first as signs, cf. also, P. Congar, *La Vie Spirituelle, Supplément*, Nov. 1950, p. 387: 'Le plus grand danger . . . est de perdre le respect de la vérité interne des choses'; Karl Thieme in *Gott und die Geschichte*, p. 94, n., criticises certain thomists for not being thomist in this matter.

are to ourselves.<sup>14</sup> And if it were otherwise, then God could not be immanent in his creatures whilst at the same time transcending them. Thus if we choose to regard natural things first as signs, or clues, they may lead us to a 'transcendent' God, but they can never restore to us the immanent God whom we have first dismissed by refusing to consider things in their own existence, in which God is most intimately present. The Neoplatonist, therefore, offers us a 'transcendent' God—but not the Christian God, who is immanent/transcendent.

Nor is this error in regard to natural things of purely speculative interest; it may have disastrous practical consequences. For, on the face of it, it seems to mean that a human being can have no relations with this remote, 'transcendent' God. How does the Neoplatonist maintain that such relations are possible, in the face of this barrier of transcendence? There is only one way: to maintain that human beings are not really human beings at all, but are really sparks of God (or partly God; the exact phrasing does not matter, so long as it expresses their view that some part of man—his soul, for instance—is *substantially* divine).<sup>15</sup> Once a creature starts thinking of himself in these terms, he is likely to start having visions and ecstasies, but has abandoned Christian teaching. His original exclusive stress upon the transcendence of God has in the end led him to deny that very transcendence by making himself into a God.<sup>16</sup>

The process of error begins, then, with the fundamentally erroneous Neoplatonic metaphysics which will not accept *things*, in their own being, as the unmistakable witnesses to the immanent/transcendent God, but treats them primarily as *signs*. The process ends with the inability to accept the revealed truth when God reveals himself to us in the despised flesh. It is *not* 'very remarkable', as Quispel says in discussing two early victims of this error,<sup>17</sup> but almost inevitable, that 'although they wished to be Christians, and knew the Bible well—especially St John's Gospel

14 S. Th., I q. VIII, a.i.

15 Anyone who has read even a little spirituality will have encountered these misleading notions—often in conjunction with their equal misleading contradictions, e.g., 'Man is nothing'.

16 One encounters in the Jewish tradition some beautiful illustrations of God's immanent transcendence, e.g., 'I learned the Torah from all the limbs of my teacher'.

17 Quispel, on Valentinus and Basilides, in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, XVI.

—they never say that God is love'. It is not remarkable, because they began from basically erroneous metaphysical intuition, and so found themselves wandering in a world of Neoplatonic visions and ecstasies where there was no room for the Christian God, who is love. Not perhaps until St Thomas expressed the basically sound metaphysical intuition of the natural world as a thing to be seen in its own being did the initial Neoplatonic error stand out in all its nakedness. With St Thomas men were helped to escape from bondage to visions and ecstasies into the freedom of the God who is love. For St Thomas taught that the two activities which the Neoplatonist most despises—unsublimated sexuality and worldly business—may be of more eternal worth than the Neoplatonist's cherished 'spirituality', so long as these activities are performed in the service of love.<sup>18</sup>

If the history of Christendom since St Thomas's day has shown that his Common Doctorate has often been treated by Christians as a sinecure, may we hope that the late H. W. V. Reade's *Christian Challenge to Philosophy* will help to restore his healing doctorate.

<sup>18</sup> *De Ver*, 12, 5 ad 6. Quoted by Fr Victor White, *Dominican Studies*, Vol. 1, p. 33.