

Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity

**Edited by Panagiotis G. Pavlos, Lars
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and Torstein Theodor Tollefsen**

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Introduction

*Lars Fredrik Janby, Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson,
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This volume is about the complex relationship between Platonism and Christian thought in Late Antiquity. Rooted in the pagan world, Platonism was perceived by Christian intellectuals as a competitor to the faith in the religious and intellectual market, while also representing a rich source of philosophical material that could be appropriated in their own rational inquiries. Christian receptions of Platonism therefore oscillated between rejection and appropriation, and it is the inner workings of that multifaceted relationship which is the subject of this book. The chapters are united in their goal to explore transformations that took place in the reception and interaction process and to discuss aspects of the relationship between Platonism and Christianity in Late Antiquity. In dealing with cases of reception of Platonic material in Christian thought, the contributions of this volume show that transmission of cultural content is always mediated, and ought to be studied as transformations that occur by way of selections and interpretations. Exploring the transformations that took place in the reception of Platonism in early Christian thought, these chapters study various ways in which Christian intellectuals engaged with Platonism both as pagan competitors and as a source of philosophical material useful to the Christian faith. The contributions also deal with various aspects concerning the general discussion on how Platonic/Hellenic philosophy and early Christian thought related to each other, examining the differences and common ground between these traditions.

With the rise of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world and its increasing worldly success, it was perhaps inevitable that Christian intellectuals would engage with the schools of ancient philosophy. In fact, Christianity was from its very beginning embedded in the intellectual discourse of the Greco-Roman world. The use of philosophical terms and conceptions in Christian literature that originated with Hellenic culture is as old as the Christian movement itself. Beginning with the New Testament, early Christians used philosophical language to communicate their beliefs. Paul's speech on the Areopagus was for example an intervention into the discourse of the hegemonic intellectual milieu of the time, using philosophical discourse in order to make himself understood and to appear convincing to his audience of pagan intellectuals. Here we encounter for the first time the idea that the message of the faith could be translated

into a language, which until then had been the exclusive property of pagan intellectuals. If Paul's appeal was addressed to intellectuals outside the faith, later Christians would also engage with ancient philosophy for the sake of rational inquiries in their own right.

Among the philosophical schools of Antiquity, it was however with Platonism that early Christianity would experience its most creative and enduring intellectual encounters. The Christian receptions of Platonism were facilitated by their shared fortunes, as the formation of early Christian thought coincided with the revival of Plato's dogmatic philosophy in the first centuries CE. As Christianity gained a foothold in late ancient society, it also increasingly started to engage with the intellectual discourses of the Greco-Roman world – a world in which the late Platonic movement was becoming a leading intellectual force. While the Platonic movement interpreted and systematised the teachings of Plato, the Christian thought was intent on interpreting and systematising the faith. Both movements showed themselves to be open to appropriating material from other systems. Just as the Platonic movement integrated material from Stoic and Peripatetic philosophy, the intellectual inquiries of the Christian movement engaged with the philosophical traditions of the Greco-Roman world, in various ways. Christian receptions of Platonic philosophy were multifaceted, spanning from complete rejection to conditional approval. This complex relationship was not specific to Platonism, but reflects the attitudes of early Christian culture to Hellenic philosophy in general. We can therefore not speak of a uniform transmission from Platonism to Christianity, only a wide range of strategies employed when material was transported from one context to another. The chapters of this volume are case studies of this process. If our introduction lines up some of the methodological principles, case studies are required to explore the phenomenon in detail.

The concepts “influence” and “legacy” have been subjected to much criticism over the past few decades. This is because they may conceal the agency that necessarily is involved in appropriation. Whatever the intellectual legacy of ancient philosophy, reception necessarily includes an active interpretation of the appropriated material. There can have been no *direct* transmissions of that material, only transfers which necessarily involved selection and mediation from one context to another. In our view, Christian intellectuals ought therefore to be seen as agents of transmission in the reception process – an aspect which may become obscured when we speak about “influence” or “legacy.” If the philosophical material that we discover in Christian texts can be identified as having a Platonic provenance, that material may appear in response to questions foreign to the Platonic tradition, for example situated in contexts that pertain to intellectual inquiries into the Christian faith or other issues motivated by a human, rational curiosity. Reception is therefore always already mediated since it is molded by the horizon of the receiver, bestowing a meaning upon the material determined by contexts. When used as a response to Christian questions, the Platonic material was re-situated and transformed in accordance with Christian values and purposes. To study the transfer of philosophical concepts and theories from

a pagan to a Christian context is to study how that material was transformed. Therefore, a number of contributions in this volume examine the *creative* aspects in which Christian thinkers engaged with Platonic material, exploring how the Platonic legacy was transformed in Christian contexts. In tracing this transmission, these contributions examine how a certain concept or doctrine changed meaning in the course of transmission, as it was uprooted from one context and placed into another – from the problems related to the Platonic worldview to the questions relevant to the Christian tradition. This methodology, analyzing the movement of material from one context to another (from a pagan to a Christian context), enables us to assess Christianity in relationship to Platonism. What did Christian intellectuals in Late Antiquity find useful in the Platonic tradition? Which changes did the material undergo with the swap of contexts? In turn, this approach also makes visible what Christian writers did *not* find to be of value in Platonism. What did Christians ignore or reject in the Platonic tradition? Reception studies are therefore expedient for inquiring into the dividing lines between paganism and Christianity.

Transformations aside, could the Christian appropriations of Platonic philosophy meaningfully be said to constitute a development of the Platonic tradition? In a famous essay, Heinrich Dörrie contended that Christian appropriation of Platonic material amounted to a de-platonisation.¹ According to Dörrie, in the cases where material was uprooted from a Platonic context and inserted into a Christian one, the essentials of Platonism were *eo ipso* purged, effectively accomplishing a de-platonisation in the process. We think, however, that Dörrie’s claim rests on a somewhat narrow definition of what tradition is. Examining how Platonic material was continued and transformed in Christian contexts, we submit that this volume can also meaningfully be said to be a contribution to studies on the development of the Platonic tradition. It has occasionally been discussed in scholarly literature whether Platonic philosophers were receptive to influences from the Christian movement. It is however not development in *that* sense which we here refer to. Rather, we claim that Christian transformations of Platonic material itself amount to a development of the Platonic tradition. Tracing the “afterlife” of Platonic material in Christian writers is to explore how Platonism continued to be used in intellectual inquiries into subjects that were unknown to the Platonic philosophers. In several cases, Christians developed the Platonic tradition in new and unexpected ways, asking new questions to the tradition that they engaged with and using it for problem-solving that was unknown to the Platonists themselves. From this point of view, it can meaningfully be said that the Platonic tradition was subject to development from the Christians. In this way, Christian intellectuals contributed to transform and disseminate the Platonic tradition, transporting its material into new areas of intellectual thought. The appropriations would therefore be a development of the Platonic tradition, albeit within a Christian frame that could not identify itself with pagan philosophy. The receptions of Platonic material in Christian thought are therefore relevant to the studies of the development of both the Platonic and the Christian tradition.

Christian methodologies

Some observations on Christian intellectuals' *own* methodologies might also be in order here. First, there was no lack of endorsements of Platonic philosophy among early Christians, including acknowledgements that the Platonists had come close to the truth. Even the mature Augustine, for example, could claim that no other philosophical school had come closer to the Christian doctrine than the Platonists.² With such statements, the usefulness of Platonic doctrines and concepts were given an explicit endorsement. Based on the perceived similarities between Platonism and Christianity, Christian intellectuals also willingly appropriated Platonic material for their own purposes. But which methodological principles did they themselves use when engaging with the Platonic material; how did they reason about their appropriation of material from Platonic philosophers? This is the subject of Part I of this volume, which deals with Christian methodologies and rhetorical strategies in the encounters with Platonic material.

There was a long-standing Christian discourse on Hellenic culture that had established some methodological principles for how Christians rightfully could engage with pagan material and use it for their own ends. The arguably most famous expression of this methodology is found in the application of the verse in Exod 12:35–36, in which the Israelites were asked to plunder the silver, gold, and clothing of the Egyptians on their way to the promised land. According to these methodological principles, the truth necessarily belonged to Christianity, and therefore all truth rightfully had to be considered Christian truth. From the viewpoint of Christian intellectuals, the use of Platonic material was therefore not seen as appropriation, but was justified and explained as *re-appropriation*. Based on the principle of “fair use” (*usus iustus*), the intellectual heritage of Hellenic culture could be integrated into Christian culture with only small modifications.³ From this perspective, Hellenic philosophy was still considered as lacking or false, but nonetheless, it justified the practice of using in their own rational inquiries elements from Hellenic philosophy that was perceived to be in agreement with Christian teachings. If something true was found in Plato or in the later Platonic tradition, then it had to be reckoned as a truth belonging to Christianity. Acknowledgement of Platonism was thus not an acknowledgement of intellectual debt, but a purification of truth from the falsehood of paganism. To appropriate material from a pagan context to a Christian one, was equal to removing any disturbing or false elements from the truth; to engage with Plato was to purify the unclean and put it into its appropriate context. In the first chapter of this volume, **Sébastien Morlet** inquires into this methodology of early Christian intellectuals, examining how key figures like Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius viewed the agreements and disagreements between Platonism and Christianity. This reveals the rich discourse established in early Christianity for how to deal with the apparent truths, which could be found in Platonic writings.

Another methodological strategy was that of casting Plato and his philosophy, which arguably had anteceded Christianity in the chronological order, as a “preparation” for the Gospels. Clement of Alexandria was one of the first writers to view

Hellenic philosophy as preparation for Christianity – the Greek philosophers had anteceded the Gospels, but only with Christ, the incarnated Word, did the truths of Hellenic philosophy find their fulfillment. This methodology effectively offered an intellectual resolution to the dual relationship toward the philosophical tradition: by being assigned a preparatory role, Hellenic philosophy was conceded a certain part in the truth, while at the same time being kept at a distance from the truth itself because it did not take part in Revelation. As preparation, Hellenic philosophy was never sufficient in itself, but would need Christianity for its partial truths to find their fulfillment. Christians could in this way acknowledge the achievements of rational analysis and the relative merits of Plato and the later Platonic tradition without conceding to Platonism knowledge of the essential truths, which only had been communicated to human beings with Revelation. In accordance with this strategy, Hellenic philosophy was incorporated within history, and Platonism could be given a position in preparing the ground for the Christian faith. Relegated to preparation and introduction, Hellenic philosophy would always remain outside of salvific knowledge. This methodology was suitable to justify the appropriation of philosophical material in a selective way, whenever something was found that was in accordance with the faith. In her chapter, **Christina Hoenig** explores the strategy employed by Augustine in using Plato as a pseudo-prophet against later Platonists. By reference to metaphysical and epistemological language from the *Timaeus*, Augustine argues that Plato anticipated the human-divine relationship that was revealed through the Gospel – a strategy by which, as Hoenig shows, Augustine pits Plato against the current-day Platonists who refuse to acknowledge the incarnated Word. Plato had perhaps not grasped the role of the mediator, but he evidently understood a lot more than his arrogant inheritors, Augustine argues.

We ought not to forget that there existed a relationship of competition between Platonism and Christianity in Late Antiquity – Platonism was not only perceived as a rival in intellectual matters that sometimes erred in its rational inquiries, but as a movement that itself had religious qualities (or at any rate was perceived to have such qualities in the religious landscape of the period). Platonic philosophy was committed to inquire by rational means into the principles of reality, but it also held these highest principles to be divine. Plotinus added an element of spiritual mysticism to his interpretation of Plato's philosophy, and later Neoplatonists only reinforced this vein of spiritual or religious sentiment to the Platonic tradition in Late Antiquity. Any modern bifurcation between philosophy and religion was non-existent, and hence Christians naturally perceived Platonism as a religious competitor. The Platonism of Late Antiquity must have been seen by Christians as a religion on its own, committed to a philosophy that offered salvation. Platonism might even have competed with Christianity on the universal salvation of human beings, as seen for example in the works of Porphyry.⁴ The philosopher from Tyre remained a perennial foe to the Christian faith. In her chapter, **Christine Hecht** explores Eusebius' reception of Porphyry's daemonology. The daemons were a part of the inventory of the classical world that caused much distress to the Christian system – Christ had of course come to break the chains

of the daemons and free human beings from their evil influence. Hecht shows the rhetorical aims involved in Eusebius' representation of Porphyry's daemonology, which often distorted what seem to have been the philosopher's original claims about the daemons.

What did Christians find useful in Platonism?

In general terms, Platonism had an *enabling effect* on the early Christian tradition. It was enabling in the sense that it provided Christians with an intellectual apparatus that allowed for new and advanced interpretations of beliefs and doctrines, providing a philosophical system consisting of terms and conceptions that could be integrated as means to interpretations and problem-solving within the faith. This claim is of course, to some degree or another, valid for all ancient schools of philosophy, and there were certainly also other philosophical traditions that made their influence on early Christian thought, such as Stoicism, for example. However, it is likely correct to say that among the philosophical schools of Antiquity, it was with the Platonic tradition that Christian intellectuals enjoyed the most creative and enduring relationship. A correspondence between Plato's philosophy and the Christian religion was observed by several Christian thinkers in Late Antiquity. Augustine could even claim that the extent of agreement between two movements was so large that the difference mainly was a matter of words.⁵ Sympathetic reading of Plato's writings could extend further than expected, surprisingly even into areas of Christian doctrine in which there was widespread acknowledgement that Platonic philosophy diverged from the faith: in his *Stromateis*, for example, Clement of Alexandria speculated that the myth of Er in Plato's *The Republic* is an allusion to the resurrection of the body;⁶ Justin Martyr was even willing to believe that the letter chi (X) which Plato in the *Timaeus* held to be the shape of the world soul, was a reference to the cross of Christ.⁷

Within which areas of philosophy were early Christians most likely to perceive common ground with the Platonists? It seems that the observation of a widespread appropriation of Platonic philosophy in Christian thought requires an explanation. How do we explain the relative appeal of Platonism to Christian thought? What was it about Platonic philosophy – in comparison to other philosophical schools in antiquity – that made it seem so useful to Christians in their intellectual inquiries? Evidence suggests that metaphysics is the area in which early Christians tended to find the most extensive agreements between the faith and Platonic philosophy.⁸ What the two movements have in common is the belief that the world depends on the absolute reality of a divine being, since also Christians could think of the principles of the cosmos as keeping place in an invisible realm unavailable to the senses. The Platonic doctrine that there is a primary reality that exists prior to the physical world that we can apprehend with our senses, was easily integrated into the Christian distinction between God the creator and the created world, although there were differences in how they saw generation or creation to have taken place. Adopting Platonic discourse, Christians acquired a way to articulate the chasm between Creator and creation by using distinctions

such as invisible/visible, permanence/becoming, and the novel uncreated/created, essence/activity.

More broadly, Christianity did find much common ground with the metaphysical inquiries of ancient philosophy. Ancient philosophy had always been committed to inquire into the principles of reality, and this was a philosophical discourse into which Christian intellectuals willingly entered. One of the main objections against Hellenic philosophy was the status of the cosmos, which Christians held to have been created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) with a temporal beginning. In their arguments against the Hellenic philosophers, Christian intellectuals attempted to show that the principle of reality that the philosophers had been searching for is the Christian God, who is the ultimate cause that has generated the cosmos. Here, however, Christian interpreters could find a philosophical ally in Plato. Christian engagement with Platonist metaphysics had Plato's *Timaeus* as its main text – the work had a formidable history of reception in Christian literature, which was anticipated by Philo of Alexandria, who already had made use of the *Timaeus* in his interpretation of Genesis.⁹ For later Christian writers too, the cosmogonic explanation given in the *Timaeus* largely agreed with the creation account in Genesis. In the cosmogonic account presented in the *Timaeus*, the demiurge is held to be the superior principle of generation, shaping the cosmos after the Forms. Its goodness is not inherent to the cosmos itself, but arranged from the outside. In the Christian perception, the *Timaeus* story nicely fitted with the key doctrine that the cosmos is created – and not eternal, as ancient philosophy otherwise would have it to be. While there were various interpretations of the demiurge within the Platonic tradition, Christians agreed with the idea that the cosmos is generated by a divine principle, that is, an active principle of generation, which otherwise could not be found in the other philosophical schools. According to this interpretation of the cosmogony in the *Timaeus*, Christians could establish common ground with Platonism with regard to the generation of the world.

Part II of the volume is focused on cosmology. Beside philosophical inquiries into the fundamental principles of reality, cosmology in the Platonic tradition also dealt with matter. Being either a preexisting something or the last phase of emanation void of form, matter remained somewhat of an “embarrassment” to the spiritual and moral aspirations of the Platonic philosopher, but none the less a subject worthy of analysis. Moreover, it held an indisputable position within the Platonic movement, since Plato had dealt with matter in the *Timaeus* – although in a way that left much room for interpretations by the later tradition. Matter was also subject to reception in early Christian thought, as shown by **Enrico Moro** in “Patristic reflections on formless matter.” The doctrine of creation had a prominent standing within Christian theology. Christians did of course take a positive view on creation, which they held to be the product of the creator God in Genesis. But where did matter fit in this picture? Moro analyses the Platonic concept of prime matter in early Christian thought, showing how this concept could be employed in inquiries into Genesis and the creation of the world, enabling new interpretations of Scripture. However, reception can differ from the original: in his chapter “Plotinus’ doctrine of badness as matter in *Ennead* I 8 (51),” **Eyjólfur Kjalar**

Emilsson examines Plotinus' claim that matter is absolute badness. Plotinus held that matter, since it is devoid of form, being and goodness, must be responsible for bad things for living bodies, such as illness, poverty, and vice in souls. The chapter discusses Plotinus' explanation as to how badness is related to matter, and moreover puts into perspective the receptions that Moro analyses in the preceding chapter (as well as other aspects of Christian reception of Plotinus).¹⁰

One of the fundamental divergences between Platonism and Christian thought is the question about the provenance of the world. For the Platonist, the cosmos is eternal, and any notion of creation would amount to nothing other than the formation of a preexisting material. In other words, for the Platonists the basic principle of cosmology is "order out of chaos." For the Christian, though, the cosmos was not always there. It has been created out of nothing. Implicit at the beginnings of Christianity, or explicit after the contributions of the Cappadocians, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* established one of the central distinctions between Platonic and Christian thought. This issue is treated by **Torstein Theodor Tollefsen**, who compares the cosmological doctrines of the Neoplatonist Proclus with the Christian doctrine of John Philoponus and Maximus the Confessor. For the Neoplatonists the world has always existed, since the paradigm, according to which it is created, is eternal. Against this view, the Christians claimed that the world has a beginning a definite number of time-units ago. The world is created from nothing, by the will of God, and it is created "recently," as said by Maximus. Tollefsen's chapter has two foci: The author treats first the Alexandrine Christian philosopher John Philoponus' critique of the Neoplatonist Proclus' cosmology. Then he focuses on Maximus the Confessor's doctrine of creation and asks whether one may detect any influence on Maximus from Philoponus.

Part III of the volume contains chapters addressing Christian receptions of Platonic metaphysics. **Lars Fredrik Janby** examines the philosophy of number in Augustine's early works. The chapter argues that this aspect of Augustine's philosophy must be read in context with the intellectual problems that occupied him at the beginning of his career as a writer. To that effect, the chapter considers the conceptual pair sensible and intelligible number, and its relation to the idea that the transient physical world reflects immutable, eternal unity. The chapter also investigates the fortunes of Augustine's philosophy of number in later writings, inquiring into how his perceptions about cognition of number changed. In his chapter, **Daniel J. Tolan** examines the role of the doctrine of the divine ideas in Christian and Platonic orthodoxy. Tolan shows how divine exemplarism was useful in defending divine simplicity, allowing Christian intellectuals to consider the created world as a temporal image of divine ideas, which are outside of time. Tolan's chapter draws on a number of sources to investigate the development of this doctrine and the various intellectual issues it confronted, including Plato's *Timaeus*, Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Plotinus and, finally, Athanasius.

Panagiotis G. Pavlos' chapter aims at offering insights on Dionysius the Areopagite's notion of theurgy. Pavlos takes over the remark that despite the linguistic affinities and terminological appropriations – whether Iamblican or Procline – Dionysius' premises on the matter remain radically different from that

of Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the wider Christian metaphysical contours he adheres to. He examines Dionysian theurgy both with respect to the metaphysical principles that connect with *θεουργία* and the particular sacramental reality that emerges from it. **Dimitrios A. Vasilakis** examines the notion of hierarchy in Dionysius the Areopagite. In contrast to its modern usage, Dionysian hierarchy does not primarily refer to stratification or rank of power. Vasilakis focuses on the definition of hierarchy from Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy* with the aid of relevant passages from the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. He explains how hierarchy relates to order, i.e. in what way hierarchy is a well-ordered system of entities, where one can indeed detect stratification. Through this ordering the higher entities (in the case of the Church: the hierarchs, the priests and their deacons) help the lower ones (the laity) to reach God, i.e. deification, as far as possible to each of them, through the sacraments of the Church. Hierarchy's last trait is understanding, which should not be understood merely intellectually, but erotically, as Vasilakis shows.

The Neoplatonist reception and development of Aristotelian logic had a great impact on Christian thought. **Sebastian Mateiescu**'s chapter focuses on how this kind of logic served the theologians especially in the Christological controversy. Theological inquiries into the philosophical problem of the universals grew after the Council of Chalcedon (451). Maximus the Confessor presented an alternative to nominalism with respect to the species that the Miaphysite/anti-Chalcedonian theologians shared with several philosophers. As Mateiescu argues, this alternative can be labelled immanent realism. Influenced by Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus innovatively combines principles within logic and metaphysics in elaborating this doctrine. It is well known that participation is a central concept in Neoplatonist as well as in Christian systems of thought. However, in his chapter **Jordan Daniel Wood** shows that the Christians, *in casu* Maximus the Confessor, needed to develop this notion of how entities relate to one another with the idea of *perichōrēsis* or mutual interpenetration. This topic is especially relevant for issues in Christology and the Christian doctrine of deification. On the background of Cappadocian trinitarian theology and Christology, Maximus elaborates a perichoretic logic that pertains to the relation between God and the world in eschatology (i.e. deification), effectuating an identity that goes beyond the Neoplatonic participation.

While receptions of metaphysics and cosmology perhaps were more frequent, there are interesting issues related to the field of moral theory as well when studying the intersection between Platonism and Christian thought. Any Platonic proclivity to value the sensible world lower than the higher realm could moreover be paired with Christian moralists' call to contempt for the pleasures of this world, since both valued the physical world lower than the eternal, invisible source on which it depends. Part IV of the volume covers aspects of Christian moral theory in relation to Platonism. **E. Brown Dewhurst** compares notions of knowledge of the divine in the works of Maximus the Confessor and Proclus. Contrasting different aspects of their thought such as nature, providence, and apophaticism in relation to knowledge, the chapter concludes that knowledge for Maximus always

is rooted in relationality – a notion which is rather absent in the Neoplatonic philosopher. A fundamental difference between Proclus and Maximus in this respect is found to be notable in the way that divine disclosure of knowledge bridges the gap between God and human beings in Maximus’ theology. It is above all the union of Christ’s humanity and divinity, the chapter argues, which makes the quest for knowledge into a relationship of love with the divine that is incompatible with Proclus’ metaphysics. **Adrian Pirtea** examines the formation of passions in Porphyry and Evagrius, exploring some possible connections between the philosophical treatises of Plotinus’ illustrious student and the ascetic writings of the Christian ascetic author. Porphyry has rarely been considered as a source of Christian ethics, but through a close reading of key passages in their works, Pirtea argues that Evagrius’ theory of passions has much in common with the philosopher from Tyre – more so than with the Stoics, which often have been held to be the source of this theory. As Pirtea shows, both Porphyry and Evagrius show an interest in explaining how the passions originate from the soul’s involvement with the sensible realm by using Platonic and Aristotelic psychology. Even Evagrius’ concept of *apatheia*, the chapter argues, seems to be closer to the Neoplatonic understanding of freedom from passions than that of the Stoics. In the final chapter of the volume, **Tomas Ekenberg** discusses whether Augustine’s notion of the happy life in fact agrees with that of the Epicureans. Augustine is one of the Christian intellectuals that frequently is cast as a “Christian Platonist” in scholarly literature, but despite all his appropriations and explicit endorsement of Platonism, he sometimes departs from their philosophy in ways that can be unexpected. Defending his claim, Ekenberg contends that the many positive valuations of pleasure in Augustine ought to be accounted for, and argues that his position is more similar to the Epicureans’ than any other philosophical school in Antiquity.

Irreconcilable differences

How far did Christian receptions of Platonism extend? Let us first consider the expression “Christian Platonism,” which frequently occurs in scholarship, and which suggests something like a synthesis forged between Christianity and Platonism in Late Antiquity. As a historical claim, it seems to be supported by the widespread appropriation of Platonic material that one finds in Christian writings. We submit, however, that any such claim about a historical fusion or synthesis between the two movements is misleading. Despite the extent of these appropriations, we need as historians of philosophy to acknowledge that Christian integration of Platonism had its limitations. Unconditional approval of Platonism is after all not possible to find in any Christian writer from this period. On the contrary, evidence indicates that even the most sympathetic Christians always had some reservations about Platonism – including Christian writers who were inclined to integrate larger portions of Platonic philosophy in their thought. Augustine for example, despite all his enthusiasm for the discovery of the Platonic treatises that prompted his conversion, always dissociated himself from those of the Neoplatonist claims that went contrary to the faith, even in the fledgling years of his career, when he had but an elementary understanding of Christian doctrines.¹¹

In this regard, Dörrie has claimed that any historical analysis of Christian receptions of Platonism should recognize the *differences* and *boundaries* which Christians perceived between their own views and those of the Platonists.¹² According to Dörrie's argument, the essential doctrines of the Platonic movement were all rejected by Christians. To take one of Dörrie's examples, Nicene Christians could not accept any doctrine which stratified the divinity – such a doctrine was however essential to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Christian reception was therefore never substantial; it was limited to fragments and pieces that were incorporated into Christian thought. The observation of such irreconcilable differences between Platonism and Christianity led Dörrie to the conclusion that not only was there never such a thing as Christian Platonism in this period – according to him, there was only a Christian “anti-Platonism.” While the latter may be a somewhat exaggerated claim, we think Dörrie is correct to the extent that despite widespread sympathy, no Christian writer from this period gave their full endorsement to the Platonists or completely adopted Platonic philosophy. From the Christian view, there was always a chasm separating the faith from paganism, and wherever there was endorsement, there was only conditional endorsement – which made any hypothetical “Christian Platonism” impossible. Christian intellectuals were understandably wary of endorsing Platonism – and, in cases of endorsement only did so by adding cautious disclaimers. Notwithstanding the truths it was held to communicate, Platonism was always held at a distance from the truth itself. From this perspective, there always remained a basic flaw about the Platonic system in the eyes of Christians since, despite their achievements within rational inquiries, the Platonists had been ignorant of or neglected Revelation.

The history of philosophy in Late Antiquity cannot exclusively be described in terms of continuities.¹³ Cracks and ruptures in the transitions of the Greco-Roman world in this period are as much part of this history as the continuities, if we are to give a correct representation of the period. The editors of this volume do not believe that the many observations of appropriation of Platonic material justify any claim that early Christianity forged a synthesis with Platonism. Further studies into Christian receptions of Platonism in Late Antiquity will bring more knowledge about how Christian writers mediated that material by way of selections and interpretations. These cracks have their rightful place in the history as well – late ancient history is not to be regarded as an intellectual relay in which Christians transmitted what the genius of the Greeks had invented. Such cracks and ruptures cannot only be studied in the polemics of Christian writers against paganism – they can also be observed and studied in any reception of pagan material by inquiring into how that material was transformed when transported into Christian contexts. What we study when we study the receptions of Platonism is necessarily excerpts that were taken from one context and placed into another. In Christian contexts, the philosophical material was interpreted from new perspectives, with new meaning being added.

In selecting the chapters contained in this volume on the relationship between Platonism and Christian thought, we have not wanted to outline any particular

historical development, and any sketch of the history of Christian philosophy in this period has been beyond the scope of this volume.¹⁴ With the aim to explore the relationship between Platonism and Christianity in Late Antiquity, we have been interested in Christian thought broadly defined, and not necessarily Christian *philosophical* receptions. This is not to say that we do not think that there was such a thing as Christian philosophy in this period. In the course of the last few decades, the study of Christian philosophy in Late Antiquity has increased in scholarship, obliterating some of the old bifurcation between philosophy and religion/theology, and important contributions have provided new knowledge about how we meaningfully can speak about early Christian philosophy, such as Georgios Karamanolis and his *The Philosophy of Early Christianity*. In making this provision, we do still acknowledge that a number of contributions in this volume examine receptions which deal with what must be considered philosophical problems in their own right, in discussing the receptions of Platonic material within rational inquiries into the faith.

Notes

- 1 Dörrie 1976.
- 2 Augustine, *Civ. Dei* 8.5.
- 3 Cf. Gnilka 1984.
- 4 Cf. Bland Simmons 2015.
- 5 Augustine, *Conf.* 7.9.13.
- 6 Clement, *Str.* 5.103.
- 7 Justin, *Ap.* 1.60.1.
- 8 Cf. De Vogel 1985.
- 9 Cf. Runia 1968.
- 10 For example, these findings call into question established knowledge on Augustine's intellectual conversion. Augustine's claim in *Conf.* that he acquired his notion of evil from the Platonists' monistic view of reality (generally believed to have been Plotinus) does not sit well with the dualistic views that Plotinus held, as shown by his doctrine on matter, which hardly could find any place within mainstream Christian doctrine on creation.
- 11 Cf. Augustine, *Contra Academicos* 3.20.43.
- 12 Dörrie 1976: 522.
- 13 Dörrie 1976: 521–522.
- 14 We agree with Stead 1994: x, who argues that any sketch of the development of Christian philosophy in this period is made difficult by the lack of convergence in philosophical knowledge and preferences among early Christian intellectuals.

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