

The Neoplatonic School of Theosophy

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AT the beginning of her book *The Key to Theosophy* H. P. Blavatsky explains: "The name Theosophy dates from the third century of our era, and began with Ammonius Saccas and his disciples, who started the Eclectic Theosophical system." This famous school, which flourished in Alexandria, did not appear suddenly, having been preceded by a long development. Ammonius asserted that the movement "dated from the days of Hermes, who brought his wisdom from India."¹ The Neoplatonic philosophy took over the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato and received much inspiration from the Mystery Schools established in Greece and in Egypt. The chief aim of the Neoplatonists was "to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities". (*The Key to Theosophy*)

These eminent philosophers professed that the various faiths were issued from the same source, the archaic Wisdom-Religion revealed to early humanity by divine teachers, but that in the course of time changing beliefs had modified and veiled the primitive message. The synthesizing trend of the Neoplatonists had been anticipated by the Jewish philosopher Philo, who lived in Alexandria

between 30 B.C. and 40 A.D. He tried to establish parallels between the Mosaic Bible and Platonic philosophy by an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, declaring that the narratives of the Holy Book were written in symbolic language hiding a deeper sense, which had to be discovered. On the ground of such pursuits Philo was called the "Father of Neoplatonism".

The Alexandrian system was the last effulgence of ancient Greek wisdom; seven centuries after Plato, there was a flowering of sublime philosophy. Ammonius Saccas, the Founder of the Eclectic System, who lived between 175 and 240, was born of Christian parents; but he renounced his native religion and turned to pagan philosophy. As he found the divine wisdom within himself, he was called "Theodidaktos" or taught by God; but he preferred the name of "Phi'alethes" or lover of truth. His disciples were also known as "Philaletheians". He left no writings, teaching only orally, and his pupils were bound by oath to secrecy as was the custom in the Mystery Schools. Nevertheless he made "a direct attempt to benefit the world by teaching those portions of the Secret Science that were permitted by its

direct guardians to be revealed in those days".²

And we read also that

"No orthodox Christian has ever equalled, far less surpassed, in the practice of true Christlike virtues and ethics, or in the beauty of his moral nature, Ammonius, the Alexandrian *pervert* from Christianity".³

Only a few words can be said here about the most eminent Neoplatonists.

The greatest among them was Plotinus (205-270), the direct disciple of Ammonius Saccas, with whom he remained eleven years. "What Plato was to Socrates, and the Apostle John to the head of the Christian faith, Plotinus became to the God-taught Ammonius".⁴ Then he participated in an expedition to Asia in the hope of reaching India, but did not succeed. He went to Rome where he spent the rest of his life, teaching and writing. His principal work, the *Enneads*, embody his theosophical ideas. Plotinus combined the greatest intellectual power with deep mystical illumination; and his life was based on self-discipline and purification. His intense spiritual aspiration resulted in ecstasy, a sublime condition of being absorbed in the Divine Life, the *Samadhi* of Hindu philosophy. His disciple Porphyry relates that Plotinus had this experience six times during his life. His teachings had a lasting and deep influence not only on the philosophical thought of later centuries, but also on Christian Theology. The Church took over its fundamental doctrine of the Trinity from Plotinus' writings. "All that

is great and noble in Christian theology comes from Neoplatonism," says H.P.B.⁵

Plotinus developed the conception of a transcendent Source, called by him the One or the Good, and pointed the way for the human spirit to return to the One, the highest Self.

Plotinus' best-known disciple was Porphyry (233-304), born in Syria. He went to Rome, attracted by the reputation of Plotinus, who introduced him to the study of Neoplatonic philosophy. Porphyry wrote a biography of Plotinus, as well as a "*Life of Pythagoras*," and he is renowned for his work on abstinence from animal food. He was a strong opponent of Christianity and a defender of independent thought. Of his work *Against the Christians* in 15 books, only fragments remain. We read in *The Secret Doctrine* that over 36 volumes written by Porphyry were destroyed by the Christian "Fathers".⁶

Porphyry also experienced the "sublime ecstasy, in which state things divine and the mysteries of nature are revealed to us";⁷ and he asserts that "only through highest purity and chastity we shall approach nearer to God".⁸ He designed a scheme of Divine Planets, called "Porphyry's Tree," analogous to the Sephirothal Tree of the Kabbalah.⁹

His greatest pupil was Iamblichus (250-330), who later established his own school in Syria. His metaphysical works are lost, but his ideas are known from his treatise "*On the Egyptian Mysteries*". He is especially famous for having practised Theurgy (divine work) or sacred

magic. Iamblichus taught that there is a faculty of the human mind, through which

"we are enabled to attain union with the superior intelligences, to be transported beyond the scenes of this world, and to partake of the higher life and peculiar powers of the heavenly ones".¹⁰

H. P. B. explains that Theurgy or Theophania

"is not only the presence of a God, but an actual—howbeit temporary—incarnation, the blending, so to say, of the personal deity, the Higher Self, with man—its representative or agent on earth. . . . When the incarnation is temporary, during those mysterious trances or 'ecstasy,' which Plotinus defined as 'the liberation of the mind from its finite consciousness, becoming one and identified with the Infinite,' this sublime condition is very short. . . . In exceptional cases, however, the mystery becomes complete. . . the individual becoming divine in the full sense of the term, since his personal God has made of him his permanent lifelong tabernacle—'the temple of God,' as Paul says".¹¹

Modern scholars believe that Iamblichus was a spiritualist, a medium in the popular sense, which is obviously quite false. He was definitely opposed to such a practice, physical phenomena being produced, as he said, by bad demons who deceive men. But to exercise Divine Theurgy, "high morality and a chaste Soul" is needed.¹²

"Magic," says Iamblichus, "is a lofty and sublime science, Divine and exalted above all others".³ Magic, for the ancient philosophers, comprised every science, physical and metaphysical; it is synonymous with occultism, Wisdom-Religion or Theosophy. But "True Magic, the theurgy of Iamblichus, is in its turn identical with the Gnosis of Pythagoras and with the divine ecstasy of the Philaletheians".¹⁴

Several Christian Fathers were students of the school of Ammonius Saccas; the most famous are Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Synesius, who were also instructed in the Egyptian Mysteries. They considered the Bible and the Kabalah as veiled and secret books, clothed in allegorical garb, which must be interpreted in order to find the hidden meaning underlying the open texts. Applying this method to Scripture they followed suit to their precursor Philo Judaeus.

Clement of Alexandria (Circa 150-215) was born in Athens from pagan parents, but he embraced the new faith and became "one of the most intelligent and learned of the early Christian Fathers".¹⁵ He declared that the Mosaic books as well as the Gospels have to be read with the key of symbology and esotericism. He stressed the necessity of secrecy for such teachings; in his work *Stromata* (Miscellanies) he said: "The Mysteries of the Faith are not to be divulged to all. . . . It is requisite to hide in a mystery the wisdom spoken".¹⁶ Though he had been thoroughly instructed in Neoplatonic philosophy, it happened that he decided

to turn over to Christianity. H. P. B., while speaking of his defection and calling him a "renegade,"¹⁷ held him nevertheless in high esteem:

"Clemens Alexandrinus, a convert to all appearance, an ardent Neo-Platonist and the same philosophical *pagan* at heart—became the instructor of ignorant Christian Bishops. In short the convert *malgré lui* blended the two external mythologies, the old and the new, and while giving out the compound to the masses, kept the sacred truths for himself."¹⁸

Origen (185-254), one of the most distinguished pupils of Ammonius, was born in a Christian family, but soon felt himself attracted to the high philosophy of Alexandria. He worked 28 years in the family city, studying, writing and teaching. Later in his life there arose difficulties from the side of the Church authorities of Alexandria, so that he had to leave Egypt. He went to Caesarea (Palestine), where he gathered many pupils around him. Out of his numerous works, only a few remains have been preserved; the best known fragment is his pamphlet *Contra Celsum*. As a "Father" of early Christianity, he had to contradict the writing of Kelsos (Celsus), a Neoplatonist, who attacked the Christian faith, declaring it erroneous and adapted only to ignorant people. Origen replied explaining that Christianity has two aspects: an exoteric and an esoteric teaching, and that, because of the incapacity of the masses to grasp the deeper sense of Scripture, they can be fed only

the husks of spiritual fruit. Origen's interpretation of Christian dogmas was based on pure Theosophy; he understood the biblical stories as most ingenious allegories. H.P.B. calls him "the sincere and honest Father of early Christianity in its days of relative purity."¹⁹ His philosophical explanations of the Gospels, which he considered as transcriptions of spiritual Initiations, and his open adherence to the great principle of reincarnation, were deemed "heretical" by the orthodox Church, which had lost the esoteric aspect of religion. But, 300 years after Origen's death, his teachings were condemned by the Ecclesiastical Council of Constantinople, in 553, under the reign of the emperor Justinian, where this decree was promulgated:

"Whosoever shall support the mythical doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and the consequent wonderful opinion of its return, let him be anathema."²⁰

Among Origen's disciples the most outstanding were Longinus, a man renowned for his vast learning, and Synesius, the bishop of Ptolemis. The latter had a deep admiration for his teacher, Hypatia; fragments of his enthusiastic letters to this wonderful priestess of philosophy have been preserved.²¹ In spite of his Christian function, he was a fervent Neoplatonist.

"Synesius had Hypatia for instructor, and this is why we find him confessing in all sincerity his opinions and profession of faith: 'The rabble desires nothing better than to be deceived. . .

As regards myself, therefore, I will be a philosopher with myself, but I must be priest with the people'." ²³

Hypatia was teaching at the Alexandrian Academy, where she expounded the doctrines of Plato and Plotinus. Through her learning, wisdom and virtue she attracted a large audience of intelligent students, much to the displeasure of the Christian authorities. Hypatia had been instructed in all the secrets of theurgy and could therefore explain the Christian "miracles". Thus she was considered as a danger for the expansion of the church, and on the instigation of Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, the young and blameless Initiate was cruelly murdered by the Christian mob. (Cyril was later canonized as one of the earliest Christian "saints"!).

With the death of Hypatia (in 415) came the end of the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria.

"The Neoplatonic school was for a long time successful, powerful and prosperous. . . . The system flourished for several centuries and comprised within the ranks of its followers the ablest and most learned among the men of the time; Hypatia, the teacher of the Bishop Synesius, was one of the ornaments of the school, until the fatal and shameful day when she was murdered. . . ." ²³

After this sad event, the Alexandrian philosophy took its seat in Athens; by the beginning of the 5th century, the Academy of Plato had become Neo-

platonist. Its most important figure was Proclus (410-485), called "Diadochos" (which means "successor," namely of Plato in the headship of the Academy). He wrote a great number of philosophical works besides treatises on mathematics, astronomy, grammar and other subjects.

"He elaborated the entire theosophy and theurgy of his predecessors into a complete system." ²⁴

He taught that all things are pervaded by a spiritual principle and that a profound knowledge of natural law is the basis of magic. In his book *Theology of Plato* he describes the gradation of the Mysteries and alludes to the final Initiation, called Epopteia, evoked by Plato in *Phaedrus* and quoted in *The Secret Doctrine*; this passage is followed by the words: "This veiled confession shows that the Initiates enjoyed theophany—saw visions of Gods and of real immortal Spirits." ²⁵

Proclus' theosophical philosophy was the main source of inspiration for Dionysius the Areopagite, often referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius, a Christian Neoplatonist living about 500, whose writings became of decisive importance on theology as well as on European thought and culture. In the 9th century, a Latin version of these documents was made by Scotus Erigena, who endeavoured to enforce the Neoplatonic influence on Christianity.

The last representative of Neoplatonism and head of the Athenian Academy was Damascius, who wrote many books.

His chief surviving work is entitled *Problems and Solutions about the First Principle*, where he treats of the mystical union of the human soul with the Divine Life. Damascius was still in office, when the Emperor Justinian closed the Academy in 529.

This was, in the outer world, the end of the glorious Neoplatonic School; its splendid message however survived in secret channels, coming sometimes to the foreground with defenders of free thought, and resuscitation in its new incarnation as the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875.

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