

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTORY

What we are trying to do in this volume is to provide a wide-ranging and fairly detailed survey of the philosophy of the period when thought in the Mediterranean lands, and later in Europe north of the Alps, took forms which deeply influenced our literature, art, social behaviour and institutions at least down to the seventeenth century and, to some extent and in some quarters, to the present day. We set out to show how Greek philosophy reached its latest, and perhaps most influential, phase, that which modern historians of ancient philosophy call Neoplatonism; and how this was taken over and adapted in various ways to suit their own purposes by Jews, Christians and Moslems. Whatever the relationship of this late Platonism to the real thought of Plato may have been (here Merlan has some interesting suggestions in the first chapter of his section), it is certain that it is this, rather than the Platonism of the dialogues as understood by modern scholars, which we encounter whenever there is a question of Platonic influence on art, literature, theology or philosophy before the nineteenth century, and sometimes even later. It, and its various theological transformations, therefore seem worth studying, and in recent years they have been vigorously studied. There is a great deal going on, in particular, in the fields of Neoplatonic and patristic studies: so much, in fact, that inevitably a good deal in this volume will be out of date by the time it is published. But it still seems worth while attempting a comprehensive survey, because much of the scholarly material is rather inaccessible except to specialists in the various fields, and also because the study of this period, lying as it does across the frontiers of so many disciplines, has suffered rather more than most from academic compartmentalization.

One object of this volume is to make generalization about the thought of the period more difficult. This is particularly necessary, because there is no period about which sweeping and ill-founded generalizations have been more common. So we have tried to show its philosophies and theologies in all their complexities and variations, and

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in particular to give some idea of how many different things ‘Platonism’, or ‘Christian Platonism’ can mean. There has, of course, been no attempt to impose any uniformity of outlook on the contributors, or a rigid pattern of treatment on the very varied subject-matter of the several contributions. Inevitably, the same or closely related topics have occasionally been treated in different Parts in different ways and from different points of view. Where this has happened, or where it seemed to me that for any reason it would be interesting and useful for the reader to compare passages from different Parts, I have inserted editorial cross-references in the notes. This deliberate refusal to over-simplify or impose a superficial tidiness has made the task of writing an introductory chapter a good deal harder. All I shall try to do in the rest of it is to provide a kind of rough sketch-map of the contents of the volume and to try to indicate the dominant preoccupations and attitudes of the philosophers and theologians of the period, and the more interesting convergences and divergences in their ways of thinking. If in doing this I slip back into just the kind of generalization which the volume was designed to make more difficult, at least the corrective will be ready to hand: a reading of the relevant chapters will soon supply the qualifications which my general statements need.

The first Part, by P. Merlan, tells the complex story of the developments in Greek philosophy which led up to Plotinus, from Plato and Aristotle onwards. Here there is a full account of Middle Platonism and late Pythagoreanism, philosophies whose influence, direct and indirect, was perhaps wider than that of Plotinus himself. Something of this influence can already be seen in the next Part, by H. Chadwick, on Philo and the beginning of Christian thought, where we find Jews and Christians taking over Greek ideas and adapting them to their own purposes and ways of thinking long before Plotinus: the section ends with an account of the great pagan philosopher’s older contemporary, the Christian Origen, probably a pupil of the same master, Ammonius Saccas, whose thought has points of contact with that of Plotinus in some ways, but is utterly different in many others. Part III, of which I am the author, deals with Plotinus himself, the central and dominant figure and greatest philosopher of the whole period; though this does not mean that all its later philosophies can simply be classified

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as forms of Plotinian Neoplatonism. Merlan in his section has sufficiently shown the degree of his dependence on earlier Greek philosophy (the assumption underlying the whole treatment of Plotinus in this volume is that he was a genuine Greek philosopher, not an Orientalizer or a Gnostic). So in my section I have tried to give a self-contained outline of his philosophy with little reference to earlier or later thought, prefaced by some account of the man himself, and his way of living and teaching: for Plotinus was a complete and consistent character in whom life and thought were so closely related that it is not easy to understand the one without knowing something about the other. With Plotinus we have reached the third century A.D. The next Part, by A. C. Lloyd, carries on the story of pagan Neoplatonism to its end in the sixth century. It is, perhaps, of all the contributions in the volume the one which will be most interesting to those professionally concerned with philosophy (in the modern sense) rather than theology; and it shows good reasons for revising some earlier judgements on those, till recently, rather neglected and despised philosophers, Iamblichus and his successors.

The later Neoplatonic schools were pagan enclaves in a world which was becoming wholly Christian, at least officially. They survived into the age in which the first great Byzantine churches were built at Ravenna and Constantinople. The next three Parts are concerned exclusively with Christian thought. The first of them (v), by R. A. Markus, deals with Marius Victorinus and Augustine. It may surprise some readers to find that the former, who generally appears as a minor figure in biographies of Augustine, is given a chapter to himself. Till recently he was neglected, because very few people indeed had taken the very considerable trouble necessary to understand him. But the great edition of Henry and Hadot<sup>1</sup> has revealed him as one of the most original and interesting of the philosophical theologians who adapted Neoplatonic speculations to serve Christian purposes. The important place given to Augustine in the volume, of course, needs no explanation or defence. In the chapters devoted to him, though no artificial and anachronistic attempt has been made to separate his 'philosophy' from his 'theology' attention has been concentrated on those parts of his

<sup>1</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Traité Théologique sur la Trinité*. Texte établi par P. Henry. Introduction, traduction et notes par P. Hadot (Sources Chrétiennes, 68–9) (2 vols. Paris, 1960).

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wide-ranging and many-sided thought which are likely to be of interest to philosophers. Augustine's influence was immense, but did not extend to the Christian East, with which he had little contact, and which from the fourth century onwards followed paths of speculative theology increasingly divergent from those of the West. The next Part, by I. P. Sheldon-Williams, tells the story of Greek Christian Platonism from the fourth to the ninth century. It contains much that will be new to all but a handful of specialists, particularly about the developments after the Pseudo-Dionysian writings came into circulation. In the last chapter of this section that isolated and mysterious figure of the Carolingian age, Johannes Scottus Eriugena, is shown in his most appropriate context, that of post-Dionysian Greek Christian theology, which makes him a good deal less mysterious. The Latin background of Eriugena, and his contribution to distinctively Western controversies, is dealt with in the last of these three sections on Christian thought, by H. Liebeschütz, which traces the history of Western Christian philosophy from Boethius to Anselm. The ground traversed here will, in part at least, be more familiar to many readers than that covered in the section before, but there are few so well informed that they will not find their understanding, especially of the Carolingian and immediately post-Carolingian periods, increased by these chapters. Finally Part VIII, by R. Walzer, gives a sketch of early Islamic philosophy: for reasons which he makes clear, no more than a preliminary survey can be attempted. He has concentrated his attention on the great, and rather neglected, tenth-century philosopher al-Fārābī, whom he shows to be a thinker of exceptional importance and interest, not least because he developed and adapted to the conditions of the Islamic world of his time an otherwise unknown late Greek tradition of political philosophy based on the *Republic* and *Laws* of Plato. Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists whom we know at first hand show very little interest in Plato's political and social thought: so here, as at other points, a study of Islamic philosophy not only is worth while for its own sake and in view of its later influence, but can enlarge our understanding of the Greek thought from which it derives.

Perhaps a good starting-point for considering what, if any, common characteristics the thought of these many and diverse philosophers and

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theologians had is to observe what they meant by philosophy. It was something very different from what modern philosophers understand to be their professional activity: though perhaps even today the ordinary man sometimes, in a vague sort of way, expects them to provide him with philosophical guidance of the older sort, and is annoyed and disconcerted when they tell him, very properly on their own presuppositions, that this is none of their business, and goes to look for what he wants where he can find it, in East or West, sometimes in very odd and unacademic quarters indeed. Philosophy for most of the ancients, after Plato at any rate, and certainly for the men of our period, was as Markus puts it, speaking of Augustine, ‘an all-embracing activity concerned with everything relevant to the ultimate purpose of human life’.<sup>1</sup> This accounts for the strong ethical emphasis and, to the modern mind, disconcertingly close connexion between philosophy and religion which we find in nearly all the thinkers of the period, in the Greek pagans just as much as in the adherents of revealed religions. This was of course compatible with a great variety of attitudes towards religious revelations and religious practices, and generalization here is particularly risky. Even the later Neoplatonists, Iamblichus and his successors, cannot just be dismissed, as is still often done, with a few general observations about superstition and the decline of rationalism. Lloyd’s observations on the relationship of their philosophy to their religion, which are among the most enlightening pages in the volume on this whole question, make this clear.<sup>2</sup> But the strong moral and religious concern of most of the philosophers of the period makes it easier to understand, for instance, why the Christians saw what we should call theology as a superior form of philosophy, and why in consequence it was quite impossible in planning this volume to make a tidy separation of the two and leave theology out of it. Only at one place and one time, in the towns of the Lombard plain in the earlier Middle Ages, do we find, for reasons which Liebeschütz makes clear,<sup>3</sup> logicians whose attitude to their studies was entirely secular and in whose writings, as he says, ‘questions of religion and theology appear to be removed to an isolated corner of the discussion’. This local attitude, the

<sup>1</sup> Part v. ch. 21, p. 344.

<sup>2</sup> See Part iv, chs. 17 and 18 C.

<sup>3</sup> Part vii, ch. 37 B, p. 596.

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importance of which for the later direction of Western medieval thought Liebeschütz shows, is rather different from the way in which many earlier philosophers and theologians, pagan and Christian, regarded Aristotelian logic as a kind of neutral preliminary study to religious speculation, though it ultimately derives from it.

The close connexion of philosophy and religion in our period leads us naturally to consider another aspect of its thought which is often misunderstood, the attitude to authority. At first sight it seems a period of servile authority-mindedness, among pagans as well as Christians. Whatever their attitude to religious revelations, the pagan philosophers regarded the great men of the past, above all Plato, with unbounded veneration. They disapproved of originality and devoted their lives to expounding what they thought to be the authentic teaching of the ancient masters, and commenting on their works. And the Jews and Christians were of course dominated by the authority of the religious revelation they accepted: though here again we find an exception to our generalization in the early medieval West, the championing of the claims of reason against authority by Berengar of Tours.<sup>1</sup> The Christian West saw, much more clearly than the Christian East seems to have done, that there was a problem about the relationship of reason to religious authority, as early as Augustine,<sup>2</sup> and at the end of our period Anselm is still very much concerned with it.<sup>3</sup> In the Moslem world the problem was still more clearly seen,<sup>4</sup> and the philosophers offered an interesting variety of solutions. Al-Kindī's<sup>5</sup> subordination of philosophy to revelation follows a familiar pattern, and Avicenna's<sup>6</sup> identification of the two is, perhaps, not so very far from the position of Philo. But it would be difficult to find parallels among Jews or Christians in our period for ar-Rāzī's<sup>7</sup> resolute dismissal of revealed religion as superstition, or for the most interesting solution of all, that of al-Fārābī,<sup>8</sup> who carried on into his own very different world the attitude of the Greek philosophers to their traditional cults and myths by interpreting the various religions of his time, including Islam, as more or less imperfect symbolic representations of philosophical truth.

<sup>1</sup> See Part VII, ch. 37 C.

<sup>3</sup> See Part VII, ch. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 39 B.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 39 B.

<sup>2</sup> See Part V, ch. 21.

<sup>4</sup> See Part VIII, ch. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 40 B.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* ch. 40 B.

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But when we look at the thinkers of our period more closely, we find that in fact they managed to combine great freedom of speculation with their respect for authority. There is surprisingly little ‘textbook scholasticism’, parrot-like repetition of consecrated formulae without further thinking, even among the later Neoplatonists. One reason for this, rather disconcerting at first to the modern scholar, was their thoroughly unscholarly and unhistorical approach to the documents which they regarded as authoritative. The way in which Plotinus used Plato, and Philo’s exegesis of the Jewish Scriptures, are good examples of this.<sup>1</sup> Another was the bafflingly unsystematic character of the authoritative documents themselves, the dialogues of Plato and the Jewish and Christian Scriptures—to say nothing of the Chaldaean Oracles, which are, to put it more mildly than they deserve, decidedly oracular. Within our period as a whole one kind of philosophy, later Platonism, dominates (Merlan’s chapters show the interrelationship of ‘Middle’ Platonism and later Pythagoreanism, and the continuity of Neoplatonism with both). But at few points do we find mere conformism, disciples simply reproducing the thought of their master. The later pagan Neoplatonists were perhaps the most conformist. They were certainly more dependent on Plotinus than some scholars have thought, as Lloyd shows.<sup>2</sup> But Plotinus was not for them an ‘authority’—less so than Iamblichus. This volume makes clear his central importance and wide-ranging influence on the thought of the whole period. But his prestige and reputation in later centuries (when and where he was remembered at all) were comparatively moderate. Nor was his influence due simply to doctrinal innovation; he can hardly be said to have taken a completely new line in philosophy. Merlan’s chapters show the continuity of his thought with that of his predecessors. Certainly the superior clarity and coherence of his philosophy counted for a great deal. But perhaps his influence was still more due to the colour and passion which he brought into Platonism by thinking it through in the light of his own experience—not only the experience of union with the One, but the equally intense experience which transforms his account of the intelligible world, his experience of the transcendent self in

<sup>1</sup> See Part III, ch. 13, pp. 213–14 and Part II, ch. 8, pp. 137–9.

<sup>2</sup> See Part IV, ch. 17.

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union with the archetypal reality of all things. It is this double experience which makes him a unique force in European thought, and, though there is no good evidence for any Indian influence on his philosophy, seems to bring him close at some points to the thought of India.

When we turn to the Jews and Christians within our period we find another help to originality, the tension between Platonic philosophy and revealed religion. Some good examples of the varied ways in which this worked can be seen in the chapters of Chadwick on Philo, of Markus on Marius Victorinus, and of Sheldon-Williams on Greek Christian Platonism.<sup>1</sup> This tension accounts, to a great extent, for the extraordinary range and variety of what is loosely called ‘Christian Platonism’, a variety which is amply displayed in our volume. There are continual divergences and reactions, often of great importance. One which is particularly interesting, and not very well known, is the reaction against the influence of Proclus in the Christian East described by Sheldon-Williams.<sup>2</sup> Greek Christian Platonism is more varied than Latin. There is no one great dominating figure. But even in the West, though Augustine towered over all the others and had an influence deeper and wider than that of any single Greek Christian thinker, he did not totally dominate the thought of Latin Christendom. Liebeschütz’s account of Boethius<sup>3</sup> shows us another, quite different and very influential, form of Latin Christian Platonism.

There is one particularly interesting kind of divergence within Christian Platonism, leading to a good deal of original speculation and springing from tensions which go deep and far back in both the Platonic and Christian traditions, which deserves special mention. This is the divergence, apparent at several points in our volume, between the tendency to make a very sharp division between ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’ or ‘soul’ and ‘body’ and the concern to give a real religious and moral value to body, the material world, time, change and history. Generalization here is particularly difficult and dangerous. Augustine can be quoted on both sides, and does not fit tidily into this or any other general scheme of classification, though his influence in the West worked, on the whole, on the dualist side. Among the Greeks the

<sup>1</sup> See Part II, ch. 8; Part V, ch. 20; Part VI, ch. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Part VI, ch. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Part VII, ch. 35.



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Cappadocians generally made the opposition between spiritual and material very sharp. But the post-Dionysian Greeks, and above all St Maximus, made the most sustained effort which is apparent anywhere in our period to find a place for body, physical motion and time in the movement of return to God and to show them as sacred. This seems to be closely bound up with their concern to show clearly what they regarded as an implication of the doctrine of creation, that things have no completely separate reality apart from God, that their whole existence is a participation in his being, so that Eriugena, the inheritor of this tradition, can even say that he creates himself in creating them.<sup>1</sup> In Liebeschütz's account of the *Libri Carolini*<sup>2</sup> we can see theologians influenced by the two tendencies clashing in a most interesting way, with a political and social background and implications to the controversy which will repay study but defy generalization. On one side, the Byzantine, we have the idea of the sacred cosmos of images and the intimate presence of God in human acts and works. On the other, the Carolingian, we have an over-simplified Augustinianism sharply separating body and soul and leading to a curiously modern conception of a non-sacred material world which, as Liebeschütz says, is 'a stage for human action only'.

The post-Dionysian Greeks made much use of Aristotle in constructing their more positive view of the material world. And this leads us to one last point about the thought of our period which it is important to make if we are to avoid a kind of particularly superficial and misleading generalization which used to be very fashionable in certain circles, that which opposes the 'Christian Aristotelianism' of the thirteenth century to the 'Platonism' of earlier Christian thinkers. Merlan's chapters show how close, if sometimes uneasy, the interrelationship of Platonism and Aristotelianism was from the beginning. There is a strong Aristotelian element in Neoplatonism, though Plotinus often criticizes Aristotle severely. And throughout the sections dealing with Christian and Islamic thought we find the direct or indirect influence of Aristotle at work again and again. In fact the interaction of Platonism and Aristotelianism is one of the main themes of this history.

<sup>1</sup> See Part VII, chs. 32 and 34.

<sup>2</sup> Part VII, ch. 36 A. Sheldon-Williams's chapter on 'The Philosophy of Icons' (Part VI, ch. 33) should be compared.

PART I  
GREEK PHILOSOPHY  
FROM PLATO TO PLOTINUS

BY P. MERLAN