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Charles Elsee

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NEOPLATONISM  
IN RELATION TO  
CHRISTIANITY

AN ESSAY

by

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## PREFACE

THE following pages are the expansion of an essay which was awarded the Hulsean Prize in 1901, and they are now published in accordance with the terms of that bequest. In apologising for the long interval which has elapsed between the award of the prize and the publication of the essay, the author can only plead the pressure of other work, first at a College Mission in Walworth, and latterly at Leeds. At the same time this very delay has enabled him to grasp what a real bearing the speculations of the Neoplatonists, and their adaptations by the Christian Fathers, have upon much that is being said and written at the present day. Let the reader for instance compare what Plotinus or Augustine has to say on the subject of evil with the teaching of the "New Theology," and he will at once see how thoughts which are floating in men's minds to-day have been expressed with discrimination in the past. Or let him join the crowd that listens to the street-corner preacher of materialism, and then notice how 'Dionysius' deals with the question of finite man's comprehension of an infinite God. Truly, if we wish to see beyond the

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giants of the past, there is much to be said for climbing on their shoulders.

The subject of the essay is “Neoplatonism in relation to Christianity.” The addition of this qualifying clause serves to limit the field of the enquiry, and to differentiate its object from that of a history of philosophy. The writer of such a history regards Neoplatonism purely from a philosophical standpoint. He draws out its relation to earlier and later systems, and seeks to assign to it its proper place in the development of human thought. Neoplatonism however was not merely a great philosophical revival: it was a part of a yet greater religious movement: and it is the latter aspect which this essay has to set forth.

For nearly two hundred years the Christian Church had been increasing, alike in numerical strength and in intellectual vigour, until it threatened not only to rival but absolutely to overpower the old pagan system of the Roman Empire. Persecution had been employed against it in vain. It gradually became obvious that if the new sect was to be exterminated, methods must be adopted far more vigorous and systematic than most of the Emperors were able or willing to employ, and the last and most statesman-like of the persecutors endeavoured not so much to destroy Christianity, as to reduce it to its original position as a mean and vulgar superstition of the lower classes.

But direct persecution was not the only weapon which was levelled against the new religion. There were intervals of rest for the Church, during which

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the struggle was carried on in the form of literary controversy; and Neoplatonism was the greatest of these attempts to meet Christianity on its own ground, and by fair argument to show the superiority of the old paganism.

Accordingly the first chapter of this essay has been devoted to the discussion of the actual state of religion in the heathen world, at the commencement of the third century of the Christian era. The next two chapters deal with the relation of Neoplatonism to earlier systems of Greek speculation and with the first beginnings of Christian philosophy, whilst a fourth chapter has been given up to the general history of the school, together with the names of contemporary Christian writers. In the fifth chapter will be found a more detailed discussion of the mutual relations between Church and School, tracing their development from apparent alliance to bitter antagonism, and again, after this period of antagonism, to the gradual absorption of Neoplatonic principles by the Church.

C. E.

CLERGY HOUSE, LEEDS.

*October 9, 1908.*

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