

INTRODUCTION

Christianity and Platonism

Alexander J. B. Hampton and John Peter Kenney

Anyone wishing to understand the Christian tradition deeply must consider the central, formative role of Platonism. At various times Platonism has constituted an essential philosophical and theological resource, furnishing Christianity with a fundamental intellectual framework that has played a key role in its early development, and in subsequent periods of renewal. Alternately, at other times, it has been considered a compromising influence, conflicting with the faith's revelatory foundations and distorting its inherent message. In both the positive and negative cases, the central importance of Platonism, as a force which Christianity defined itself by and against, is clear. Equally, this process of influence is not unidirectional. Whereas Platonism played a key role in the development of Christianity, the further development of Platonism beyond antiquity was dependent to a large degree upon Christian thinkers. The importance of this dialogue provides an answer to Tertullian's celebrated question: 'Quid ergo athenis et hierosolymis?', usually rendered, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?'¹ The emphatic answer, detailed in the chapters of this volume, and at odds with Tertullian's own, is everything.

In using the term 'Christian Platonism', this volume intends to draw attention to the complex relationship of Christian thought to Platonism and to underscore the varieties of that association historically. As the chapters that compose this volume make manifest, the conjunction of Platonism and Christianity shifted diachronically, with distinctive themes

¹ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 7. *Library of Latin Texts. Series A.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000). <http://clt.brepols.net/LLTA/pages/TextSearch.aspx?key=PTERT0005>.

coming to the fore in different historical periods. ‘Christian Platonism’ thus took on a conceptual shape conditioned by the philosophical and theological issues exigent at various times. But having said that, there was one element that has remained constant and fundamental. That is Platonism’s commitment to transcendence, its adherence to an ontology countenancing the existence of a higher level of reality beyond the manifest image of the physical world. In this regard Platonism has been, and remains, the most powerful tradition of realism and anti-materialism in Western thought. That has been the source of Platonism’s appeal to Christians since antiquity, since it offered a conceptual language by which to articulate the deeper reality of God, Christ, and the human person more systematically than could be found in the sacred scriptures. The exact character of this transcendentalism and its epistemic foundations have been matters of ongoing debate, among both pagan and Christian Platonists alike. That discussion is a major thread running through the essays in this volume.

This powerful assertion of ontological transcendence by Platonists entailed the sovereignty of the Good – to adapt a phrase from Iris Murdoch.² Platonism, both in antiquity and in its subsequent reception into the Abrahamic traditions, has been committed to an ultimate first principle, one that is absolutely good and the foundation of all reality. Platonism did not just assert the existence of a level of being higher than the earthly realm, it recognized that this transcendent existence must be grounded in Goodness itself, the perfect source of all subsequent reality. That divine absolute – whether described as the One, the Good, the Beautiful, or God – came to be understood by Platonists not just as a theoretical construct postulated at a distance, but as infinite reality itself in which human souls participate by the fact of their existence. The infinite Good transcended finite description or conscious appraisal, and was perceived in a fashion that exceeded knowledge. The Good could only be discerned through interior contemplation, in the certainty of its deep presence to the soul. As the soul sheds the contingency of materiality and intensifies its inner consciousness of the Good, it participates in the immutable, the eternal, the transcendent. Platonism thus initiated and sustained a philosophical and theological culture of transcendentalism, centred on the Good or the One. It was this transcendentalism that served as a powerful resource for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thinkers, generating a distinctive trajectory of thought through its reception into the

² Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971).

Abrahamic traditions. Rather than a strictly essentialist philosophical-theological concept, therefore Christian Platonism can be seen as one branch of a larger culture of transcendentalism, coming into prominence in different historical periods whenever Christians sought to emphasize or restore that dimension to their theological tradition.

Augustine of Hippo, perhaps the single most influential voice in the Christian Platonist tradition, affirmed this transcendentalist perspective in crucially important teachings – often adumbrating many of the most ingenious ways in which Christian thinkers would discover not only the fulfilment but also the conversion of reason’s greatest aspirations in the mystery of the Word made flesh. In the Word, said Augustine (and countless other Christian Platonists in every period), dwell the real and imperishable archetypes of all that is. For the Christian Platonist tradition, this signal fulfilment and transformation of Plato’s ideas became the motive force behind a seemingly inexhaustible theological creativity across the ages. It is manifest in those works that rejoice at the luminous goodness and compelling beauty of the creation, echoing with its eternal significance in God. Equally, it is present in the probing critiques of human injustice and local xenophobic evasions of true and more universal justice. Furthermore, it can be observed in the boundary-breaking assertions of the authentic role of desire and love in epistemic success. In many ways one can only fully perceive the inner conceptual beauty and meaning of Christianity’s most significant theological achievements by uncovering the Christian Platonist dimensions at their core. Whether this leads primarily to deeper understanding or also to critique and amendment, neither would be possible without a grasp of the Christian Platonist role in the history of Christian thought.

This volume offers a systematic overview of Christian Platonism. One can easily identify reasons for the hesitancy to recognize and engage constructively with the Platonic tradition within Christianity. From the time of the Reformation, Protestant scholarship had sought to disentangle what it conceived as authentic biblical Christianity from what it saw as the distortions of philosophical traditions (even if a number of Protestant thinkers continued to embrace and develop Christian Platonist perspectives; though these sometimes flourished most recognizably in more marginal, often esoteric, schools of thought, coming to be regarded uneasily in both academy and church). This tendency to devalue the significance of Platonist elements in Christianity gained a powerful new impetus with the scholarly influence of Adolf von Harnack and the quest for a putatively pure and simple essence of Christianity, free from Hellenistic influences.

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Moreover, more particularly philosophical reasons for the paucity of scholarship on Christian Platonism may be located in its twentieth-century critique. In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard attacked the highly Platonized German Romantics, whilst Nietzsche launched an attack on Platonic metaphysics. Under the influence of both, Heidegger developed his significant accusation of ontotheology against the metaphysical enterprise. The consequent postmodern attack on metaphysics, led by Derrida, took singular aim at Platonism. Equally, twentieth-century positivism offered its own demolition of metaphysics and the possibility of transcendent knowledge.

In the present day, the influence of these powerful critiques may be in decline. The social, cultural, and ecological crises towards the end of the last century, and in the initial decades of the current one, has led to the questioning of twentieth-century assumptions, most powerfully in the case of secularization. Concepts such as post-secularism and re-enchantment have opened possibilities for the renewal of metaphysics in general, and Platonism in particular, both within and without the Christian tradition. In Charles Taylor's phrase, the 'immanent frame' of modern thought (obscuring any basis for reference to a transcendent reality) has now, itself, become an object of critical awareness and questioning.³ The present intellectual landscape suggests the very real timeliness of a comprehensive guide to one of the single most transcendent-oriented dimensions of religious thought.

The systematic consideration of Christian Platonism presented in this volume aims to provide its reader with crucial insights regarding a key dimension in Christianity's long engagement with Western thought. To achieve this, it is divided into three sections. The first, titled 'Concepts', offers an analytical and synthetic investigation of Platonic themes across a range of writers and periods. In doing so it introduces readers to the conceptual patterns of Christian Platonism. The second section, called 'Histories', takes up the history of Christian Platonism from antiquity to the present day, overcoming the overwhelming focus on its early manifestations to the neglect of its later development. 'Engagements', the final section, turns to a constructive set of conversations with the tradition, with the aim of illustrating the continued importance, validity, and possibilities of the tradition.

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).



FIGURE 1. Leopold von Klenze, *Der Camposanto in Pisa*. Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images.

Der Camposanto in Pisa (1858) (see Figure 1), by the architect and artist Leo von Klenze, provides an illustrative opportunity to consider the multi-layered influence of the Christian Platonic tradition, both conceptually and throughout time.⁴ In nuce it offers what the many pages of this volume aim to explicate. The Camposanto Monumentale, at the northern edge of the Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa, is itself built around the holy field for which it is named. The field is said to be composed of the sacred soil of Calvary, borne back to Pisa in the holds of archbishop Ubaldo Lanfranchi's sixty-three galleys returning from the third crusade.⁵ Lanfranchi's logic reflects the metaphysics of methexis that was adopted so vigorously into the Christian tradition. It held that created reality shared in divine reality, and indeed that some parts of creation concentrated the divine presence. In turn, beginning in 1278, the holy field was

⁴ *Neue Pinakothek: Katalog der Gemälde Skulpturen*, ed. Bayerischen Staatgemäldesammlungen (Cologne: Pinakothek-DuMont, 2003), 189.

⁵ 'Pisa', in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Colum P. Hourihane, 6 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5, 29–38.

compassed with the cloister-like Camposanto building, with its four covered colonnades, as depicted on the right of the canvas. The elegant tracery of the quatrefoils that enclose the cloister enact the heavenward striving of creation back to its divine source. The Camposanto, along with abbot Abbé Suger's rebuilding of the abbey church of Saint Denis a century and a half earlier, represents the development of the gothic form that embodies this heavenward striving.

In the middle ground of von Klenze's canvas, drawing the eye slightly to the right, is a depiction of the fresco known as the *Cosmographia Teologia*, thought to be painted by Piero di Puccio around 1390. According to Vasari, it depicts 'God who with his arms holds the heavens and the elements, or rather the whole machine [*machina*] of the universe'.⁶ These are represented in terms of a hierarchical structure, with the heavens, the angels, the zodiac, and then the elements of fire, air, and finally earth at the centre. Underneath these successive emanations of God, as if supporting the depiction from below, and translating divine reason to human understanding, are two of the great contributors to the story of Christian Platonism, Saints Augustine and Aquinas.⁷

Finally, with the two characters depicted in the right of the middle foreground we are drawn to the perspective and presence of von Klenze himself, who in living the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, witnessed the philhellenism of Neoclassicism, and the Romantic revival of Platonism.⁸ As court architect, and then director of building for Ludwig I of Bavaria, von Klenze endeavoured to find a conciliatory passage between the rationalism of the French enlightenment and the idealism of Hellenistic classicism. In his writing, such as in *Anweisung zur Architectur des christlichen Cultus* (*Instruction on the Architecture of the Christian Worship*, 1822), his design, such as in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and here in his painting, von Klenze drew inspiration from the Christian Platonic tradition he observed in his frequent trips to Italy. The detail of the mother and the child act to both contrast and consummate the image. Their presence manifestly contrasts the contemplative and

⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols. (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1876–81), 1, 513. Vasari incorrectly attributed the fresco to Buonamico Buffalmacco.

⁷ Giovanni Lodovico Bertolini, 'La Cosmographia Teologia del Camposanto di Pisa', *Nova antologia* 147 (1910), 720–72.

⁸ Alexander J. B. Hampton, *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–12, 125–32.

structural atmosphere of the painting, and the historical and intellectual layers of Christian Platonic meaning it depicts. Yet they consummate the central message of Christian Platonism, which is not an intellectualizing and abstract tendency, but rather a focus on the incarnational, participatory, and sacramental character of being, which calls us back to its motive force in love.

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I

CONCEPTS

I. I

The Perennial Value of Platonism

Lloyd P. Gerson

By the time of the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, self-declared Christians who wanted to reflect philosophically on their religion did so almost exclusively within a Platonic context. This is because, from among all the philosophical schools that continued to flourish and vie for adherents more or less into the Hellenistic period, Platonism emerged clearly victorious. In fact, we know of almost no Peripatetics, Epicureans, or Stoics after the beginning of the third century. The closure of the Academy by Justinian in 529 – just to pick a convenient terminus – meant the virtual end of the public teaching of any pagan philosophy. At about the same time, the extent to which Christian theologians had appropriated Platonism and incorporated elements of it into their thinking was most dramatically evident in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, a student of the aggressively pagan Platonist Proclus. In this chapter, I aim first to provide a relatively concise account of Plato's Platonism. I will then focus on those features of Platonism that emerged in the Hellenistic period and after as most apt for theological criticism and appropriation. Among these are the personhood of the first principle of all, the meaning of creation, and the eternity of the world.

PLATO'S PLATONISM

The most distinctive features of Plato's philosophical system are (1) his rejection of the naturalistic scientific and philosophical approaches of his predecessors in favor of a radically different mode of explanation, and (2) his positing of an absolutely simple first principle of all. It is the latter

point that provides the justification for speaking of Plato's philosophy as a system.¹ That is, the first principle of all is the ultimate *explanans* upon which all investigations converge, those in metaphysics and epistemology as well as in ethics and moral psychology. What makes Platonism a system is just this unitary explanatory framework. Needless to say, this feature of Plato's philosophy was extremely attractive to Christian theologians aiming to transpose the historical accounts of scripture into a universal theoretical framework.

Plato's programmatic announcement of his rejection of most pre-Socratic accounts of nature is found in Socrates' "autobiography" in his *Phaedo*.² The upshot of this all-important passage is that the putative scientific explanations offered by Anaxagoras in particular or by anyone proceeding in a similar manner are in principle capable of being no more than necessary conditions as opposed to real explanations.³ It is crucial to Socrates' argument that such naturalistic pseudoexplanations are not merely incomplete, but rather radically different from what a real explanation should do. If, for example, one seeks an explanation for some natural event or process or state of affairs, and if one does so employing natural elements of whatever sorts, none of these can ever provide the real explanation because the very same elements are capable of belonging to an explanation for a different or contrary result. So, a composition of some material does not make something large because the same material can make it small and the shape and colors of Helen do not explain her beauty because the same shapes and colors are part of an account of her being the opposite. But even if we focus on a particular case – the property that something has here and now – and even if we provide all the conditions that taken together can be said to be necessary and sufficient, we still do not have a true explanation. The reason for this is as follows. Let "X is f"

¹ I shall assume here without argument that Plato's philosophy is not simply identical to what we find in the dialogues. Rather, his oral teaching as recounted by Aristotle and the indirect tradition is an essential supplement to what we do find in the dialogues. Even if one were to reject the accuracy of Aristotle's testimony, there is no doubt that later self-declared Platonists like Plotinus took it seriously. The Platonism that was in 529 left on the table, so to speak, was significantly shaped by it. See D. Nikulin, *The Other Plato. The Tübingen School of Plato's Inner-Academic Teaching* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012) for a brief introduction to the evidence relating to Plato's unwritten teachings.

² *Phd.* 95A4–102A9. That this "autobiography" is in fact in all likelihood that of Plato himself and not Socrates has been well argued by David Sedley, "The Dramatis Personae of Plato's *Phaedo*," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 85 (1995): 3–26.

³ The word being translated by "explanation" is *aitia*, which may also be rendered "reason" or "cause."

represent the *explanandum*. The predicate “is f” gives us more information than does “X.” But it also gives us a different kind of information from that of the name “X.” That is, “X is f” indicates something different from “X + f.” The “is f” expresses, shall we say, a “part” of the identity of X. But how can this be so? Isn’t the identity of X *entirely* indicated by “X?” Plato does not take seriously the claim that the only thing we can say about X is that it is X.⁴ If he is right not to do so, then an explanation for the truth of “X is f” cannot be provided by Anaxagoras or any other naturalist. For predicative identity cannot be reduced to formal identity. That is, if the supposed naturalistic explanation provides necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of “X is f,” it does this only by producing a formally identical result. Thus, the necessary and sufficient conditions for X are just the components of X, what X’s formal identity is. If one objects that the formally identical result *includes* the predicative identity as well, then the latter would be reduced to the former. Predicative identity is only distinct and irreducible to formal identity if the source of the former is distinct from and irreducible to the source of the latter. So, Helen is beautiful because she partakes of Beauty and the group of items is odd because it partakes of Oddness, and so on. The explanation for Helen’s beauty is not reducible to the necessary and sufficient conditions for her being beautiful.

The intelligible world, including the *explanantia* for predicates here below as well as a superordinate first principle of all and immaterial souls or intellects is, as Plato says in *Republic*, the subject matter of philosophy.⁵ The core claim of Platonism is that there is a distinct subject matter for philosophy, that the intelligible world is that subject matter, and that it has an explanatory primacy.⁶ Christian Platonism will obviously have no difficulty in appropriating a metaphysical claim for the primacy of the intelligible over the sensible or the immaterial over the material. In addition, it will enthusiastically embrace the hierarchical ordering of the

⁴ See *Tht.* 201D–E; *Soph.* 251Dff.

⁵ *Rep.* 476A9–D6. At 484B4–7, Socrates clearly distinguishes between philosophers and nonphilosophers by the subject matter with which they are concerned, namely, the intelligible and the sensible worlds. Cf. 485A10–B3; *Phd.* 79A6–7; *Tim.* 27D6–7, where a sharp distinction between the sensible and the intelligible is made along with the mode of cognition appropriate to each. Also, 51D3–E6.

⁶ I use the term “world” advisedly, realizing that many contemporary Plato scholars have expressed their disdain for an interpretation of Plato that rests upon a “two-world” metaphysics. But the word “world” has a perfectly ordinary English use in such phrases as “the business world,” “the world of dance,” and “the fashion world.” I use it in this sense.