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Neoplatonism and Christianity

Greek thought had considerable influence on later Christian thought. Christian awareness of Greek thought, however, was mediated by a movement of later interpreters of Plato called *Neoplatonism*. In addition to its impact on Christianity, Neoplatonism also had significant influence on Islamic thought, as we shall see.

The most influential Neoplatonist thinker was Plotinus (204–270). Plotinus emphasized the religious currents in Plato's thought, facilitating a later conflation of Platonic metaphysics with Christian theology. For example, he interpreted the Platonic form of the Good as a kind of person, inviting later interpretation of the Good as the Christian God. The Good, according to Plotinus, was the Supreme Mind, an indivisible unity that created the world. As an intelligence, this Supreme Mind was engaged in contemplation of itself, and Creation emerged as a kind of overflow from its thinking. Creation, in other words, emanated, or issued from, God's thinking. Plotinus's theory, therefore, is often described as a theory of *emanations*.

In contrast to Plato, who denigrated the material world as a lesser reality (comparing it to the shadows in a cave), Plotinus saw the material world as itself spiritual, the thought of a fully spiritual mind. Plotinus did, however, believe that the emanations constituted a hierarchy and that one order of Being emerged out of another. Spirit, the highest form of Being, emerges directly from the Divine Mind. Spirit illuminates Plato's Forms, the objects of the Divine Mind's contemplation. Soul proceeds from Spirit and guides life in the world by reaching beyond itself, ensouling matter. Matter is merely the lowest of the emanations.

The appeal of the doctrine of emanations may be less than evident in the twentieth century. In the first centuries of Christianity, however, the theory had tremendous appeal because it served several important philosophical and religious functions. Plato had divided the divine realm from the material realm without providing much of an account of their relationship. (His claim was that ordinary objects "participated" in the Forms.) The theory of emanations tries to explain how the two realms are related. From a strictly materialist standpoint (that is, the position that matter is the fundamental basis of whatever is real), this emanation theory might not seem like much of an account of the nature of things. But if one adopts the spiritual outlook presumed by Plotinus, his explanation is not only appealing but even edifying, insofar as it does not try to remove the "mystery" from an account of the world.

The theory of emanations also resolved the problem that the Pythagoreans had raised: "If unity is prior to everything, how does multiplicity ever come into

being?" In the same way, one might ask, "How did the World of Becoming emerge from Being?" In the context of monotheistic doctrines about God as Creator, this question easily takes on religious significance: If God is conceived as the eternal and perfect unity, why does He create a temporal world that is distinct from Him?

Plotinus claims that Creation, the world coming into existence, is an essential aspect of the Divine Mind, the One (God) thinking Itself. Like an artist, the One is impelled to create, to express itself, by virtue of its own nature. Creator and creation, however, are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus's account. Furthermore, the levels of Being overlap and interpenetrate one another. The human soul already has its archetype on a higher level, and spiritual discipline enables a person to develop spiritual intuition. This is a harmonious merger of the mind with higher levels of being. The ultimate aim for the soul, accordingly, is mystical union with the One (God), who becomes fully present to the human soul. Plotinus envisioned this optimal relationship between human beings and the One (God) as involving the whole person, joined to the One not only through knowledge but through love.

Despite its extreme abstraction, Plotinus's philosophy conveys a simple and remarkably positive spiritual message. The human soul is already in some sense divine and even the material world of everyday life is spiritual. There is no evil in the world, and therefore there is no "problem" of evil either. At worst, we encounter an absence of good, a lack that can, through human devotion, be corrected.

St. Augustine and the Inner Life of Spirit

St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.) eventually bequeathed Plotinus's message that evil was only the absence of good to generations of Christians; but for much of his life, he found the problem of evil a devastating quandary. Augustine was born about sixty miles from the city of Hippo in North Africa (on the coast of what is now Algeria). His mother was a Christian; his father was not. Augustine later credited both his conversion and that of his father to her example. In his autobiography, entitled the *Confessions*, Augustine described his youth as a period of wanton sensuality which resulted in his fathering an illegitimate son. Motivated at least in part by despair over his own behavior, Augustine began seeking a solution to the problem of evil. Like Zarathustra, the Buddha, and Job, among many others, Augustine found himself searching for an explanation of the evil in the world—in particular, for the evils perpetrated, quite consciously, by human beings.

The first solution that attracted him was that of the Manichees, the followers of Mani (216–276 or 277 C.E.). Mani's sect was one of many *Gnostic* (the Greek term for "knowledge") schools, so named because they preached that redemption could be achieved through esoteric knowledge. Such knowledge was restricted to a small group or directly revealed to a sect's leader. Mani combined elements of Christianity and Zoroastrianism and attempted to appeal to both groups at once. His primary and best-known doctrine is that the world is a manifestation

