cism becomes clearly apparent, led by Plotinus, whose influence, reinforcing the anti-Gnostic elements in orthodox Christianity, was decisive in ensuring the ultimate defeat in our culture of the Gnostic way of thinking and feeling about this world. In the first three centuries of our era, and thereafter, Greek philosophy remained an intellectual force distinct from alienated Gnosticism, and from the third century onwards (and often before) Platonic philosophy in particular has been a force working, not only on the comparatively superficial level of polemic, but very deep down in the thoughts and feelings of men of our tradition, against the alienated Gnostic attitude to the world, reinforcing elements in traditional Christianity opposed to Gnosticism, and opposing those Gnostic influences which have persisted in the Christian tradition.

XXII

Man in the Cosmos
A study of some differences between pagan Neoplatonism and Christianity

Public controversy between pagans and Christians in late antiquity was generally conducted at a fairly superficial level. Polemic on both sides had the shallowness, the lack of intellectual justice or charity, the unwillingness to try to understand an opponent's point of view or appreciate fairly his reasons for holding it, which are generally characteristic of ancient controversy. Sometimes, however, really important issues were raised and a deeper understanding was shown of the differences between the two religious outlooks. There was the pagan Platonist belief in the natural subordinate divinity of the soul as opposed to the Christian belief in divinisation by the grace which God freely gives to those He freely chooses: and, closely connected with this, the belief in the superiority, as a means of attaining divine truth, of traditional philosophy to any kind of non-philosophical revelation or religious faith, which is so clearly apparent in Porphyry. And, after Nicaea, there was the opposition between the Neoplatonist belief in a divine hierarchy, an ordered procession from the Principle of divine realities each inferior in unity and power to that above it, and the Nicene Christian conviction that there could be no degrees of divinity, that it was not possible to be more or less God, an opposition of which Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa were clearly conscious. These differences have been frequently and carefully studied by modern scholars. But there are other, and perhaps deeper, differences between pagan and Christian religious attitudes in late antiquity which merit further consideration.

A good starting-point will be a passage from Plotinus' attack on the Gnostics[1] in which he appears to have an attitude of mind in view which was not peculiarly Gnostic but was probably shared by most Christians, orthodox or heretical, in his own time and later. The passage begins with what seems intended to be a positive religious statement of the traditional Hellenic faith as Plotinus understood it, formulated in conscious opposition to what seemed to him a crude barbarian monotheism (ll. 26-42). The language of this has a particular solemnity, almost liturgical in tone: it would be easy to develop it into a sort of pagan *anaphora*. It is followed by a spirited attack on religious persons who consider themselves an elect peculiarly favoured by God, apart from and superior to, not only their fellow-men, but the universe and the divinities within it whom Plotinus has just exhorted his readers to acknowledge and praise (ll. 43-83). This is of course primarily directed at his Gnostic friends, but much of it would apply to more orthodox Christians of his time.

In the first part of the passage Plotinus is trying to make as clear a distinction as he can between his Hellenic philosophical monotheism and the monotheism of his opponents. He expresses this distinction as he saw it in a superb sentence: "It is not contracting the divine into one but showing it in that multiplicity in which God himself has shown it which is proper to those who know the power of God, inasmuch as, abiding who he is, he makes many gods, all depending upon himself and existing through him and from him."[2] This is not a contrast between polytheism and monotheism, and can only be interpreted as such by someone who is ignorant of or ignores the normal Greek usage of θεός and is determined at all costs to justify the invectives of the Fathers against the "idolatry" of the philosophers. It is a contrast between a monotheism which sees the One God, the unique, unchallengeably and unchangingly transcendent, source of all reality and goodness, communicating divinity to all beings whom his spontaneous creativity brings into existence according to their capacity to receive it, and the monotheism of the "jealous god", separated by an unbridgeable gulf from his creation, guarding his divinity as an unique prerogative which it is blasphemy and idolatry to attribute to any other being.

Another closely connected point of Hellenic doctrine which Plotinus strongly emphasises here is that the physical universe is a theophany, a revelation of the divine world to men. This is, of course, particularly strongly emphasised throughout 2,9, but it is always one side of Plotinus' complex and not, perhaps, fully consistent thought about the

material world.[3] The revelatory function of the cosmos is especially stressed in the present passage, where the language throughout seems to be slightly adapted to the ways of thinking of the opponents whom he is exhorting, denouncing and perhaps genuinely trying to persuade. "This universe exists through him and looks to him, the whole of it and each and every one of the gods in it, and it reveals what is his to men, and it and the gods in it declare in their oracles what is pleasing to the intelligible gods."[4] It needs no demonstration that this religious valuation of the cosmos is profoundly opposed to Gnosticism, in any sense of the word "Gnostic" which is appropriate here. (These of the "pagan Gnostic" Hermetic writers who take an optimistic view of the cosmos close to Stoic pantheism are not relevant in this context). But rather careful consideration is required to show that this attitude to the universe differs from, and is in some ways opposed to, orthodox Christianity. It is of course true that orthodox Christians affirm the goodness of the material universe and its maker against the Gnostics quite as strongly as Plotinus: as it is equally true that Platonists, Christians, and Gnostics in their several ways and with varying degrees of intensity share a sense of alienation from this world, whether they affirm it to be good or bad; they feel themselves to be strangers here below whose true home is elsewhere. But, though Platonists and orthodox Christians both affirm themselves to be strangers and pilgrims in a good world made by a good divine power, there are differences in their attitude to this good world which seem to me to be important and to have far-reaching implications. To begin with, for the pagan Platonists the material universe is the only, and as far as is possible, the complete, manifestation of God on the level of space and time. That multiple self-communication of divinity of which Plotinus spoke at the beginning of the passage which we are considering everlastingly brings into being the two universes, intelligible and sensible, which are God's best possible self-expressions on their respective levels, and it is only in and through their rainbow multiplicity[5] that we can return to that One God who is their transcendent origin and the goal of all desires. For the Christians this is not so. However much the cosmic function of the Logos and the world-animating activity of the Holy Spirit may be stressed by the Apologists and by some later patristic writers, the main emphasis, when it comes to serious religion, must always be on the Incarnation of God, not in the universe but in one man, Jesus Christ, and on his saving work which is communicated to us, not through membership of the cosmos, but through membership of the Church, a society of men to some extent

set apart from the world and sharing in a supernatural life which is other than and superior to any natural self-communication of God to the Universe as a whole.

It is important if we are to understand the pagan Platonists' religious valuation of the universe properly that we should see how Plotinus regards the relationship of the two universes,[6] intelligible and sensible. It is the peculiarly intimate relationship of archetype and image. The intimacy of the relationship does not seem to be reduced for Plotinus by the mediation of soul, for soul at its highest remains fully in the intelligible while it translates intelligible realities as well as possible into the language of sense. Plotinus makes this clear in an earlier chapter of the great work of which 2,9 is the conclusion.[7] "There is nothing between", he says, and it makes no difference to the intimacy of the relationship whether we assume (as of course he always does) the instrumental activity of soul or not. The contrast between the two universes is between an inner reality and its, perhaps very imperfect, outward expression. This is the characteristic attitude of Plotinus and his Neoplatonist successors (who emphasise the goodness and religious value of the sense-world more than he does): his Middle Platonist and, still more, his Neopythagorean predecessors are sometimes inclined to a darker pessimism about the world of the senses. So when a Neoplatonist despises this world and seeks to escape from it to the intelligible, he is not seeking to fly to a strange and alien realm beyond the sky or after the end of time. He is turning inward to that interior, immediately present reality which gives to the half-real imperfect outer world, here and now, such substance as it has. He is turning to a cosmos of thought more real and vividly alive than the cosmos of sense, in which everything here below is present, but unified and glorified: he is entering a world in which "all are everywhere and each and everyone is all, and the glory is unbounded: for each of them is great because even the small is great: the sun there is all the stars and each star is the sun and all the stars": and "there is no poverty or impotence, but everything is filled full of life, boiling with life. Things there flow in a way from a single source, not like one particular breath or warmth, but as if there were a single quality containing in itself and preserving all qualities, sweet taste and smell and the quality of wine with all other flavours, visions of colours and all that touch perceives, all too that hearing hears, all tunes and every rhythm".[8] And this inner cosmos is in no way separated from us in space and time. We are in it here and now; indeed, Plotinus sometimes says that we are it. "We are each of us an intelligible universe."[9]

The way in which the generally otherworldly Christians of the first centuries of our era thought of their relationship to their other world, and of that other world to our world here below, was usually more distant and less intimate. The doctrine that the Ideas in the mind of God are the archetypes of the created world can be of importance in Christian thought: but the degree of emphasis laid upon it varies greatly, and in any case the sharper, more anthropomorphic, insistence on the unbridgeable gulf between the Creator and his creation makes the relationship of archetype and image much less intimate than it is in pagan Platonism. The Divine Ideas may be thought of as particularly closely associated with Christ as Logos and his cosmic function in creating and sustaining the world is sometimes emphasised, from the Johannine Prologue onwards. But the cosmic activity of Christ was not of primary importance in Christian devotion or Christian thought. It was on the saving work of the Incarnate Logos that attention was concentrated. The Christian turning in love and worship to Christ was not turning to the glorified inner reality of this world of ours, nor was Christ the Way to the Father for him as the Divine Mind and World of Forms but as the Saviour who died and rose again for us.

Again, the angelic world was often spoken and thought of as some sort of equivalent of the Platonic *κόσμος νοητός*, and angels were supposed to have cosmic functions: but this was not where the primary Christian emphasis lay. The angels here below were thought of primarily as helping and transmitting divine guidance to the Church on earth and to individual believers, and in heaven as the fellow-citizens of the saints, leading the worship of the Church Triumphant. Their most important functions were connected with the ecclesiastical rather than the natural cosmos. The eschatological emphasis in early Christian thought about the other world also tended to make it more sharply separate from this world of ours. The new heaven and the new earth were to come into existence after the destruction of our world at the end of time. It is true that Christians believed that they would be in some sense material, and that in them all things, not only men's bodies, would be restored and perfected. But there remained a certain otherness and remoteness (and, for Christians of later ages, an inevitably growing unreality) about this eschatological hope.

This difference between Christian and pagan attitudes to the cosmos can now be seen to be connected with that feature of the attitude of his opponents which made Plotinus most indignant, their extreme anthropocentrism. Here again it needs no demonstration that the attitude

of arrogant superiority to the universe which he attacks so fiercely in the last part of the chapter is one which a Gnostic, on his own principles, would be fully justified in adopting, and which most Gnostics did no doubt adopt. Gnostics had every reason for being only interested in Gnostics, and for regarding the Creator of this world and his creation, and the mass of unspiritual men, with scornful indifference. But it is difficult to read the last forty lines of our chapter without feeling that a good deal which Plotinus says would also apply to the orthodox Christians of his time (and to many in later centuries down to our own). They could not of course despise the Creator of this world as an ignorant and inferior Demiurge, nor could they deny, as Plotinus accuses the Gnostics of denying (ll. 64 ff). that the one true God exercises providential care for the universe which he has made. But they could say to the very ordinary men whom they converted "You are the son of God, and the others whom you used to admire are not, nor the beings they venerate according to the tradition received from their fathers; but you are better than the heavens without having taken any trouble to become so".[10] It would be to underrate the depth of the difference between Christians and pagans to suppose that what is at issue here is solely the veneration of the cosmic deities of pagan philosophical religion. Plotinus, as a good Hellenic traditionalist, fully accepted the divinity of the heavenly bodies, and regarded the relationship of the astral gods to their bodies and of the World-Soul to its body, the physical universe, as an ideal relationship to body which the philosopher should emulate as far as he can.[11] But it is not of central philosophical or religious importance to him that there should be a clearly distinguished hierarchy of intra-cosmic and extra-cosmic divinities. There is in the thought of Plotinus, and still more in that of Porphyry, not only an inherited hierarchical element, but a distinct anti-hierarchical tendency, a tendency, that is, to blur, and at times almost to obliterate, the distinction between Intellect and Soul and between different kinds of souls, divine and human, embodied and unembodied (the only souls which Plotinus clearly recognizes as divine are, of course everlastingly embodied). Iamblichus and his successors noted disapprovingly this tendency of their predecessors to ignore order and degree in the divine world, and to blur what seemed to the later Neoplatonists essential distinctions. But exactly what hierarchy meant in their apparently rigidly hierarchical theology, and how centrally important it was, are questions which require, and are receiving, further careful investigation. They certainly held fast to the conviction that the

divine is immediately present everywhere and to all men in this material world.[12]

The difference here between pagans and Christians seems to me, therefore, to be more general and of deeper import than a dispute about whether sun, moon and stars are to be worshipped, or whether there is a hierarchy of subordinate divinities. It is a difference about the degree of religious relevance of the material cosmos, and, closely connected with this, about the relative importance of general, natural, and special, supernatural, divine self-manifestation and self-communication. On the one side, the pagan, there is the conviction that a multiple self-communication and self-revelation of divinity takes place always and everywhere in the world, and that good and wise men everywhere (especially great thinkers of Hellenic and Oriental antiquity) have been able to find the way to God and the truth about God in and through rational reflection on themselves and on the world, not only the heavens but the earth[13] and the living unity of the whole. On the other side, the Christian, there is indeed a readiness to see the goodness and beauty of the visible cosmos as a testimony to God's creation and providential care of it, and to use traditional philosophical arguments to provide rational confirmation for the Scriptural account of creation and providence as interpreted by Church tradition. But the religious emphasis lies elsewhere. Saving truth and the self-communication of the life of God come through the Incarnation of God as a man and through the human (or human and angelic) society of which the God-Man is the head, the Church, set apart from the non-human world and the common society of men. It is only in the Church that material things become means of revelation and salvation through being understood in the light of Scripture and Church tradition and used by God's human ministers in the celebration of the Church's sacraments. It is the ecclesiastical cosmos, not the natural cosmos, which appears to be of primary religious importance for the Christian. There is here a new and radical sort of religious anthropocentrism, which may have had far-reaching consequences. It has been held that this new Christian anthropocentrism played an important part in preparing the way for modern technological progress and pollution; and, though some caution and a number of qualifications are needed here, there seems to be a good deal of truth in this view. It is easy to see how the anthropocentrism, with all its consequences, has outlasted the dominance of the Church. In so far as the Church became the only theophany, when it ceased to be an effective theophany, (as it has long ceased to be for most Europeans)

there was no theophany left for the majority of men, no divine self-manifestation here below. A minority, containing more poets and artists than philosophers, scientists, or practical men, continued to apprehend divinity in the cosmos: but for most of us there was left a wholly profane, de-sacralized non-human world, which could only be regarded as raw material for human exploitation. We had been set free by the Christianity which most of us had abandoned from the superstition and wisdom of the ancients, set free to try to realise our dreams of a wholly man-centred technocratic paradise, which is beginning to look to more and more of us more and more like hell.

It may seem to many Christian believers and students of traditional Christianity that the contrast which has been drawn here between "pagan" and "Christian" views of God, man and cosmos is altogether too sharp. If we are thinking of historic Christianity as a whole, this is certainly true. Apart from the facts that the life and thought of simple country people and the poetic imagination of Europe remained to a great extent unselfconsciously pagan during the Christian centuries, many Christian thinkers, and whole traditions of Christian thought have absorbed a great deal of the way of thinking which I have characterized as "pagan" Neoplatonism and have often happily combined it with elements of the Biblical tradition. There have been Christian thinkers like Eriugena who have seen creation as a natural self-explication and self-manifestation of the Divine goodness (and have been suspected by their fellow-Christians of pantheism for doing so). And there have been very many for whom the cosmos has been not only good but holy, an icon and a sacrament, the self-manifestation of immaterial glory and a means of return to God at least as important in practical religion as the observances of the Church, which are taken as confirming rather than superseding God's natural self-giving and self-revelation. Many English Churchmen since the Reformation, in particular, have felt themselves to be members of the cosmos quite as much as the Church. This is why statements that Christianity is to a great extent responsible for the present unsatisfactory relationship of man to his natural environment need a good deal of qualification. None the less the anthropocentrism which has been described as "Christian" has persisted both in its religious and in its later secular forms, and has exercised much influence: and the tension between the two ways of thinking has often been felt, and has never been sharper than in our own time. This is one reason why the "de-Hellenization of Christianity" is a subject of lively debate

among contemporary theologians. And a recognition of these two ways of thinking as distinct may help to throw some light on the ambiguity of proposals for the "secularization" of Christianity. Sometimes this seems to mean simply a whole-hearted acceptance of profane anthropocentrism. But sometimes it may mean an abandonment of the way of thinking which sharply distinguishes the sacred ecclesiastical sphere from the profane world outside and an extension of religious awareness and concern to all mankind and the whole world; and this is something which should be thoroughly acceptable to religious people influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by Plotinus and other pagan Neoplatonists.

This very brief and partial survey of some differences between pagan Neoplatonism and Christianity may do something to justify R.T. Wallis's remark that "Neoplatonism's relevance to the contemporary religious scene will be clear from the briefest perusal of Plotinus' treatise *Against the Gnostics*".[14] It is certainly intended to show that the study of the confrontation of classical civilization and Christianity which Professor Waszink has done so much to advance can have a real contemporary relevance, and that further investigations of the subtle and intricate relationship of the thought of the greatest of the Greek philosophers who taught at Rome, and of the tradition which he inaugurated, to Christian and post-Christian attitudes to the world may help us to attain that self-understanding which is necessary if we are to have any hope of solving some of the greatest of contemporary problems.

Whitton, Nr. Ludlow, Salop,
The Hollins

1) 2,9[33],9, 26-83. 2,9 is of course the conclusion of the great work which Porphyry so cruelly quartered (3,8[30], 5,8[31], 5,5[32], 2,9[33], containing a polemical appendix to one of Plotinus' most impressive expositions of his system.

2) *οὐ γὰρ τὸ συστεῖλαι εἰς ἕν, ἀλλὰ τὸ δεῖξαι πολὺ τὸ θεῖον, ὅσον ἔδειξεν αὐτός, τοῦτό ἐστι δύναμιν θεοῦ εἰδότων, ὅταν μένων ὅς ἐστι πολλοὺς ποιῇ πάντας εἰς αὐτὸν ἀνηρτημένους καὶ δι' ἐκεῖνον καὶ παρ' ἐκείνου ὄντας* (ll. 35-39); of this and the following passages, the translation is my own from Plotinus II, Loeb Classical Library.

3) For striking expressions of this in treatises where the pessimistic and dualistic side of Plotinus' thought about the material world is well in evicence, cp. 4,8[6],6, 23-28 and 1,8[51],14, 36-37 and 1,8[51],15, 23-28.

4) καὶ ὁ κόσμος δὲ ὅδε δι' ἐκεῖνον ἔστι κἀκεῖ βλέπει, καὶ πᾶς καὶ θεῶν ἕκαστος καὶ τὰ ἐκείνου προφητεύει ἀνθρώποις καὶ χρῶσιν ἃ ἐκείνοις φίλα (ll. 39-42).

5) Cp. Peter Brown, The World of Late Antiquity (London 1971) 73-4.

6) Again cp. Peter Brown, *l.c.*

7) λείπεται τοίνυν εἶναι μὲν πάντα ἐν ἄλλῳ, οὐδένος δὲ μεταξὺ ὄντος τῇ ἐν τῷ ὄντι πρὸς ἄλλο γειτονείᾳ οἷον ἐξαίφνης ἀναφανῆναι ἴνδαλμα καὶ εἰκόνα ἐκείνου εἴτε αὐτόθεν εἴτε ψυχῆς διακονησαμένης – διαφέρει γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐν τῷ παρόντι – ἢ ψυχῆς τινος (5,8 [31],7, 12-16).

8) My own translations of 5,8[31],4, 7-10 and 6,7[38],12, 22-30 from Plotinus (London 1953; New York 1962) 72 and 76.

9) 3,4[15],3, 22; cp. 4,7[2],10, 34-36.

10) καὶ ὁ πρότερον ταπεινὸς καὶ μέτριος καὶ ἰδιώτης ἀνήρ, εἰ ἀκούσειε σὺ εἶ θεοῦ παῖς, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι οὓς ἐθαύμαζες οὐ παῖδες οὐδ' ἃ τιμῶσιν ἐκ πατέρων λαβόντες, σὺ δὲ κρείττων καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐδὲν πονήσας (ll. 55-59).

11) Cp. ch. 18 of this treatise and 4,8[6],2.

12) See Proclus *In Tim.* B. I. 209-11 Diehl (the exposition of the teaching of Iamblichus on prayer) especially ll. 19-20 οὐδενὸς γὰρ ἀφέστηκε τὸ θεῖον ἀλλὰ πᾶσιν ἐξ ἴσου πάρεστι. There is a good and well-documented discussion of the difference between Plotinus and Porphyry and their successors in R.T. Wallis' Neoplatonism (London 1972) ch. IV p. 93-123. He has some useful remarks on the differences between pagan Neoplatonism and Christianity; see ch. III pp. 89-90 and ch. IV pp. 100-105.

13) Plotinus' reflections on the divinity of the earth (a goddess for all Hellenes) are of interest here; see 4,4[28],22-27.

14) Neoplatonism 178.

XXIII

The Escape of the One

An investigation of some possibilities of apophatic theology imperfectly realised in the West

"Le Principe n'est pas Vérité, comme le croira saint Augustin. Il n'y a pas de vérité absolue . . ."
JEAN TROUILLARD. Le Néoplatonisme (Encyclopédie de la Pléiade)

Much has been written about the apophatic theology of Plotinus and the later Neoplatonists, but its implications have not always been perfectly understood. I do not think that the Neoplatonists were fully conscious of them themselves. And Christian theologians, before the author of the Dionysian writings, who made use of Hellenic philosophy tended on the whole not to advert to the full Neoplatonic doctrine of the One or Good beyond Being and Intelligence (which is what I mean by Neoplatonic apophatic theology) and to remain, as has often been observed, in a pre-Neoplatonic rather than a Neoplatonic position. It has not always, perhaps, been sufficiently noticed how curious a mixture of apophatic and kataphatic theology is to found in some Middle Platonists. The mysterious transcendence of God is stressed in the most superlative language. Even the "negative theology" is applied; it is denied that God is anything which we can conceive.[1] But at the same time it is strongly asserted that God is the Supreme Being and Supreme Intellect. The influence of this kind of apophatic-kataphatic mixture is already strongly apparent in Clement and Origen, as again has often been observed. And it persists in the great age of the Fathers, in the 4th and 5th centuries. Dr. E. P. Meijering, in his very useful book on Athanasius[2] says, rightly, that Athanasius did not know the Neoplatonic apophatic doctrine and, wrongly as I hope to show, that no Christian theologian could make use of the ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας as interpreted by the Neoplatonists. And what is true of Athanasius seems to remain true of his successors, at least for the next century or so: they are either not fully aware of or do not think that they can use as it stands the doctrine that God is beyond being and intelligence which was being developed to its extreme by the contemporary pagan Neoplatonists. And this on the whole remains the characteristic position of traditional Western theologians from St. Augustine onwards. They adhere to the old Middle

[1] Albinus X 4 Louis.

[2] Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius (Leiden 1968).