VII

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY MYTH AND INCARNATION

There are few, if any people who have done more than Jean Trouillard to open our eyes to the depth and richness of the thought of the last Hellenic Platonists, above all of Plotinus and Proclus. My own debt to him is immense, and I know others, of very different ways of thinking, who would say the same. But he has not been content simply to expound these venerable thinkers as period pieces, belonging to a past time and irrelevant to the concerns of our age. He has tried to show that they can speak to our condition, and do something to illuminate the religious and philosophical perplexities of our own time (though not, as we shall see, by providing dogmatic solutions). This has sometimes brought upon him the charge of inventing a «Neo-Neoplatonism» of his own (a very Platonic thing to do). But his concern for the contemporary may be a very important reason for the depth of his insight into the ancient. And it is because of this that I dedicate in his honour this odd attempt to show the relevance of some of the late Platonic ways of thinking which he has so well explained to us to the crisis of religious thought in our own time.

It will be as well to begin by explaining what this large vague phrase «the crisis of religious thought» means to me. What seems to me to have been happening for a very long time, but to have become particularly apparent recently, is the progressive breakdown of any and every sort of «absolutism». By «absolutism» I mean the making of absolute claims for forms of words and ways of thinking about God as timelessly and universally true (including of course the absolute claim that all God-talk is meaningless and hopelessly incoherent). These claims can be made in various ways. They can be made by prelates, preachers and theologians asserting the absolute, unique and universal

claims of one special revelation : or by philosophers of the older style (including of course systematic Platonists) who claim that their metaphysical system is the one absolutely and universally true philosophy - and, of course, those of their newer-style opponents who claim equally dogmatically that *their* philosophy provides the one infallible method of disposing of all this metaphysical and religious nonsense : or by the believers in a *philosophia perennis* in the Huxleyan sense, a single tradition which underlies all the great religious traditions and is uniformly confirmed by all religious experience. There are, of course, plenty of absolutists of all these varieties still with us. But their influence is generally confined to restricted circles : and outside these circles, and I think increasingly within them, absolute claims and assertions are now subjected to immediate critical questioning, and generally found wanting or dubious : historical claims are questioned historically, and dogmatic non-historical statements (e.g. about the personality of God or the Trinity) are questioned philosophically.

Two points must be made here, which will probably indicate to many what a conservative and old fashioned paper this is. The first is that questioning does not mean outright rejection : that would be just another, and unpleasant, form of dogmatism. In the field of Christian theology the rejection of «absolutism» does not mean that «radical» positions are always to be preferred to «conservative» ones. Many «radical» positions are very silly : many «conservative» ones deserve serious consideration and are supported by excellent scholarship. Nor does critical questioning mean wholesale rejection of the great systematic philosophies. This paper is permeated by the deepest qualified affection and critical respect for the great late Platonists, Hellenic and Christian, who were in some ways very systematic thinkers. And even if one finds the idea of a *philosophia perennis*, in any sense, implausible, one can still agree with its exponents who insist that living tradition is necessary for any art, including the art of living. What the rejection of «absolutism» means is that all dogmas become hypotheses : and one does not arrive at an unhypothetical principle of demonstration or guarantee of certainty. (God is not such a principle or guarantee). One therefore simply continues the discussion, probably for ever. One must stand away from the tradition one respects, as Aristotle stood away from Plato and Aristotle's personal pupils from Aristotle : and stand away not to propound an improved dogmatism of one's own, but to go on asking more and more questions. This paper is conceived in this spirit, as a contribution to a completely openended discussion, not as a final solution to anything. The second point is that when claims to possess an exclusive revelation of God or to speak his word are made by human beings (and it is always human beings who make them) they must be examined particularly fiercely and hypercritically for the honour of God, to avoid the blasphemy and sacrilege of deifying a human opinion. Or, to put it less ferociously : the Hellenic (and, as it seems to me, still proper) answer to «Thus saith the Lord» is «*Does*

he?» - in a distinctly sceptical tone, followed by a courteous but drastic «testing to destruction» of the claims and credentials of the person or persons making this enormous statement.

What are the reasons for this breakdown of «absolutism»? The first, and oldest, is, probably, steadily growing intellectual dissatisfaction with the arguments produced for the various and incompatible absolute positions. This springs from a very venerable element in our tradition, the sceptical in its Academic form (1), which has revived particularly strongly in Western Europe since the Renaissance, and been powerfully reinforced in the last two centuries by the development of critical philosophy and critical history (modern critical historians and scholars are perhaps the truest spiritual descendants of the Academics in our world). The second, which is also ancient (it can be traced back to Herodotus), but which has developed very powerfully in my own lifetime, is an intense and vivid sense of our own historical limitations. We are aware, both by experience and our study of history, of the immense and irreducible diversity of human beliefs and ways of thinking. We know sufficiently well that not only our own thought but that of the founder and teachers of any religious group or philosophical tradition to which we may adhere is limited and determined by historical circumstance, by time, place, heredity, environment, culture and education : even quite small differences in the circumstances of our education (e.g. going to a different university, or even a different college in the same university) might have made our religious and philosophical beliefs quite different, by causing us to be influenced by different people, to read different books etc. And we think this matters, and is not to be casually dismissed with a few rude remarks about «relativism», as is still sometimes done. We should think it crudely and antiquatedly arrogant to be certain of our certitudes, especially in religious questions, without unattainable confirmation by the agreement of all those, of all beliefs and ways of thinking, saints, sages and scholars, who are or have been competent to consider the belief for which certainty is claimed. This lends straight to the third reason for the breakdown of «absolutism». This is comparatively modern (though it is anticipated to some extent in pre-Christian antiquity) and its strong and full development and increasingly wide dissemination are becoming more and more notable in our own time. It is the vast and unprecedented increase in our knowledge of other ways of faith, piety and thought about God than our own, which has more and more both led to and been helped by a growth of understanding, respect, and sympathy for them and willingness to learn from them. Especially if this is not merely gained by reading, bul also by direct acquaintance with other ways and personal friendship with those who follow them, this produces an irrevocable change of mind and heart, which both strengthens and is strengthened by our sense of historical limitations. Our new awareness includes, of course, an awareness of the divergences, tensions and contradictions within our own tradition and the value of many ways

in it which diverge from those authoritatively accepted. We have become conscious of the folly and arrogance of «not counting» people ; of simply dismissing from consideration (as some philosophers and theologians still do) those who do not conform to the official orthodoxy of the group to which we belong. We have learned at last, I think once and for all, to believe that there is no one universally true or universally saving way : that many different paths lead to the great mystery.

At this point some religious persons will no doubt want to say «But what about *real* faith? What about the Leap, the Wager, the Great Option? Throw away these rationalistic hesitations and commit yourself, if you want to know what true faith is». I am unable genuinely to accept this peremptory and dramatic invitation (I have tried hard enough), because, if one really looks around one and stops «not counting» people, one finds that one is being invited to leap in altogether too many directions at once : and one can only discriminate between them by returning to the, probably endless and inconclusive, critical discussion of claims, credentials and arguments. And even if there was only one direction to leap in (and some Christians still talk as if this is so) it would be impossible without returning to the critical examination of the claims and credentials of the clergyman summoning me to faith, and other related matters, to distinguish faith from gross credulity, which is not religiously or morally virtuous, especially in an academic. I cannot, with regret, accept the view that our experience or awareness of God can in itself justify or guarantee one particular dogmatic and exclusive faith. This is because I hold the view that this experience (even at its lower levels) is strictly ineffable ; we naturally try to interpret it, always inadequately, in the language of the religious tradition to which we belong, but the experience does not justify or guarantee the interpretations (not that we can think or say what it is «in itself» or compare it with the interpretations). Yet this whole paper is based on faith in and dim awareness of the Unknowable Good, which I cannot and do not want to get rid of, but which remains tentative, personal, not absolute or exclusive, and making no demands on others.

What, then, has the old Neoplatonic «negative theology», and other related aspects of the later Platonic tradition, Hellenic and Christian, to give to those who have experienced the breakdown of «absolutism» but still want to believe in and worship God? I can only offer what I myself have found helpful. Trouillard has written most illuminatingly on this subject, and I have stumblingly tried to follow in his footsteps (2) (and have also learned very much from the Greek Orthodox Abbess Maria, who really lived the «negative theology», to its ultimate point). I shall not here repeat much of what can be found better elsewhere. But it must be stressed that what seems likely to be helpful is the fully developed negative theology, in which we negate our negations (which does not mean that we simply restore the original positive statement with a «super» attached, though this language is often used by the

ancients because they cannot find anything better : perhaps the «pre» language often used by post-Plotinian Neoplatonists, «pre-being», «pre-intellect» etc. is somewhat less misleading nowadays than «super-being» or «super-intellect»). This leads us to the state of mind in which we are not content simply to say that God is not anything, but must say and be aware that he is not not anything either : and, in the end, not even to know that we do not know. It is a strange kind of liberation from thinkings and languages which enables us to use them freely and critically, always with a certain distance and detachment. (There are of course a number of kinds of human language, poetic, musical, those used in the visual arts, and mathematical, as well as the rather clumsy and limited prosaic-discursive kind normally used in philosophy and dogmatic theology - which by no means escapes metaphor (3) : of course, if we use this last we must use it precisely, and according to the rules of the game as played in our particular environment, as the great Neoplatonists did excellently). Having got this far, we can of course use positive terms about God as freely as negative, provided that we prefix something like the favourite *Hoion* of Plotinus («as if», or «in a manner of speaking») to indicate their inadequacy. I can agree with a great deal which Christopher Stead says about the desirability of using «being» or «substance» terms about God, on the appropriate occasions, and could supply him with some excellent Neoplatonic texts in which they are freely and quite consistently used in a context of radical negative theology (4). It seems that the traditional terms «beyond being» or «non-being», or «nothing» applied to God are most significant when used in their proper Hellenic context in which being is closely correlated with intelligibility : real being is intelligible being. They mean, then, that God is not a somebody or something who can be discursively defined or discerned with intuitive precision. It is not that his intelligibility transcends our limited and fallen human intelligences, but that he has no intelligible content : Trouillard has explained this very well (5). It is this ability to use positive terms in a peculiar way which may make the negative theologian sympathetic to «myths», as we shall see. I prefer, myself, to call what I am talking about «icons» (6), partly for reasons of my own not unconnected with Eastern Orthodox theology and piety, and partly because «myth», since about the 5th century B.C. has had, probably for most people in the Western tradition, the rather narrow and derogatory meaning of «more or less poetic fiction». I shall, however, use «myth» (in an extended and complimentary sense) in this paper in order to relate it to contemporary theological discussions.

Before proceeding to discuss myth it should be made clear that what has been said about «negative theology» so far is perfectly compatible with conservative Christian orthodoxy. The Eastern Christian tradition as a whole and many perfectly orthodox and traditional Western theologians insist that all our language about God is inadequate, that our statements about him are only «pointers» to, or «icons» of his unknowable reality. But they hold that certain

statements only are divinely revealed or authoritative, and so are privileged pointers or uniquely authorised icons, and that the Incarnate Christ is the one and only perfect icon (to use patristic language) of the supreme divinity. Reasons for disagreeing with this have nothing to do with the «negative theology» as such. They spring from the attitudes of mind discussed earlier which have led to the general breakdown of «absolutism». For those in whom this breakdown has taken place, however, the «negative theology» can, I think, do something useful. It can, sometimes, prevent them from giving up the whole business of religion in disgust - the usual reaction - and help them to remain at least dimly aware that there is really somebody or something there «behind» or «beyond» (to use the inadequate spatial metaphors which we must all use in this context) the dubious stories and inadequate concepts and definitions. It may help to give some expression to a deep, obscure anonymous faith which remains untouched by the breakdown of «absolutism», though as the result of this breakdown it insists on remaining anonymous. And those who arrive (not necessarily by a Neoplatonic route) at understanding that a radically apophatic faith permits the use of very positive language in a peculiar way may come to understand the expressions of their traditional religion «mythically» or «iconically» : and not just as «myths» or «icons» made up by men but as a multiple and varied revelation of images through which the Good communicates «iconically» with all of us, of all religious traditions, according to our several needs, that we may all have something through which to sense his presence and worship him.

If we understand «myth» in this way, as part of the expression of what happens when the Unknowable, so to speak, seems not content to remain aloof in his ineffable obscurity but «turns» and comes back to us as the painter of many icons not made with hands in that «outgoing» which «Dionysius» calls his «ecstatic *eros*» (7), we may see better how we should use the term and how widely it can be extended. The sense to be given to «myth» in the context of this way of thinking will obviously be strongly positive. It will often be practically equivalent to something like «general» or natural, revelation (this involves, of course, human participation, and human error and inadequacies, in expressing what God suggests). In this way it will come close to the significance of myth (and ritual) as understood by Proclus, whose accounts of the function of mythical and mathematical imagination are most illuminatingly correlated and discussed by Trouillard (8). Myths and the rites and arts which express them can provide true ways to God, though of course they can also mislead. (The superbly and fruitfully ambiguous valuation of art in relation to philosophy and religion by Iris Murdoch in her very Platonic - though not Neoplatonic- book on Plato and the artists (9) should be carefully studied by anyone who wishes to understand its dangers, uses, and, in the end, inescapable indispensability). But myth for Proclus is exclusively poetic or imaginative myth : and he would not have been at all pleased if we extended the term to

cover his own (or, as he thought, Plato's) systematic philosophical theology. But the breakdown of «absolutism» seems to have made it necessary to see systematic theology «mythically», as well as the alleged historical facts contained in some particular revelations. The most abstract and logically constructed treatments of the Henads or the Trinity can only function for us «mythically», if they function at all. (One can, and should, of course criticize the logic, as one can criticize the historical evidence or the expressive quality of the images in other kinds of «myth» : but these separate and distinct kinds of criticism will not necessarily deprive the «myths» to which they are applied of all power and value).

It may help to clarify the way in which I regard the Christian story and Christian doctrine as «mythical» if I compare my position briefly with those of a small selection of others. I am not conscious of any strong differences with Maurice Wiles, though our different environments and preoccupations may lead to rather different theological conclusions. I admire the scholarly caution and religious discretion with which he pursues the argument, and find his comparison between the way in which Christian thought about the Creation and the Fall has developed and the way in which Christian thought about the Incarnation might reasonably develop fruitful ; and his statement (derived, like so much else in contemporary discussions, from Strauss) that a myth may have a historical element may be a very useful corrective to extremist positions (10). With Don Cupitt, and others who think like him, my difference is rather sharp, and may be of some general significance (11). It is not that I object to his history. His treatment of the evidence seems to me at any rate plausible. But (to say something which, from inherited reverence, I have refrained for some time from saying) I do not find the Jesus of good critical Biblical scholars very impressive or interesting. I am not even sure that the only people in the first century A.D. with whom I can conceive myself having much in common would have done so, that is to say, Greek-speaking people with some degree of Hellenic philosophical culture, for instance in the neighbouring Decapolis. This reconstructed Galilean rabbi, this Jesus (or these Jesuses) of scholarship, seems very restricted, not only in period but in place and culture (12). It seems unlikely that the «Jesus of scholarship» can ever attain even the limited universality, even in our transitory Western culture, of the «Christ of history». (I am using here the excellent terminology of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. The «Jesus of scholarship» in the Jesus reconstructed by scholars. The «Christ of history» in the «mythical» or «iconic» Christ, the Christ who has mattered in Christian history). I owe a personal debt of gratitude to the Biblical scholars and theologians, conservative and radical, to the de-mythologizers and de-Hellenizers from Bultmann onwards, and to those who, with excellent pastoral intentions, have forced the Bible so much on our attention in the non-Reformed churches in recent years. They have shown me something that I was too obtuse and traditionalist to notice before, but is of

the greatest historical significance. Our Inherited Conglomerate (as Gilbert Murray and E. R. Dodds would call it) (13) is breaking up. The Biblical and the Hellenic elements are, apparently now finally and irrevocably, coming apart. And, if they come apart, it is not as certain as Christian theologians and preachers seem to suppose that most of those who remain at all interested in the matter will choose the Biblical and reject the Hellenic. In my own case my remote forefathers (if they were ever genuinely converted to anything) were pretty certainly converted to a strongly «mythical», Hellenized form of Christianity, and the succeeding generations, Roman Catholic or Anglican, retained this form, on the whole, and interpreted the Bible in its light. The faith of my fathers centred on the «Christ of history». The tradition handed down to me was the «myth», and in my own religious wrigglings of earlier years I think I was, at first unconsciously, trying to get further from the Bible and nearer to the «myth», in a strongly Hellenic, Mediterranean form for which I still have much affection. (Of course my Christian parents and teachers in the earlier 20th century took very good care to see that I should be well educated in Greek poetry and philosophy, which carry Hellenic religion). I really do not think that I have much reason for allegiance to «authentic», «truly Biblical» Christianity, whether radical or conservative. And, now that because of the breakup of the Conglomerate, I have to choose between the Biblical and the Hellenic, I shall choose the Hellenic, though I can only choose it as «myth». And it may be that a good many other people, less well informed than I am about our own older tradition, will make the same choice: either because it has really been the strongly Hellenic elements in the theology and piety of the Conglomerate which will be discussed later which have attracted them, or because it is the «myth» which has inspired the great Christian visual art and music which may be doing more than anything else to keep something of Christianity alive in our own day, or because they are drawn to Indian or esoteric Islamic ways which are often (for whatever reason) very much closer to Neoplatonism than they are to Jewish-Biblical ways of faith, thought and piety (14).

To conclude this essay, let us attempt to see what a «mythical» treatment of the central Christian doctrine of Incarnation might look like. It must be stressed here again that there is no question of dogmatic rejection of traditional doctrines, but of well-grounded doubt, suspense of judgement, the reduction of the doctrines to endlessly discussible hypotheses. In this position one is perfectly entitled to consider as acceptable more conservative and traditional hypotheses than those just discussed, when they are well based on excellent scholarship, like those of C. F. D. Moule (15), provided that they are still considered as hypotheses, and not used apologetically to justify a return to «absolutism». And this means that, within the limits imposed by free and sound scholarship and history, a closer hypothetical linking of the «Jesus of scholarship» and the «Christ of history» might be attempted than has been

suggested above. We are not bound to believe that the «myth» has no historical foundation or core, even if the extent of the historical element in it must probably remain for ever undefinable. But it should also be made clear again that the rejection of «absolutism» and questioning of claims and demands extends beyond the claim that Jesus was God Incarnate in an unique sense. It extends to all claims made that any revelation of God has unique and universal authority or that any people or community has been brought into an unique and special relationship with him. If anyone demands faith, submission or territory as a representative of the unique People of God, he should be taken all the way back to the covenant with Abraham and his claims tested every step of the way by the intensest criticism that can be brought to bear, for the honour of God. Criticism can be inspired by religious fervour as well as dogmatic faith.

Even if one is prepared to consider, tentatively, as tenable the hypotheses of the more conservative New Testament scholars who really are scholars and not apologists (some of course, rather bewilderingly to the layman, speak now in one capacity and now in the other) one will probably have to go fairly far in separating the fully Hellenized «Christ of history» from the «Jesus of scholarship». (It is, at least, reasonably certain that Jesus was a Jew, and this makes a difference). I have already shown my preferences if this has to be done (16). What then, can an irremediable gentile like myself make of the centre of the Christian «myth», the doctrine of Incarnation? A good deal, in fact, and some of it surprisingly traditional ; and I should describe my «mythical» interpretation as «expansionist» rather than «reductionist». The method I apply here to the thought of the Greek Fathers is of course heretical in the strict sense, a process of *hairesis* or selection. (There is a good deal of *hairesis* in orthodox theology, especially nowadays). For this reason I bring them in, not to claim their authority, but to acknowledge my debt to them. The characteristic which I have discovered in their thought struck me most forcibly when reading «Dionysius», and particularly the *Divine Names* (17). Though it can certainly be observed over a much wider area (18) and I do not regard it in «Dionysius» as an Athenian Neoplatonist deformation of Christianity, it will make for brevity and clarity, and be appropriate in a paper in honour of Trouillard, if I discuss it in a «Dionysian» context. The first point which impressed me was that, though the language, and I am sure the belief, of the author of the Dionysian writings about the Trinity is perfectly orthodox, *Trias* is only one of the (all inadequate) names for the unknowable God, the Thearchy, interchangeable with others : and his Trinitarian theology is rather in the background and only comes into use when required for the purposes of his simplified, and in a sense Christianized, Neoplatonism. It is not grounded in, and has not much connection with, the historic Incarnation (19). About this, again, the author's language and faith is quite orthodox. But, as with *Trias*, «Jesus» is, in the Christological passages of the *Divine Names*, just another name for the ineffable Thearchy, whose whole function in these

passages he takes over, and the details of his earthly life are interpreted entirely symbolically (20). What this seems to mean is that what really matters to «Dionysius» (and perhaps to many others, in the Greek-Christian tradition especially, though individual cases need particular and careful examination) (21) is the outgoing of the unknowable Godhead in his theophanies and ecstatic *eros*, which is creation, and his leading all things back to himself by that same *eros*, in its return, which is redemption. And both of these are cosmic and universal, not strictly tied to a particular human person or historic event, though the historic Incarnation is of course seen as the exemplar, guarantee and centre of the whole creative-redemptive process and the principal means of redemption.

When one has realized that this sort of distinction between an universal and a particularist understanding of Christian doctrine related to the Incarnation can be discovered in our Christian tradition, and that the emphasis (especially perhaps in the «Dionysian» tradition) lies sometimes more on the universal than the particular, some consequences may begin to appear to one who is conscious of the «breakdown of absolutism» and the grave doubts that must now exist about the Incarnation in its historical particularity. If one retains some sort of faith in the Unknowable Good, one may still want to be able to see not only God's creative, but his saving work as extending from everlasting to everlasting, not only to every human being, but to every being in his universe (anthropocentrism is one of the disadvantages of conservative Christianity) (22) : and to hold that God so works because the cosmos is in him and he is united with it (though «inexpressibly», as the Fathers say about the Incarnation) from the beginning with an intimacy which the hypostatic union of developed Christology cannot surpass. This is part of any Platonic faith, because the Platonic Good is self-diffusive, and being good means doing good (23). And I (because of my Christian background) can think of no better way of speaking of this ineffable outgoing of the Good in his *eros* than in terms of the everlasting and universal mission of Logos and Holy Spirit. Others will legitimately prefer other ways of speaking. I know that I only use these words because my parents and teachers, the books I have read, and perhaps most effectively of all, the great liturgies and arts of Christendom have taught me to. If I had been brought up in India, or a Buddhist or Islamic country, I should have used different «myths» or «icons». And even within our own tradition many of anonymous faith but (often with good reasons) deeply anti-Christian, will prefer other ways of speaking. But, if the negative theology carried through the double negation, leads, as it often does, to this sort of belief in cosmic incarnation, then the Christian «myth» can come to have a very powerful and positive effect as a «myth». It will not give us the kind of assurance possessed by all the Fathers and traditional theologians who believe (as they do) in the unique Incarnation fully and completely as historical fact and the dogmas in which its meaning was explained as divinely

guaranteed : but we must be content with a more tentative and uncertain faith nowadays. And accepting a myth is not like accepting a creed. It leaves room for free reinterpretation, imaginative and intellectual development, and plenty of criticism of details and variation of emphasis (even the most orthodox and conformist Christianity allows, and has always allowed, for plenty of all these, though theologians have sometimes pretended otherwise). But, in the end, I can think of no better representations of the faith I hold, if they are interpreted in the free and universal way I have suggested, than the great theological and artistic «icons» of traditional Christianity.

NOTES

1 The Academic rather than the Pyrrhonian is, I think, the strongest sceptical element in our tradition. It differs from the Pyrrhonian in admitting degrees of probability, and so leaving room for enthusiasm, and even a degree of commitment (though not absolute commitment). See the generally excellent statement of the difference between the two traditions by the Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I, 226-231) : though it does not seem to be true that, as Sextus asserts, the Academics fell into the elementary mistake of stating dogmatically that they knew that they did not know, or that Carneades in any way illegitimately smuggled certainty as an ultimate norm into his theory of probability : see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (London 1974) pp.94-99.

2 J. Trouillard «Valeur critique de la mystique Plotinienne» in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 59 (August 1961) pp.431-4 : «Raison et Mystique chez Plotin» in *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 20 (1974) pp.3-14 : «Théologie négative et autoconstitution psychique chez les néoplatoniciens» in *Savoir, faire, espérer : les limites de la raison* (Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Brussels 1976) pp.307-321 : A. H. Armstrong «The Escape of the One» in *Studia Patristica XIII* (Berlin 1975) pp.77-89 : «Negative Theology» in *Downside Review* Vol 95, No. 320 (July 1977) pp.176-189.

3 «Of course he [Plato] used metaphor, and metaphor is basic ; how basic is the most basic philosophical question». Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (Oxford 1977) p.88.

4 See Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford 1977) Ch.*X*, *Conclusion*. Plotinus uses a great deal of positive «substance» language about God, in the way described, in VI 8 [39] where in my view, **(see this volume, study XI)** he is arguing, patiently though not without irritation, with a Christian theist much concerned about the free will of God. But the Neoplatonic work which uses substance and knowlege-language most strikingly (and quite coherently) of God in a context of extremely radical negative theology is the Anonymous Commentary on the *Parmenides* so admirably studied and edited by P. Hadot in his *Porphyre et Victorinus* (Paris 1968 : text of the Commentary in Vol.II), especially IV and V (pp.74-83 Hadot : Fol. 94^{v} and Fol. 64^{v}). It is not quite as certain as Hadot supposes that the commentary is by Porphyry. **But it is a most original Neoplatonic work, of great importance for the development of negative theology.**

5 In «Théologie négative et autoconstitution psychique....» (see note 2) pp.312-313 : «Dès lors, la notion de «Dieu caché» change de sens. Le Dieu de saint Augustin et de saint Thomas est caché parce que, étant la plénitude infinie de l'intelligibilité, sa trop grande clarté nous éblouit, comme le soleil regardé en face offusque nos yeux. L'Un néoplatonicien est nocturne parce qu'il refuse tout contenu intelligible et toute pensée. Il est au-delà l'ordre de connaissance. Il n'a donc pas de secret, c'est-à-dire d'essence qui se déroberait au regard.

Cela ne veut pas dire qu'il ne peut se communiquer et qu'il reste muré dans une transcendance inaccessible». What follows, on the immanent interior transcendence of the One as an «inexhaustible starting-point», always before, never attained by, thought is very relevant to a proper understanding of what I mean by «myth» in its extended and positive sense.

6 For my curious use of «icon» cp. «Negative Theology» (see note 2) pp.188-189.

7 *Divine Names* 4. 13 (712 A-B).

8 In «Le Merveilleux dans la vie et la pensée de Proclos», in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger*, 1971, pp.439-452 ; section 3 «La fonction de l'imagination» pp.447-452. The principal source for the views of Proclus on poetic myth is *In Rempublicam* I 368-407, 69-205 Kroll, especially 368-378, 71-86 Kroll.

9 *The Fire and the Sun* (see note 3), especially pp.69-89.

10 I refer particularly to his «Does Christology Rest on a Mistake» in *Religious Studies* 6. 1. (March 1970) pp.69-76 and his second essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London 1977) «Myth in Theology», pp.148-166. I also find very satisfying his treatment, both historical and theological, of a most important and difficult theme in the «myth», that of Resurrection, in the *Appendix* to his *Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London 1974), pp.125-146. I find this much more satisfying than the summary dismissal of the Resurrection by both sides in the older controversy between Jaspers and Bultmann (originally published in book form as *Die Frage der Entmythologisierung* : English translation (*Myth and Christianity*) first printed in paperback New York 1958 and frequently reprinted since). In many ways, however, my position is fairly close to that of Jaspers, and I agree with much in his defence of liberalism and his appreciation of the religious value of myth.

11 I have in mind particularly his essay in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (see previous note) «The Christ of Christendom», pp.133-147, and his numerous and vigorous defences of his position since, generally on radio or television.

12 On the historical Jesus I am at present in general agreement with the position of Dennis Nineham in his somewhat devastating *Epilogue* (pp.186-204) to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (see note 10), which shows clearly what very awkward questions a serious critical study of the evidence can raise.

13 Cp. Gilbert Murray *Greek Studies* pp.66f : E. R. Dodds *The Greeks and the Irrational* (University of California Press 1951) pp.179-180.

14 I have discovered this by experience in dialogue with an Indian and an Isma'ili friend. If they spoke the language of their own traditions and I spoke the language of Neoplatonism, we understood each other without much need of interpretation. P. Hadot, in his profound interpretation of Hellenic philosophy as a whole, *Exercices Spirituels* (*Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, 5e Section, T.*LXXXIV* pp.25-70) has demonstrated that we have in our own Western tradition a rich and varied store of the sort of wisdom for which many people now look to the East.

15 In *The Origins of Christology* (Cambridge 1977). The excellent hypotheses - clearly presented as such - of the chapters devoted to a scholarly consideration of the New Testament evidence do not, unfortunately, seem to me, even if they are taken as certain conclusions from that evidence, to support sufficiently the apologetic conclusion.

16 Those of others will, of course, be different. It is perfectly possible to make a «Jesus of scholarship», even before he goes out of fashion, the historical foundation of a «myth» : and for very many people a Semitic rather than a Hellenic form of «myth», incarnational or non-incarnational, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, will be the right and necessary one. My own reasons for especially disliking un-Hellenic or de-Hellenized Western Christian or post-Christian Biblical «myths» would take too long to explain adequately : it would be necessary to deal with such subjects as the disjunctiveness of Biblical monotheism, the «meaning of history», and the harm done in real history by the idea of an Elect or Chosen People in its various forms. (Or course in many of them the Gentiles of the «myth» will include or be Jews).

17 My belief that what I had noticed in «Dionysius» was really there was strengthened by discovering that Dr. Bernhard Brons had noticed the same phenomena and forcibly described them in his scholarly studies of the Dionysian writings *Gott und die Seienden* (Gottingen 1976) and «Pronoia und das Verhaltnis von Metaphysik und Geschichte bei Dionysius Areopagita» in *Freiburger Zeitschrift fur Philosophie und Theologie* 24 (1977) 1-2 pp.165-186. Of course, as the theological position of Dr. Brons seems to be almost the exact opposite of my own, he notes these characteristics of Dionysian thought with disapproval.

18 It has often been observed that the Fathers of the Alexandrian tradition, in particular, seem more interested in the «incarnability» of the Logos and the universal theandric union of God with humanity as a whole than in the particular historic Incarnation, and something of this persists in Greek-Christian theology and theology influenced by it in the West. E. P. Meijerings «Cyril of Alexandria on the Platonists and the Trinity» in *God Being History* (Amsterdam-Oxford-New York 1975) pp.114-127

is of much interest in this connection.

19 For the way in which «Dionysius» speaks of the Trinity see, e.g. *Celestial Hierarchy* VII 4 (212C) : *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* I 3 (373C-D) : *Divine Names* I 4 (592A) 5 (593B) : II 7 (645B-C) : III 1 (680B):XIII 3 (980D-981A) : *Mystical Theology* III (1038A) and V (1048A ; cp. Letter II). On the way in which «Dionysius», as is generally supposed, adapts Athenian Neoplatonism to Christian purposes by a certain conflation of the Neoplatonic One and the Neoplatonic Nous, see the most recent discussion by S. Gersh *From Iamblichus to Eriugena* (Leiden 1978). It is agreed that «Dionysius» is not a «hierarchical» thinker in the sense of Proclus (cp. my «Negative Theology» (see note 2) pp.181-184) and that he uses very positive language about God's being , knowledge and action while strongly maintaining an extreme apophatic theology. But there are unsolved, and possibly insoluble, questions as to the precise relative importance of the contributions made to this Dionysian Christian Platonism by the distinctively Christian side of the theology which he inherited (especially from the Cappadocians), by the predominantly pre-Plotinian Platonism which was the philosophy most used by fourth-century theologians, and, possibly, by a return, which might have been deliberate, to a more Plotinian-Porphyryian kind of Neoplatonism (see *supra* note 4).

20 The principal Christological passage is *Divine Names* II 9-10 (648A-649A) : cp. XI 1-2, 948D-953B where *Eirene* and «Jesus» or «Christ» seem to be interchangeable divine names.

21 In view of his great influence, the universal sweep of his vision of creation and salvation, and his intense devotion to the Incarnate Lord (who is much more than a symbol to him, however allegorically he interprets the details of his earthly life), Origen deserves particularly careful investigation on this point. And I do not wish to lump together the great thinkers, from Maximos onwards, who have more or less followed the Dionysian tradition under any superficial generalization.

22 See my «Man in the Cosmos» in *Romanitas et Christianitas* (Amsterdam-
* London 1973) pp.5-14.

23 The main Platonic authority for this conviction for later Platonists has of course been *Timaeus* 29D-30B : though it pervades the theology of the Dialogues. My way of putting it is a summary paraphrase of Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 122 (especially p.128, lines 19-21 Dodds).

ADDITIONAL NOTE.

I had written this paper before the publication of Dr. E. P. Meijering's excellent book, *Theologische Urteile uber die Dogmengeschichte : Ritschl's Einfluss auf von Harnack* (Leiden 1978). This does a very great

deal to clarify the nature, origin, and much of the development of what I have described as «Biblical» theology, and in the author's final critique of Harnack suggests approaches to the Bible, Greek philosophy, and the theology of the Christian Fathers which, if they were widely followed, might lead to the transformation rather than the desintegration of our Inherited Conglomerate.

Additions to note 2

* Berlin 1975 = Plotinian and Christian Studies XXIII
* July 1977 = Plotinian and Christian Studies XXIV

Addition to note 22

* Amsterdam-London 1973 = Plotinian and Christian Studies XXII