teaching of Christ my tone becomes kinder and my judgments more positive than when I am concentrating my attention on the great bishops of the Empire and their flocks.

My obligations to other scholars and thinkers continue to be many. It is encouraging for the future of our studies that so many of those to whom I feel a strong gratitude are younger, often considerably younger, people. The quotations and references in V, VI and XIV indicate two, John Kenney and Peter Manchester, to whom I feel myself particularly indebted, but there are others, notably Kevin Corrigan, whose recent work on Plotinus is outstanding. One contact which has meant a great deal to me is indicated by the reference in the *Concluding Note* of the Introduction to *Plotinian and Christian Studies* to the joint article by Dr Ravindra and myself "Buddhi in the Bhagavad-Gita and Psyche in Plotinus" (*Religious Studies* 15, September 1979, pp.327–342: reprinted in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought* ed. R. Baine Harris, International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Norfolk, Virginia, 1982, pp. 63–86). My conversations with Ravi Ravindra have greatly enlarged my mind and given me some understanding of Indian religious thought and its close kinship and resemblances, in some important ways, to Neoplatonic thought and to Hellenic religious thought in general (though I remain somewhat sceptical about actual historical influences of one on the other). This is apparent in several places in the *Eranos* papers: it came naturally to mind at Ascona.

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I

Some Advantages of Polytheism

All (or nearly all) of us in our post-Christian civilisation are inclined to be rather complacent and unreflective about monotheism.[1] This is true of both those of Protestant and strictly Biblical tendency and those of Catholic tendency, and both of believers and unbelievers. Even those who think that the question "God or no God?" has been settled decisively in favour of the latter alternative, or that it has no practical importance and is unprofitable to discuss, are generally disposed to think that the question "God or the gods?" was settled long ago in favour of the monotheist supposition, and, even today, many of us are still inclined to think of it as an "either-or" question. Either you worship one God or you worship a lot of idols. (The way in which Catholics and Orthodox still talk about the idolatry of the heathen is sometimes quite embarrassing to a historically minded person of Catholic tendency.)

This sort of monotheist complacency is becoming more and more difficult to maintain as we become more and more vividly aware of other religious traditions than the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic, notably that of India. But there is enough of it around still to be worth disturbing, and I propose here to attempt to disturb it. I shall do so by considering one or two points about the most powerful polytheism within our own tradition, the Hellenic, which has influenced that tradition in many important ways. The Greeks in the end found it perfectly possible to combine this with monotheism, to believe in God without ceasing to believe in the gods. If I am to be taken as recommending anything in this essay, it is something like this that I am recommending, not a futile nostalgia for temples, idols and sacrifices. I have sometimes been sufficiently irritated by the way Christians talk about Greek heathenism to think about setting up in my garden a statue of Priapus or of Diana of the Ephesians (you can still buy quite good ones of her at Ephesus). But I have never actually done so. I shall begin with a look at pre-philosophical Greek polytheism, of the sort which we can know and understand best from the Greek

1. William James was a notable exception. See the conclusion of his *Postscript* to *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (pp. 499-500 in the Fontana edition). His argument in *A Pluralistic Universe* leaves room for polytheism as a serious possibility, as he himself clearly recognizes (p. 140 of the Harvard edition).

Dionysius, Vol. V, Dec. 1981, pp. 181-188

poets: though when we read them we should always remember what we are so often truly told, that this was a religion of worship, not of belief. Cult was primary, myth was secondary, and one could interpret cult and myth as one pleased. Plato and other philosophers criticised the poets' stories severely, and we have been inclined to repeat their criticisms rather uncritically, and without noticing how much the philosophers took over from the old religion, and how they simply assumed that polytheistic cult would continue to provide the religious environment of the ordinary man, as it did down to the end of antiquity, and beyond, in more or less Christianized forms. But for some time now classical scholars have been pointing out forcibly that, despite the philosophers' criticism, there was a great deal in the old poetic religion worth seriously considering. So let us take a brief look at it.

It was a religion which recognised many divine powers in one divine universe. The unity of the divine is often very much in the background, but it is always there. The universe is something given, for gods as well as men, not the product of a divine creation. The old stories of its beginnings are stories of birth, not making. The actions of the many powers within the one universe are various and often unexpected. They can clash and conflict and do not appear to serve any great obvious overriding purpose. The powers do not seem necessarily friendly to man, though people often felt that, especially, their local gods and the gods of their personal devotion were kindly disposed towards them, and one could love as well as fear the gods. Any moral concerns which the gods may have appear at best spasmodically and are not always of a sort very comfortable to man: they visit the sins of the fathers on the children in strange and terrible ways, and they punish more certainly than they reward. The world of the old gods is a hard and dangerous world apprehended unflinchingly by their worshippers in all its hardness and danger. But it is not a bad world and the gods are not evil, but beautiful and delightful to contemplate, as well as terrible. The ancient Greeks were not a gloomy people, oppressed by religious fear and depression. Nor in their hard world were they often quite as hard and cruel to each other as Mediaeval and Reformation Christians. Perhaps they were kept from gloomy and cruel fanaticism by the way they instinctively understood the time of their divine world. Under all the changes and chances of divinity lies the rhythm which is the expression of the unity of the divine cosmos, the rhythm of the seasons, of day and night, of birth and death. Those who have this rhythm in them as the Greeks had it are not optimists or pessimists: they can always look at things either way up. How sad that winter follows

Fall! But how wonderful that spring follows winter! How sad that I must die! But how happy that my grandchildren have been born! The city is destroyed and the fruit-trees cut down. How terrible! But new cities will be built and new trees planted, of course to be destroyed in their turn; and so it will go on.

The philosophers, from Plato onwards, with some important exceptions, wanted to see in the world a more unified order and a more explicitly good divine purpose. This led them into a good deal of rather unconvincing and decidedly anthropocentric teleological explanation, which took its most exaggerated forms in the thought of the Stoics. Aristotle does not seem to have gone this way. His universe has the unity of a great machine, with all biological processes dependent on the movements of the heavenly spheres. But the teleology in which he and his successor Theophrastus seem to have been interested was the kind of limited teleology modern biologists admit, the appearance of purpose-built design within a particular species tending to the ends of that species. And it is interesting for our present purposes to note that the Epicureans, whose conviction of the meaninglessness of reality has been so attractive to many moderns, were the most explicit and conscious polytheists of antiquity. There is no one divinity behind the many gods in whom they firmly believed: and the idea of divine purpose is for them a terrifying delusion. But even the mainstream Stoics and Platonists who insist most strongly on the unity of the divine and the one good divine purpose make room for divine plurality in the unity. They did not repudiate the gods for the sake of God (as early Christian writers noted frequently and indignantly). The explication of divine intelligence which they see as the order of this world is a harmony of clash and conflict, an endless tension between warring opposites. And the world-order moves with the old seasonal, alternating rhythm, the rhythm of a dance rather than a march to a goal. The greatest of ancient theodicies, the treatise of Plotinus *On Providence*[2] remains surprisingly close in its vision of the world to the spirit of the great tragedians. Plotinus is by no means anthropocentric in his outlook. He displays the beauty and terror of our world magnificently. And, though he considers carefully several solutions to the problem of evil, he seems in the end by no means convinced that he has solved it.

What are we to make of this ancient Hellenic religious view of the world now-a-days? We must begin, if we are honest, by admitting its extraordinary clear-sightedness. It is a vision of the

2. III 2-3,[47-48].

world which is true to our day-to-day experience of it, and at least less difficult to reconcile with the discoveries of modern science about it than a simple-minded monotheism. Even if we retain any sense of a divine presence in the world, we have to admit that it manifests itself in innumerably various, apparently clashing and conflicting, often inscrutably odd and horrifying ways. Divine unity, not divine plurality, requires an effort of reflection and faith to attain it; and, when attained, it does not necessarily exclude plurality. As for whether we can or should have a sense of divine presence in the world, I cannot argue convincingly against those who say we cannot and should not: perhaps nobody has ever been able to. I can only say that awareness of God in the natural world is the heart and foundation of any religion I have, and that more and more people, including many who are not in any way formally religious, seem to be coming to the same awareness (there have always been a good many): it is to them that I am speaking: everybody cannot speak acceptably and understandably to everybody. Those of us who have this awareness should recognise that the old polytheisms, and, for most of us, especially the Hellenic, can convey the sense of the universal divine presence and the holiness of the world with incomparable poetic force. As Plotinus says, expanding what Sophocles said about his beloved native village, Colonus, to apply to the whole universe: —

> "All the place is holy, and there is nothing which is without a share of soul."[3]

And this recognition may bring with it a content with the Hellenic awareness of the movement of the universe as rhythmic, as a dance, which is so close to what seems to be the basic time — experience of all living things, that of the alternation of light and dark: and a discontent with and disbelief in the alternative linear understanding of it as the march of one purpose irresistibly onward to a glorious or horrifying future, which, if it could in any way be demonstrated, would perhaps provide some support for intransigent Judaeo-Christian monotheism and the anthropocentrism which usually accompanies it: though it seems to survive and flourish very well in completely secularized forms. Some of us are beginning to see this as not only probably false but dangerous, in so far as it invites us to sacrifice not only our own past and present, but that of our planet, to an increasingly dubious future. Nobody

3. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 54cp. 16. Plotinus *On What Are and Whence Come Evils*, I 8 [51] 14, 36-37: my translation from the Loeb *Plotinus*, Vol. I, p. 313.

has shown this danger better than Hans Jonas in his great work of moral philosophy *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*[4]. The austere argument of this book does not start from or require any metaphysical or religious presuppositions: and it is concerned with secular, not religious versions of eschatological hope, particularly, though not exclusively, with E. Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. But, perhaps for these very reasons, it provides an excellent foundation for a critique of theologies of hope.

In developing the theme which has begun to appear of the importance of a polytheistic element in religion for personal piety, I shall start from the other end of the Hellenic religious tradition, with a look at the polytheistic element in the monotheism of the great Neoplatonists. This took two successive forms. The first is to be found in the great third-century Neoplatonist, Plotinus, and his pupils. Plotinus sees the multiplicity of the gods appearing in the eternal outgoing of divine life into multiplicity from the One, the self-diffusion of the Good first into Divine Intellect and then into universal Soul. The following passages give a very clear idea of how he interpreted traditional polytheism, and the last, from his treatise *Against the Gnostics*, shows how vigorously he was prepared to maintain it against an intransigent and exclusive monotheism. He says of *Nous*, the Divine Intellect "For he encompasses in himself all things immortal, every intellect, every god, every soul ..."[5] and he prays "May he come, bringing his own universe with him, with all the gods within him, he who is one and all, and each god is all the gods coming together into one: they are different in their powers, but by that one manifold power they are all one: or rather the one god is all: for he does not fail if all become what he is ...[6] And in his great challenge to the other kind of monotheism he says:

> "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."[7]

The later Neoplatonists who maintained an intellectual opposition to Christianity from the age of Constantine to the age of

4. Frankfurt, Insel Verlag, 1979.
5. *On the Three Primary Hypostases*, V1 [10], 4, 10-11.
6. *On the Intelligible Beauty*, V8 [31] 9, 14-19.
7. *Against the Gnostics*, II 9 [33] 9, 37-39: all translations from Plotinus are my own.

Justinian were not satisfied with Plotinus' placing of the gods. No doubt with some anti-Christian intent, they wanted to place the many gods whom they devoutly worshipped (not only the gods of the Hellenes, but the gods of all mankind as far as they knew them) more nearly on the level of God, the First Principle, the One or Good Himself. So there evolved in the fifth-century Platonic school of Athens the remarkable doctrine of the Henads. As our concern here is with the religious driving-force behind the evolution of the doctrine rather than with the details of late Neoplatonic theology, I shall not illustrate or discuss the appalling complexities of the doctrine as it appears in the voluminous works of the great fifth century Athenian philosopher Proclus. I shall quote a simple statement of it from the sixth century commentator Simplicius, and add the most penetrating comment I know on its importance for the personal piety of these last Hellenes. Simplicius in his commentary on the Enchiridion of Epictetus says, "The Good is source and principle of all beings. For that which all things desire, and to which all things reach up, this is the principle and the goal of all things. And the Good brings forth all things from himself, the first and the middle and the last. But the first, the beings close to himself, he brings forth like himself: one goodness, he brings forth many goodnesses: and one Simplicity, and the Henad (or Unity) above all henads, he brings forth many henads: and one principle, many principles."[8] My comment comes from A. J. Festugière, one of the great French Catholic scholars who have done so much to increase our understanding of these last anti-Christian thinkers of antiquity. He says, speaking of the religion of Proclus: "The same religious soul who aspires to this Unknown God aspires also to a more immediate contact with more accessible, less separate forms of the Divine. From this comes the tender devotion of many Christian mystics to the Virgin. And I explain to myself in the same way, in the case of Proclus, his tender devotion to Athena. There is nothing there, I repeat, which surprises me: or rather, this piety seems natural to me, as the necessary complement of intellective contemplation."[9] Perhaps in his last words Festugière suggests an inappropriately sharp disjunction between affective piety and intellectual contemplation.

8. *Commentarius in Epicteti Enchiridion*, p. 5, 4-11 Dubner: my own translation.
9. "Proclus et la réligion traditionelle" in *Mélanges Piganiol* Paris 1966. rp. in *Études de Philosophie grecque*, Paris 1971, pp. 575-584: Quoted in the introduction to Proclus *Théologie Platonicienne* III ed. Saffrey-Westerink, Paris 1970, p. LXXII: my own translation from the French.

There is plenty of hard dry thinking in the theology of the henads, and a deep and passionate affective piety drives on the search for the Unknowable One. But on the whole this seems very just, and an excellent example of the right way to talk about other peoples' religion. These last Hellenes wanted to find the divine presences that they and their ancestors and all mankind had known and loved in their cities and villages, their trees and springs and rivers and mountains, all together yet still distinct with the One, to meet the Unknowable in the likeness of many familiar friends.

There are, perhaps, more people in our own time than in any age since the fourth century A.D. who can understand and respond to the message of this defence of polytheism by the last Hellenic monotheists. As one of them, I should like to end by reflecting on what it might say to us in our present circumstances. There is much in it, as Festugière recognised, which has survived in the simple piety of Catholic and Orthodox people, and much that can be grounded in a perfectly traditional theology of the universal activity of the Logos: and we should not let any of this go. But we may have to expand our belief in Divine plurality and make it less church-bounded and man-centred.[10] We need to understand that if we are to think of God as "having descended" (as we inadequately and inaccurately say) into history, as being present and somehow deeply involved in our contingent changes and chances and joys and pains, we must think of him as "descended" everywhere and at all times. This he can only be, while still being God, if unbounded plurality as well as unity is somehow grounded in his transcendent and eternal nature, which is beyond the opposition of one and many, as it is beyond all such dialectical oppositions and therefore unknowable. Our time has been one of enormous development in our critical understanding of history, of the problematic character of much historical evidence, of historical difference and distance, of the historical limitation and relativity of our own thoughts and beliefs. Many Christians, including some who talk glibly about "history", do not seem to have seen the real implications of this. But to those of us who have, it seems that if God "descended" once for all, in one particular time and place, into history, he would be limited by history and alienated from us by history, and his descent would become, not a ground of faith but an everlastingly disputed historical problem.

10. A most convincing and well documented account of how Catholic piety in the West moved away from the forms and spirit of the old religion to become church-bounded and man-centred is Peter Brown's *The Cult of The Saints* (Chicago and London 1981).

Another characteristic of our time, of course, has been the enormous increase in our knowledge of the universe and our power to damage it. We know now how little room man occupies in cosmic space and time, how comparatively insignificant the duration of our species has been even compared with the history of life on earth: and we know that Western man occupies a much more modest place in human history than we used to think. But we also know that we may now have power, in whatever remnant of our short span may be left to us, to do irreparable harm at least to our own small planet. This knowledge and this power seem to require a new degree of awareness of the holiness of all things, of divine presences quite outside man and his history, as well as of God's epiphanies in the gods of other men. We may perhaps be being called more urgently than ever before to a very difficult sort of humility, which, if we ever attained to a decent measure of it, might establish our unique spiritual greatness among the beings we know by our very capacity of denial of that unique greatness. This is the humility of putting ourselves out of the centre of the picture, of no longer supposing that all the lives of earth and all the galaxies and all God's purposes converge on our culture or our religion or our species or our future. This is difficult to do properly. It is easier to proclaim that we are nothings before God or miserable sinners before God, often in a way which enhances our own importance, than to accept quietly that in the divine sight we may be insignificant somethings in a very small corner of space and time.

I am not recommending a return to Hellenic polytheism, even of the late Platonic kind, in the manner of that great and good, but rather cranky, man, the Emperor Julian. That sort of archaizing and nostalgic attempt to return to the past, Christian or pagan, is always futile and unreal. But, if we find, as I have done, that the polytheists have a good deal to say to us which is relevant to the contemporary needs of which I have just been speaking; then we shall do well to keep their theology and their gods in our thoughts and in our prayers, in the way which seems appropriate to each of us. It is not by one path only that so great a mystery can be approached.

II

IAMBLICHUS AND EGYPT*

The imposing *persona* of the high-ranking Egyptian priest Abammon, adopted by Iamblichus,[1] justifies the title *Les Mystères d'Egypte* given to his work on theurgy. This *persona* was of course made appropriate for him by the fact that he was replying in the *De Mysteriis* to the critique of theurgy which Porphyry had addressed to the Egyptian priest Anebo.[2] But this title would otherwise be somewhat difficult to justify from the text. If the work had come down to us without the first chapter or any external indications of its "Egyptian" setting it is unlikely that modern editors would have adopted it. Consideration of distinctively Egyptian rites and teachings occupies only a small part of it, 18 pages out of 178 of the Budé text.[3] A great deal of the attention throughout is directed to the traditional observances of Hellenic public worship. This is particularly true of Book V, the most theologically important part of the work, which deals with sacrifice and prayer. And of the "Oriental" and esoteric elements in the content, the "Chaldaean" or "Assyrian" is more important than the Egyptian.[4] And of course if one turns one's attention to the principal theurgic scriptures, the *Chaldaean Oracles*[5] themselves one soon

* On trouvera une traduction française, due à Luc Brisson, de cet article dans le nº 4/1987 *(N.d.l.r.)*.

1. The attribution to Iamblichus is now generally accepted. See the excellent summary discussion by E. des Places in his edition (Jamblique, *Les Mystères d'Egypte*, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres, 1966, Notice, pp. 5-8). I am much indebted throughout this article to this edition of the *De Mysteriis*. References to the text will be given in the form adopted by des Places, i.e. his own lines within Parthey's pages.

2. On Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* (ed. and tr. A. R. Sodano, Naples, 1964) see J. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre* (Gand, 1913, repr. Hildesheim, Olms, 1964), chap. 8.

3. Pp. 186-202 (VI 5-end of VIII, 245.11-272.15).

4. In VI 7 (249.4-8) which deals with the ticklish question of menaces addressed to the gods, Chaldaean practice is explicitly preferred to Egyptian.

5. What remains of these is now generally accessible in another admirable edition by E. des Places, *Oracles Chaldaïques, avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, Paris, Les Belles-Lettres 1971.