

4) καὶ ὁ κόσμος δὲ ὅδε δι' ἐκεῖνον ἔστι κάκει βλέπει, καὶ πᾶς καὶ θεῶν ἕκαστος καὶ τὰ ἐκείνου προφητεύει ἀνθρώποις καὶ χρωσῶν ἃ ἐκείνους φύλα (II. 39-42).

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

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

7) λείπεται τοῖνυν εἶναι μὲν πάντα ἐν ἄλλω, οὐδένοσ δὲ μεταξὺ ὄντοσ τῆ ἐν τῷ ὄντι πρὸσ ἄλλο γειτονεῖα ὡσ ἐξαίφρησ ἀναφανῆναι ἰνδαλμα καὶ εἰκόνα ἐκείνου εἶτε ἀτόθεν εἶτε ψυχῆσ διακονησαμένησ — διαφέρει γὰρ οὐδὲν ἐν τῷ παρόντι — ἢ ψυχῆσ τωσ (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 ἀνῆρ, εἰ ἀκούσειε σὺ εἶ θεοῦ πᾶισ, οἱ δ' ἄλλοι οὐσ ἐθαύμαζεσ οὐ παῖδεσ οὐδ' ἃ τιμῶσιν ἐκ πατέρων λαβόντεσ, οὐ δὲ κρεῖττων καὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ οὐδὲν ποιήσασ (II. 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 II. 19-20 οὐδενὸσ γὰρ ἀφῆσθηκε τὸ θεῶν ἄλλα πᾶσιν ἐξ ἴσου πάρεσσι. 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 be 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.<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Albinus X 4 Louis.

<sup>2</sup> *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius* (Leiden 1968).

Platonist kataphatic-apophatic mixture, in spite of some powerful influences working for a more purely apophatic theology. Apophatic theology has been used as a kind of supplement to kataphatic theology to preserve something of the mystery of God, and perhaps sometimes, with lesser men, to provide a rather disreputable way of getting out of difficulties. I think, that the very strong prejudice against the full Neoplatonic apophatism which is sometimes to be found in Christian theologians is due partly at least to a not unjustified fear that if you sweep out the room in your mind where God should dwell quite as thoroughly as this, and leave it quite so empty, devils will come in: either the devils of one's own irrational and superstitious fantasy or, worse still, ecclesiastical devils, God-fantasies created by prelates or preachers, according to the supposed demands of Scripture or dogma, which are really the ugliest sort of anthropomorphic idols. I hope to show in this paper that the opening of the doors of the mind which the full apophatic theology can produce need not lead to this sort of false God and that, if we do not adopt something like it, many of us may have to abandon theology altogether.

The East has perhaps understood apophatic theology and its implications better than the West, but I do not propose to speak here of the Eastern Orthodox apophatic tradition, and this not only because there is no time to discuss it properly. Like many people in the West I have been playing for many years with Orthodox theology, but, though I shall continue to be deeply affected by what I have absorbed from it already, I have reached the Socratic moment of knowing that I do not know. I do not understand what it is to *live* Orthodox theology – I hope this attainment of ignorance may be the beginning of understanding. It seems to me important that we should all of us reach this Socratic-apophatic moment in studying each other's traditions. Otherwise we shall go on for ever producing from the outside learned and sympathetic accounts of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant life and thought which no Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant can accept as adequate accounts of his religious life and thought as seen from the inside. To discuss those influences leading towards a fuller apophatic theology which enter the West from the Eastern tradition through Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena and the later mediaeval, Renaissance and post-Renaissance developments deriving from them or from direct acquaintance with the pagan Neoplatonists, or from both, would be improper without a previous discussion of Orthodox apophatic theology, and would take us far outside the limits of a paper appropriate to a Patristic Conference. Furthermore, I am inclined to think that it is only very rarely in this tradition, or in its very interesting encounters and interlacings with the Western patristic tradition or with the so-called "Aristotelianism" of the great scholastics, that one encounters apophatic theology in anything like a pure form. It is generally present in an impure form, sometimes as simply strengthening the apophatic element in the "apo-

phatic-kataphatic" mixture, or else very much as a background influence. This does not mean that I undervalue these influences and developments. I believe that they have done much to improve our Western theology (they have had little, if any, influence on non-theological philosophy). They have helped to give it a real and good sense of mystery, to make it less arrogantly and cocksurely dogmatic, more tolerant and human. These good results of apophatic Platonism are, I think, above all manifest in the great English Christian Platonist tradition, which is now rather unfashionable but whose powers are not exhausted, and which I believe to hold great hope for the future.<sup>1</sup>

I shall next try to describe the apophatic theology of the pagan Neoplatonists in its most scandalous forms, and to indicate some of the consequences of it which I do not think that the pagan Neoplatonists saw. Then I shall try to explain briefly (if by that stage any explanation is needed) the reasons which, as I think, prevented the Fathers, especially in the West, from quite grasping what the full apophatic theology was all about. And finally I shall try to suggest why I have written this odd paper, not about what the Fathers said, but about what they did not say, for the Patristic Conference: why, that is, I think that the way in which this strange element in the final culmination of pagan Hellenic thought, with its deep roots in Plato, was neglected, downright rejected, or at best not fully understood, has had serious consequences for Christianity, and that the acceptance of it in some form may be the last hope for some people in the present age of remaining religious believers and, I hope, Christians in some sense approaching the traditional one. This is something which Patristic scholars, who wish to make some contribution to the life of the contemporary Church should, I think, consider seriously.

In considering the Neoplatonic doctrine of the One or Good beyond Being and Intelligence, I shall concentrate on that aspect of it which is most difficult for Christian theologians, ancient or modern, to accept, that the One is absolutely beyond the reach of thought and cannot himself<sup>2</sup> be properly represented as having any activity which can be conceived by us as thinking. The other, apparently more radical, negation, "beyond being", is, I think easier to explain in a way satisfactory to Christians. For Plotinus and all the other Neoplatonists the One or Good was supremely real, however far he might be beyond our conception and comprehension. And the Christian thinkers who have most strongly asserted that

<sup>1</sup> Cp. the review of the Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy by the late Austin Farrer, of blessed memory, in *Religious Studies* (Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1969, pp. 287–88), where he spoke of this tradition and indicated some hope for its continuance. It gave me more pride and pleasure than any other review of this book which has appeared.

<sup>2</sup> In using the masculine rather than the neuter pronoun for the One or Good I follow a frequent usage of Plotinus.



God is Infinite and Necessary Being have also insisted that his being is totally different in kind from the being of creatures, that God is not just another infinitely large thing alongside created things. The difference here is very largely, I think, one of emphasis and terminology, and many Christian thinkers find it easy to pass from one kind of language to another. But of course in the tradition of classical Hellenic metaphysic being is the intrinsically intelligible, and perfect being is the perfectly intelligible, the highest proper object of intelligence, and, at least in the late Platonic tradition, which sought to combine the metaphysical doctrines of Plato and of Aristotle, identical with the highest, divine, intelligence, an Aristotelian Divine Intellect which is also the Platonic World of Forms. Now it is at this point, I think, that the Neoplatonic negative theology becomes really scandalous to most Christian thinkers till comparatively recently, as it does to metaphysicians in the classical intellectualist tradition. Plotinus developed the doctrine of *Nous*, the Divine Intellect which is also the World of Forms, to a point far beyond anything reached in the, as far as we know, generally rather simple-minded doctrines of the Ideas as the "thoughts of God" to be found in his predecessors, of which the first Christian thinkers and their successors made use. His doctrine of the Divine Thought which is True Being and Primary and Eternal Life is rich and subtle, even if not altogether consistent, and his descriptions of it are magnificent. But this great divinity with its unbounded glory, which is all that most people mean by God, is of course very far from being for Plotinus the supreme reality, the source of value and the goal of desire. This is the unknowable One or Good, unknowable not only to us but to the Divine Intellect itself, which is closest to it of all derived beings, the first creative irradiation on which all other things depend for their existence. Divine Being and Intelligence, the highest reality which we can conceive or be intuitively aware of in any way which can be described as intellectual, cannot understand the One. This inability is of course quite inevitable. The One in his infinite simplicity is not understandable in any rational or intellectual way.<sup>1</sup> This statement itself, according to Plotinus,<sup>2</sup> is not to be taken as any sort of definition or description of the One or Good as infinitely simple or incomprehensible: we are only making inadequate remarks about the way he affects us which may serve as hints or pointers to help others to be aware of him. Plotinus often faces the consequences of this doctrine with remorseless clarity, without any softening down or explaining away. Divine Intellect constitutes itself as Intellect by turning to the One in contemplation: but when the primary unformed life which originally proceeds

<sup>1</sup> Cp. e. g. *Enn.* VI, 9 [9]. 4: γίνεται δὲ ἡ ἀπορία μάλιστα διτι μηδὲ κατ' ἐπιστήμην ἢ σύνεσιν ἐκείνου μηδὲ κατὰ νόησιν ὡσπερ τὰ ἄλλα νοητά, ἀλλὰ κατὰ παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα (1-3): ἀλλ' ἀποστήναι δεῖ καὶ ἐπιστήμης καὶ ἐπιστητῶν καὶ πάντος ἄλλου καὶ καλοῦ θεάματος (8-10).

<sup>2</sup> *Ep.* e. g. VI, 8 [39]. 11; VI, 9 [9]. 3.

from the One makes this contemplative return it seeks what it cannot have even in the highest intellectual contemplation, and the One gives what he has not got, the multiplicity-in-unity of the Forms which are Intellect's content. Intellect understands the One in the only way he can be thought about, as a one-in-many — and this of course means that in its effort to think the One it thinks, not the One but itself.<sup>1</sup> This doctrine does not simply move the Supreme Being and Supreme Intelligence down to second place, and regard it as the self-expression or self-manifestation of the unknowable first principle. It seems to be saying that even divine thought, pure thought at its highest level of concentration and intensity, is in the last resort inadequate to bring us to that which we desire and from which all our good comes. Even Divine Intellect must leave itself behind to "attain for ever what it ever desires".<sup>2</sup> It is in its "loving, mad, drunken" state,<sup>3</sup> which eternally co-exists with its sober contemplation, that it attains to union with the One. It is only when divine thought breaks down that the Divine Intellect and ourselves in it can find what we want. Pure thought at its highest is an everlastingly unsuccessful attempt to think the unthinkable, and depends entirely for its existence on the unthinkable Good.

If we turn from Plotinus' statements about the inadequacy of Divine Intellect to his denials that the One or Good himself thinks, the doctrine appears equally radical. One does not have to read a great deal in the *Enneads* to discover this. That the One does not think is a constant theme of Plotinus (he knows very well that in the context of contemporary Platonism it is a highly controversial view, and needs a great deal of reasoned defense). I shall only refer here to a couple of particularly striking expressions of it. To enquire whether the One is intelligent or unintelligent is, he thinks, to ask a silly question, like asking whether God has and uses a professional qualification. "You might as well call him unmedical [as unintelligent]" he says.<sup>4</sup> The language and concepts which we use when we are thinking about thinking beings are quite inapplicable at this highest level. In another passage he argues rather disconcertingly that if the One tried to formulate propositions about himself (an absurd hypothesis in his view) he would have either to tell lies or to talk nonsense, because he is not a one-in-many, a complex whole-of-parts, which is the only sort of being which could talk about itself.<sup>5</sup> Affirmative, positively descriptive speech and thought necessarily analyse their subject, break it up and present it as a multiplicity. We may compare the remark of Proclus, "Affirmations cut off realities in slices".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cp. II, 4 [12]. 5, 31-35; III, 8 [30]. 11, 1-2; V, 3 [49]. 11, 1-12; V, 4 [7]. 2, 4-10; VI, 7 [38]. 15-17.

<sup>2</sup> III, 8 [30]. 11, 23-24 (slightly adapted).

<sup>3</sup> VI, 7 [38]. 35, 19-30.

<sup>4</sup> VI, 7 [38]. 37, 28: this is part of a long and powerfully argued demonstration that the One does not think.

<sup>5</sup> V, 3 [49]. 10, 31-39.

<sup>6</sup> ἀποτεμαχίζουσι γὰρ αἱ καταφάσεις τὰ ὄντα. In *Parmenidem*, VI, 1074, 7-11 Cousin.

The great denials of being and thought to the One carry with them, as Plotinus and later Neoplatonists clearly saw, a great many other negations. Indeed, as soon as any statement about the One is taken as a description, a definition or a dogma, and not as a simple gesture in the right direction or a way of preparing the mind for the awareness which cannot be put into words, it seemed to them that it must be denied. Two denials are particularly important. The first, which is made explicit by Plotinus himself, is that the One is one in any intelligible sense. We have already seen that he is not an organic unity, a single whole of parts. But Plotinus also denies that he is one like a point or mathematical unit:<sup>1</sup> and this seems to leave no conceptualisable sense of unity. This denial may be of some importance for Christian theologians. The doctrine of the Trinity seems to be quite compatible with the Neoplatonic doctrine of the One as long as one does no philosophising, either avowed or disguised as theological speculation or dogmatic formulation, about the Trinity. The other important denial, which only becomes completely explicit in Damascius,<sup>2</sup> is that it is adequate to call the One "transcendent". His relationship to all which comes after him is absolutely indescribable, whether in terms of immanence-transcendence, identity-otherness, or any others. However, in spite of these denials, One and Good, though not proper names, descriptions or definitions, remain to some extent privileged terms for the Neoplatonists. "One" suggests the absence of the articulation or organisation, division or boundary, which would make description or definition possible. And "Good", still more importantly, keeps our minds pointed in the right direction, and helps us to remember that we experience him primarily as the source of value and the goal of desire, and that he is more, not less, than anything we can describe or define. And transcendence language, in so far as it suggests only this and is not taken too literally, may still be felt appropriate in speaking of his relations to all else.

This radically apophatic doctrine of God has, it seems to me, very far-reaching consequences, of a sort which make it worth serious consideration in our own time. But before proceeding to consider these, I must make it quite clear that the Neoplatonists themselves did not, and being men of their own time probably could not fully perceive these consequences, and might have been rather angry with their modern interpreters who point them out. It is fairly widely agreed that there are two sides or tendencies in Neoplatonism. For Professor A. C. Lloyd the one on which I am concentrating in this paper is "romantic", and "anti-intellectual"; it "imposes the language of poetry and religion on that of abstract philosophy"; and the union beyond thought with the One "seems to belong to some Indian mysticism": the other side or tendency is a normal and re-

<sup>1</sup> VI, 9 [9]. 5, 38-46.

<sup>2</sup> *Dubitationes et Solutiones*, p. 15, 13-19 Ruelle.

spectable sort of European philosophy.<sup>1</sup> For that great and rather neglected Christian Platonist Hermann Gauss the side with which I am concerned here is authentic Platonism, in accordance with the teaching of the later dialogues of Plato himself, and the abstract, respectable, classical intellectual side is a late antique development of Aristotelianism, which Gauss regarded as a decidedly inferior philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The existence of these two sides or tendencies seems to me to be responsible for a great deal of the strong, wide-ranging and various influence of Neoplatonism on many very diverse minds through the centuries. There is something very remarkable about a philosophy which could profoundly influence both Augustine and William Blake. The two sides are probably in the last resort incompatible. But it is clear that Plotinus and his successors did not see this, and it is also clear that their whole philosophical system, as a distinct philosophical system, depends on maintaining both. The great hierarchical structure, with its degrees of reality and intelligibility culminating in the Supreme Being which is Divine Intellect has to keep its place below and without any intelligible connection with the One or Good which is its origin. It was this insistence on maintaining the eternal intelligible in second place which, I think, masked from the Neoplatonists themselves and, till recently, from thinkers influenced by them, the consequences of their apophatic theology for our thinking about God. Their position, I think, is a strange and uncomfortable one, which cannot be permanently maintained as it stands: one must either go back or forward from it. Most Christian thinkers till not long before our own time have tended to go back, and use apophatic language in its most superlative forms about a God who is said none the less to be Absolute Intellect and Being, about whom certainly and unchangingly true intelligible propositions can be formulated, and who can reveal such propositions about himself.

The first steps, at least, on the way forward from this ambiguous Neoplatonist position have been very clearly indicated by one of the best Neoplatonic scholars of our own day, Dr. Jean Trouillard. His way of understanding the positive value of the apparently scandalous doctrine of the One beyond Intellect was most fully presented in an article which appeared some ten years ago<sup>3</sup>, but I shall quote here some very suggestive remarks which appeared in his excellent short account of Neoplatonism in the *Encyclopédie de la Pleiade*.<sup>4</sup> This, to begin with, is what he says about the

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy (Cambridge 1967; reprinted 1971), Part IV, ch. 19, Epilogue, p. 324.

<sup>2</sup> H. Gauss, *Philosophischer Handkommentar zu den Dialogen Platons*, I, 1 (1954), pp. 16-18: cp. E. Hoffmann, *Platon* (Zürich 1950), p. 35, cited by Gauss.

<sup>3</sup> *Valeur Critique de la Mystique Plotinienne* in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 59, August 1961 pp. 431-444. A revised version of this article is to appear in *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* in 1974.

<sup>4</sup> *Histoire de la Philosophie I; Le Néoplatonisme*, pp. 886-935.



One of Plotinus and Proclus: "Cet Un auquel on ne peut donner aucun attribut, pas même l'être ni l'unité, qu'on ne peut poser sans le retrancher, dont il n'y a ni pensée ni science, ni expérience, ni nom et dont pourtant on ne se passe point . . ." (pp. 894–5). He then goes on to point out the radical discontinuity between the intelligible order and the Absolute, and says "Le Principe n'est pas Vérité, comme le croira saint Augustin. Il n'y a pas de vérité absolue, puisque toute intelligibilité est dérivée et frappée de relativité" (p. 895). Next he proceeds to draw the consequences of this for our own thinking: it is at this point that, I think, Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists, and the patristic, mediaeval and Renaissance Christian thinkers would find him highly disconcerting. He begins this extremely penetrating little paragraph by saying "Si tout sujet pensant part nécessairement de l'Un en deçà de sa vie pensante aucun n'est prisonnier de l'évidence et chacun, au contraire, se trouve foncièrement affranchi de l'ordre noétique entier". And he ends it with the words "L'antériorité mystique aboutit donc à faire de l'esprit une liberté radicale et à rendre capable d'une critique que rien ne pourra limiter" (p. 896). It is also relevant to our purpose to quote his next sentence, which introduces a very interesting account of Plotinian procession. "S'il est des philosophes qui visent l'absolu comme un savoir intégral, la démarche plotinienne est tout autre. Elle se garde d'identifier l'Un et le Tout".

It seems to me that the side of Plotinus' thought which Trouillard has here so brilliantly summed up, with the implications which he rightly draws from it, must lead in the end, if consistently followed out, to nothing less than the abolition of the *kosmos noëtos*, the World of Ideas as it is presented in Aristotelianized late Platonism. It must lead, that is, to the denial of an eternal unchanging intelligible reality, which is in principle the supreme object of thought of all minds and must control our thinking, whether we come to know it by reason or by revelation. This means the end of two-world thinking, in which the static intelligible or spiritual world, the living but immobile Divine Mind, is the superior archetype of this changing and imperfect world of ours. The only *kosmos noëtos* which will survive in this way of thinking is a Heraclitean one, the ever-changing succession of created thoughts about the ever-changing created world, in which we may hope and believe that we receive lights from the Good sufficient for our personal needs in our particular time and place, but not of a kind which we can appropriate and fix and demand that others should accept as unchanging universal truths. The Good does not give us a share in his own ideas: he has not got any. He creates ideas in us to supply our needs at the time. He gives us each day our supersubstantial bread. Having seen that we can arrive in this way at the abandonment of two-world thinking from a Neoplatonic starting-point, we should remember that it has been remarked that the two worlds in Plotinus are often very close together. His thinking, as Mr. Peter Brown so well puts it, is "inner-worldly" rather than "other-

worldly". This is especially true when, in some passages which I have discussed elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, he finds himself compelled against his normal philosophical intention to introduce life as process, change and movement into his accounts of the Divine Intellect. In these the Eternal Mind seems to become something very like our minds seeking God, and the Eternal World our world seen "from the inside". We should remember, too, that it is very likely that Plato, during the period he wrote his later dialogues, was not thinking at all in the terms of the crude "Platonism" which sets an unchanging World of Forms over against a physical world in Heraclitean flux.<sup>2</sup> Trouillard and I have perhaps not gone so far outside Platonism as Plotinus and Proclus might have thought in these apparently hazardous speculations.

It should by now be abundantly clear to all patristic scholars that the Neoplatonic apophatic theology as I have presented it, with the implications which the Neoplatonists themselves did not see, was not fully comprehensible to, and could not have been accepted by, the Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries. And the same, I think is true of the mediaeval and post-mediaeval Christian Platonist tradition in the West, at least till the 19th century. Reasons for their failure to understand and inability to accept it can, in a paper like this, only be put forward very briefly and tentatively, as suggestions for further exploration. I believe them, of course, to have been good reasons for their own time, though no longer applicable in the very different intellectual climate of our own. At the deepest intellectual level the reason for the rejection of a fully apophatic theology was, perhaps, the classical Hellenic intellectualism which, as we have seen, had so strong a hold on the pagan Neoplatonists themselves. It was what Christós Yannarás, in a remarkable paper, calls "an ontology of ontic categories, that is, an ontology which examines all that exists and grasps its truth in terms of concepts . . . Directly or indirectly this ontological way of thinking identifies existence and thought"<sup>3</sup>. An important particular reason for regarding God as Supreme Intellect-Being, however mysterious and ineffable he was also said to be, was that the Fathers, like Philo before them, considered

<sup>1</sup> Eternity, Life and Movement in Plotinus' Accounts of Nous, in *Le Néoplatonisme* (Editions de Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1971), pp. 67–76.

<sup>2</sup> I am well aware that what I have extracted here from one side of Plotinus is in some ways not unlike the Platonism at which Gauss arrived by meditation on the later dialogues of Plato and which he expounded in his great *Philosophischer Handkommentar*. But I arrived at it independently, and have thought it best to present it as I found it, if only to avoid seeming to claim the support of that distinguished Christian philosopher for my own ineptitudes. His Christian Platonism is in many ways, especially epistemologically, much superior to that stumblingly presented here.

<sup>3</sup> "Orthodoxy and the West" tr. T. Stylianopoulos, in *Eastern Churches Review*, III, 3, Spring 1971, pp. 287–8 (the comment by Robert Murray, pp. 306–7, should be noted).

exemplarism to be essential to the doctrine of creation. It would have been, I think, historically impossible for them not to think in terms of Ideas in the mind of God which were archetypes of all things which he made. In particular, exemplarism is absolutely basic to the thought of St. Augustine about God.<sup>1</sup> Very closely connected with this is the obstacle presented by the development of Trinitarian theology. Once the Logos was firmly identified with a late Platonic Divine Intellect who was the self-expression or self-manifestation of the Father, the orthodox insistence on the consubstantiality and co-equality of the persons of the Trinity, must, it seems, inevitably lead to thinking of the Godhead as Supreme Intellect and Supreme Being, and is incompatible with the recognition of the gulf between Divine Intellect and the unknowable Good which Divine Intellect can only cross by leaving its knowing self behind. We should note here that the careful distinction which Origen may have made<sup>2</sup> between the Son's knowledge of the Father and the Father's more perfect knowledge of himself falls far short of the Neoplatonic doctrine which I have been describing. I do not think that the gulf between Intellect and the One (which in a Western patristic Christian form would have to be a gulf between Son and Father) appears, or could appear, in any Western patristic theologian influenced by late Platonism: it is not in Marius Victorinus, who of all the great philosophical theologians is closest to one form of Neoplatonism. This form however, which is probably Porphyrian, does not seem to emphasise the transcendence of the One over Intellect in the way in which Plotinus and Athenian Neoplatonists do. Porphyry's development of the thought of his master seems to have been in a strictly monistic or pantheistic direction, and this could leave no room for a discontinuity between Intellect and the One (I am not, of course, suggesting that Marius Victorinus was a pantheist). In Augustine this Trinitarian development is particularly important because he felt it his duty to make philosophical sense of the Trinity in terms of Neoplatonism as far as he understood it. It is, I believe, the attempt to explain the Trinity, not simply belief in the Trinity, which makes acceptance of the full apophatic theology impossible, whether the attempted explanation is avowedly philosophical or is philosophy disguised as theology or dogma, in which latter and more common case a good deal of talk about mystery is to be expected and the disguise may precariously protect the explanatory statements for a time from proper criticism.

I do not think that concern to maintain that God is personal played a large part in the refusal or misunderstanding of the full apophatic theology, or that it should have done so. Plotinus and Proclus seem to find it easier to think of the unknowable Good as in some sense personal, and our loving rela-

<sup>1</sup> A good clear short account can be found in Theodore Kondoleon, "Divine Exemplarism in Augustine", in *Augustinian Studies*, I (1970), pp. 181-195.

<sup>2</sup> *De Principiis*, IV, Fr. 39 Koetschau (from Jerome Ep. ad Avitum, 13 and Justinian Ep. ad Mennam, Mansi, IX, 525).

tionship with him as a personal one, than they do to think of Intellect-Being in personal terms: and this is quite natural, for the concepts of Intellect and Being are highly abstract and impersonal ones, and should be used as such by those who employ them. It seems to be only when the Neoplatonists use "Intellect" and "Being" as collective terms denoting a world of minds or living spiritual realities that they cease to be abstract and, sometimes, seem to indicate something like a personal community or communion with which our true, higher, selves are or can be united.

I have left myself little time to explain why this extremely negative doctrine of God, which the Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries, in the East, I think, as well as the West, could not accept, and which has on the whole remained alien to Western religious thinking, may have something very positive to contribute to theology in the intellectual climate of our own period. It should not be necessary to say much about the relativism and pluralism forced upon us by experience and history which has made it impossible for most people who think seriously in our world to believe that there are any incorrigible or infallible propositions or statements, established by philosophical reason or allegedly divine authority, which are in some way exempt from or unchangeable by that "criticism without limits" of which Trouillard speaks. For those of us who think like this the triumphant conclusions of a philosopher claiming to settle metaphysical questions finally, one way or another, or the *ex cathedra* utterances of an ecclesiastical authority intended to close a theological debate once and for all, or the assertions of a preacher that the Word of God in Scripture has made something for ever clear and certain, can all only be contributions to an endless discussion: which in the latter two cases may easily turn into a very critical discussion of the credentials of Book or Church to speak with absolute and exclusive divine authority, which will inevitably prove to be questionable. It would seem to me to be the abandonment of all intellectual integrity and honesty to bring in faith, as is so often done, to end this sort of discussion by in some pseudo-religious way imparting certainty to dubious evidence and to propositions which look to the scholar, historian or philosopher as if they needed drastic criticism. A genuine religious faith in our time must be compatible with limitless criticism. None of this will be in the least alarming to many of my audience, who will have long ago learnt to live and think as Christians without the support of metaphysical certainty or any kind of infallibility, and have excellent guides to doing so in their own traditions, especially in England. As for my more conservative coreligionists, and those who think like them, if history and experience have taught them nothing, they are not likely to listen to me. I would only ask them to consider seriously whether their demand for a certainty which is to most of us unattainable may not have done a great deal to destroy the religious faith of many: it has certainly come near to destroying mine, and would have done so if I had not found guides and helpers who will permit me to doubt.



What positive help then, can be given us in our Heraclitean religious situation, by the archaic apophatic theology which I have been trying to speak about, which ends by negating its own negations, and must necessarily reject any attempt to describe or formulate it (including, of course, that in this paper)? It is, obviously, a little difficult to say, though perhaps not so difficult to experience. I am not under any illusion that apophatic Neoplatonism is widely popular in our world, or is ever likely to become a fashionable way of thinking. But I have found it sufficiently helpful, and found enough people who are prepared to be seriously interested in it, to believe that it may be able to do something towards repairing the appalling harm that the maintenance of an absolutist and exclusive dogmatism, based on the concept of God as Intelligible Being, has done to our religion, especially in the last two centuries. In a very offbeat paper by an American girl which I read recently, full of quotations from the songs of a group called The Grateful Dead and other contemporary spiritual authorities, there occurred a most penetrating remark: "Plotinus really did help me. My favourite thing about him is that he didn't organize his Good". I think many people are looking for an unorganized and unorganizable Good as the only true object of worship, the source of value and the goal of desire, whose light shines everywhere in this ever-changing world as we contemplate it with our ever-changing minds. To "organize" the Good, I suppose, is to try to put him, or allege that he has put himself, into words and concepts: but words and concepts are human and transitory things, part of the everlasting discussion, and the only faith which can abide unchanged and unperturbed through the discussion is one based on a dim awareness of the unthinkable and unspeakable reality which creates, stimulates and eludes our minds as we discuss. It can be a very positive faith, generously and openly recognising the light and loving presence of the Good in all values, aesthetic, moral and religious, perceived throughout the world, and responsive to the obligations which they lay upon us when they appear. If and when it seems to us that the historical evidence permits — this is part of the subject-matter of the endless discussion — it may lead us not only to recognise the equal and equitable presence of the Good to all men, but to see his love perfectly manifested in a human life uniquely and mysteriously united to himself, as long as there is no denial of that equal and universal loving presence, no attempt to deify any set of human concepts, and no dishonest and arrogant devaluing or reduction to second-class status of the values shown to us in the heterodox or non-Christians. A faith of this sort is not the end of religious thought and discourse, but only the end of the claim to attain at any point to incorrigible intellectual certainty, philosophical or theological. After all, one cannot negate anything properly unless it has been fully stated and understood. Every affirmation which we can attempt to make about the Good must be fully developed and every effort made to explain and defend it before we can see that it will not do, if the negation is to have a properly liberating effect and to be the dest-

ruktion of an idol which will enable us to venerate the icons of the Good in the world.

Plotinus, I think, knew by experience and Proclus stated clearly in a passage to which Trouillard has drawn our attention<sup>1</sup> that it is impossible to awaken that in us by which we are united to the One without actively exercising our minds on every level and in every kind of thought: if we do not do so, Proclus warns us, we are liable to be led by our negations into the obscurity of non-being through the operation of our indefinite imagination. Reasoning in contemplation of the lights from the Good in the world is at least an indispensable religious exercise. Considered from this point of view the endless discussion which is our intellectual life, with the continual intuitions of value which cannot be organized into a fixed, unchanging universal system, can be seen as the everlasting dance of our minds in their splendid and uncircumscribable diversity, through the ever-changing glories of the creation, around the uncircumscribable Good.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the attitude of Plotinus in theory and practice to discursive reasoning and discussion, cp. my paper Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus, to be published in the volume of papers read at the Rome Plotinus Congress in October 1970, organized by the Accademia dei Lincei. The Proclus passage is In Parm. VI, 1071-2 Cousin, translated in part in J. Trouillard "L'Âme du *Timée* et l'Un du *Parménide* dans la Perspective Néoplatonicienne" (Revue Internationale de Philosophie, No. 92, Fasc. 2. 1970, p. 251).

<sup>2</sup> An extreme, passionate and magnificent statement of the essentials of apophatic theology can be found in the following verses of the great pagan Neoplatonist poet W. B. Yeats:

Then my delivered soul itself shall learn  
A darker knowledge and in hatred turn  
From every thought of God mankind has had.  
Thought is a garment and the soul's a bride  
That cannot in that trash and tinsel hide.  
Hatred of God may bring the soul to God.

At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure  
A bodily or mental furniture.  
What can she take until her Master give!  
Where can she look until He make the show!  
What can she know until He bid her know!  
How can she live till in her blood He live!

(3rd and 4th stanzas of Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient. Supernatural Songs 5) in A Full Moon in March (London 1935) pp. 65-66). I think that these lines express a current of thought which runs very deep in our tradition, not always due to any conscious influence of Neoplatonism, which leads people to reject all talk about God, especially when it takes an authoritarian tone and demands assent, as inadequate or, often, unworthy, *μη Θεογονετός*. Mistaken Christian responses to this rejection (e. g. accusations of spiritual pride or atheism) can have disastrous consequences for Christianity.