

## Later patristic philosophy: Gregory of Nyssa, Marius Victorinus, Ambrose

In AD 313, the imperial Edict of Milan initiated a new era of religious legitimacy for Christianity; shortly thereafter, the great ecumenical Council of Nicaea (AD 324-5) began the process of defining orthodoxy with imperial support. Christian philosophy was influenced by both events. No longer was there a need for political polemics in defence of the faith, although the effort to present Christianity to educated pagans continued unabated. Now, internal efforts to define and explain the doctrines of orthodoxy came to the fore.

These developments are particularly evident in the works of three Cappadocian bishops, Gregory Nazianzen (circa AD 330-90), Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa (circa AD 330-90). Of these, the most philosophically acute was Gregory of Nyssa, whose theology is much influenced by Origen and by post-Plotinian Platonism (see Neoplatonism). Unlike Origen, Gregory did not ground his thought exclusively on a model of free will and psychic precipitation. Rather, divine creation is the dominant image and the soul but a creature conditioned by God's providential intention. That eternal plan involved materiality and the body. Thus the fall constituted a desecration of human nature, but it did not generate the mingling of soul with body. The misery of human life can be overcome only by restoration of our original state through God's intervention, through Christ. Philosophy can guide the soul to recognition of its condition, but the soul can be saved only by God's activity. Philosophy alone can never be sufficient for salvation.

Gregory's thought put a renewed emphasis on the conceptual transcendence of God, so that the divine Father was presented along Plotinian lines as being beyond all predicative descriptions. In Gregory's case, this view was based upon a sharp recognition of divine infinity. The created soul has, as its future course, the eternal process of the contemplation of God's infinitude; unification of the human soul with the one God can never be wholly consummated.

Gregory of Nyssa and the other Cappadocians are evidence of a great emergence of Christian Platonism in the Greek world of the late fourth century. This same post-Nicene flowering of philosophical theology also occurred in the western portions of the Empire. Here the influence of the Greek philosophical schools was somewhat less direct, in part because of linguistic difficulties, but it was still felt. Marius Victorinus was a Roman rhetorician much influenced by the works of the Plotinian school; he translated some of these into Latin and wrote treatises with a pronounced Neoplatonic influence in defence of Nicene orthodoxy. For Victorinus, Platonism seemed a conceptual resource and philosophical ally of Christian orthodoxy. This is also true to an extent of Ambrose, the great fourth-century bishop of Milan, who was concerned not only with re-drafting Christian theology in a Platonic idiom accessible to cultured pagans, but also with presenting Christian asceticism and theology as a successful rival to Platonic philosophy. His strategy had internal resonance within Christianity as well, allowing orthodoxy to assert its superiority to Arianism, Manicheism and other forms of Christianity (see Manicheism). His greatest success was the conversion (from Manicheism) of the North African rhetorician Augustine, whom he baptized in AD 387. It was the preaching of Ambrose, together with his treatises, that led Augustine to study 'the books of the Platonists' which Marius Victorinus had translated. This proved a spiritually volatile mixture, sending Augustine into an orthodox Christian trajectory and a life of asceticism.

### Later patristic philosophy: Augustine, Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius

Like Gregory of Nyssa and Ambrose, Augustine was determined to construct a coherent Christian theology which could stand as a compelling alternative to the still active and prestigious pagan tradition. It is well to remember that Julian the Apostate, the recidivist emperor who sought to restore a paganism through the revitalization of polytheistic cult and Neoplatonic theology, ruled during Augustine's youth (AD 361-3). Augustine's thought might well be considered as a fresh response to the same set of desiderata as had moved Gregory and Ambrose: problems internal to Christianity and external ideas which were hostile to orthodoxy. Perhaps because he read little Greek and had an informal philosophical education, Augustine's thought is less a Christianized Platonism than it is a systematic development of Christian theology, using Platonic epistemology and metaphysics. Often Augustine seems intent on answering classical philosophical questions in novel, Christian ways.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the *Confessiones* (Confessions), where Augustine carefully asserts his own personal success at Plotinian contemplation in the vision at Ostia, only to conclude that pagan philosophy, while providing the soul with epistemic access to God, was inadequate as a means of assuring continuing salvific association with God. Augustine presents this theme as an autobiographical refutation both of Manichean materialism, now confounded by the soul's transcendental vision through contemplation, and Platonism, found wanting in its prideful over-estimation of the soul's natural proximity to the eternal and the divine. These opponents are the background to the brilliantly original account of memory and time in Books X and XI of the *Confessiones*, where the phenomenology of the fallen, embodied, and temporally constrained soul is explored. This account of the human soul constructing a lapsarian self and so constituting time as the medium of its collective anxiety and loss had a decided impact on the development of the introspective consciousness of the West and on the framing of a philosophical account of Genesis.

Throughout the vast corpus of his later writings, Augustine frequently makes use of philosophical notions, usually in contexts whose primary focus is theological. In the *De civitate Dei* (City of God), however, he returns to the question of the value of philosophy, especially Platonism. In this sustained argument, he makes plain his admiration for the intellectual utility of philosophy, while rejecting the philosophers' pretence to salvific efficacy and excoriating their continuing acceptance of polytheistic cult. It is interesting to note that Augustine views Platonism as a natural approximation to Christianity, achieved through reason but without the benefit of revelation. Yet the Platonists were, in the end, spiritually incoherent, accepting a first principle, the Good or One, while countenancing polytheistic worship.

While Augustine was in many respects a *sui generis* thinker with a penchant for original reflection on philosophical topics, there were other Christian thinkers in late antiquity whose works were more clearly bound by philosophical conventions. Boethius is an outstanding example. An active member of the Roman senatorial circle during the Ostrogothic period in Italy, Boethius undertook the revival of technical philosophy at a time of its marked decline in the western provinces. He translated and commented on some of Aristotle's logical works, and wrote a series of five theological treatises on the Christological debates of his time. Most important for medieval and renaissance readers, he

completed the *De consolazione philosophiae* (Consolation of Philosophy), a protreptical work on the value of the philosophic life, while a political prisoner before his execution. In most respects, Boethius was a conventional Christian Platonist, although the Christian element can be found only in his theological works (see Platonism, medieval). His efforts to articulate and defend the congruity of divine foreknowledge and human freedom were critical to later medieval scholasticism, as were his commentaries on Aristotle. His pupil Cassiodorus continued aspects of the encyclopedic legacy of Boethius, concentrating his efforts on articulating the seven traditional liberal arts (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). He also wrote a treatise on the soul, arguing that it is transcendent of materiality, but distinct from God in its capacity for evil. As is the case with his teacher Boethius, Cassiodorus is significant primarily for his role in transmitting classical philosophy to the medieval age (see Encyclopedists).

At about the same time (early sixth century) in the Greek East there surfaced a collection of treatises under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite (St Paul's Athenian convert in Acts 17). The identity of the actual author has been the subject of extended speculation and remains undetermined, although the works came to be accepted as genuine in both the Byzantine East and later in the Carolingian West (see Pseudo-Dionysius). These treatises represent the high-water mark of compatibilism between Christianity and late Platonism. They centre on the absolute predicative transcendence of God. The soul must grasp the total darkness of divinity as well as the vast manifestation of its hidden nature in the cosmos that emerged from it. The whole of reality is a theophany, an expression of the One who cannot be known *per se*. The levels of reality that are manifest to us constitute grades of being, each part of a pattern of divine self-presentation and return. The concept of God, while undefinable, is not privative or nugatory but can be partially understood as characterizing the source of reality.

This theology represents a Christian redaction of the pagan Platonism of the fifth century. While assuredly Christian in its theological terminology, its basic ontology is intelligible only when read against the metaphysics of the pagan Neoplatonists. This was one possible line for Christian intellectual development. However, there were others who resisted such assimilation. Chief among them was John Philoponus, who was active in the Greek East during the first half of the sixth century. Philoponus was sharply opposed to pagan Neoplatonism, especially that of Proclus. He criticized Aristotelian and Neoplatonic claims about the eternity of the cosmos, and favoured a model of temporal creation. Even if the world were beginningless, it must be seen as a contingent system that depended for its existence upon a transcendent source. In his view, the eternalism of the pagan cosmologists occluded this central metaphysical point (see Eternity of the world, medieval views of). Moreover, the commitment of many pagan Platonists to a theory of necessary cosmic emanation from the One further confused the issue. In consequence, Philoponus attempted to clarify the fundamental ontological dependence of a contingent cosmos upon its divine creator. He is a representative of a vigorous Christian philosophical movement in late antiquity which sought to sharpen the lines of conceptual demarcation between Christianity and pagan Platonism, while using common methods of philosophical argumentation to achieve that end.

The closing of the pagan Platonic academy in Athens was ordered by the Emperor Justinian in 529. Subsequently philosophy continued in a variety of Christian philosophical schools, each committed to different, rival theologies, including monophysites,

Chalcedonians and Nestorians. It was on this foundation that later Byzantine Christian philosophy and early Islamic philosophy were able to develop, transmitting the thought of both the classical and the patristic traditions into the medieval period.