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II. From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius

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IAMBlichus WAS BORN IN SYRIA, probably between 245 and 250; Damascius was born in Damascus and died after 538; the dates of these two figures give a time span of roughly three centuries. Iamblichus lived and taught in Syria, and his pupils spread his doctrine to Pergamum and Ephesus in Asia, as well as to Athens. Syrianus, who was from Alexandria, and Proclus, whose origins were in Lycia, took up Iamblichus's heritage and nurtured it in Athens, where they headed a flourishing school of Platonic thought in the fifth century. The last head of this school was Damascius. So it was in the Oriental basin of the Mediterranean that, over the course of some three hundred years, Neoplatonic philosophy and spirituality grew and developed.

The works of all these Neoplatonic philosophers, from Iamblichus to Damascius, deal almost exclusively with the nature of the divine and the hierarchy of the gods. "Theology as a science" is, therefore, a notion that originated with and was developed by them. Moreover, as philosophy in Greece was always more a way of life than a mere intellectual activity, the spiritual life of these philosophers came to be a constant sort of prayer or liturgy—and this precisely at a time when Christian emperors were forbidding the worship of pagan gods, closing down temples, and removing statues of worship and transforming them into decorative garden pieces, that is, a time when prayer had become an inner or silent matter and liturgy a private or household one. In this context their philosophical activity itself was transformed into a cult of worship of the gods.

Theology as a Science

In the *Parmenides*, Plato has his hero, Parmenides of Elea, say that a philosopher should be completely trained in dialectic "if he really wants to perceive the truth" (136C5). Proclus comments here:

What is the goal that Plato ascribes to this training? He says it is the vision of the truth. We understand this remark not to be about truth purely and simply, but about that same truth of which he told us in another dialogue

(*Phaedrus* 248B5–6) that it is the moving force of the immense effort to see where the region of the Truth lies. Our whole life is thus a training for that vision, and a roundabout journey via dialectic leads us to that haven; that is why he speaks of a wholly admirable method of elucidating it in depth: indeed, souls really obtain that vision through a series of multiple, intermediary steps. (*On Plato's Parmenides* 5.1015.33–1016.3, Cousin)

This is how Proclus explains the meaning of the spiritual life which he both leads and recommends to his disciples.

For Proclus, the expression "vision of the truth" has a very specific meaning, in that the truth that he is seeking is a theological one. Prior to Proclus, the Greek tradition had sought sources of theology in myths interpreted by allegorical methods, in acts of cult that were defined by the literature of the *Aitia*, and in the interpretation of the oracles; but no one had ever as yet attempted to draw these sources exclusively from the works of Plato, who, in Proclus's eyes, had become "the guide to true mysteries and the hierophant of integral and immobile apparitions" (Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.1, Saffrey–Westerink). The immediate result of this development was the birth of a new type of theology. Indeed, if up to Proclus's time three types of theology were well known—that of myth, that of public cult, and that of the philosophy of nature—now, "theology as a science" was to be discovered and developed, inasmuch as the living sources of theology were to be drawn from the rational work of one philosopher. This gave rise to a "scientific theology," which was different from all the others because of the systematic and coherent nature of its discourse. Proclus supports this idea as follows: "Plato is the only one to have undertaken the establishment of proper distinctions and to have provided for the organized procession, in good marching order, of all the divine classes and their mutual differences, the characteristics common to all the categories and those which are specific to each one" (Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.4).

As such, true spiritual life would henceforth consist of reading Plato—in particular the *Parmenides*, the theological dialogue *par excellence*. The Neoplatonists interpreted the negations of the first hypothesis as "a theological hymn in honor of the One" (Proclus *On Plato's Parmenides* 7.1191.34–35), a hymn that Proclus takes up in his own way in the *Platonic Theology*, when he says of the First God:

Let us extol him by a sort of hymn without saying that it was he who brought the earth and the sky into existence, or that he created souls and the species of all living things (for, to be truthful, this was no doubt also his work, but only the very last one); let us extol him instead for having brought to light the whole intelligible class of gods and the whole intellectual class of gods, all the hypercosmic gods and all the encosmic gods; and let us say

that he is god among all the gods, henad among the henads, beyond the first *adyta*, more ineffable than all silence and more unknowable than all existence, a holy god, hidden in the holiness of the intelligible gods. (2.11)

Let us also add to this important text the prayer that opens Proclus's commentary on the *Parmenides*:

I beg all the gods and all the goddesses to guide my spirit towards the goal I am ascribing to myself and, having kindled in me the shining light of the truth, to deploy my intelligence so that it attains the true knowledge of Being, to open up the doors of my soul and allow it to receive the divinely inspired doctrine of Plato, and, having put into motion my cognitive faculty towards that which is most luminous within Being (*Republic* 7.518C9), to put an end to my claim to wisdom and to my wandering among non-beings, through the completely intellectual study of Being, on which the eye of the soul *feeds* and *drinks*, as Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* (247D2; 251B3); I pray to the intelligible gods for a perfect intellect; to the intellectual gods for elevating power; to the supracestial masters of the universe for an infrangible energy, free of material knowledge; to the gods who have the world as their lot, for a life equipped with wings; to the angelic choirs for a true revelation of divine things; to the good demons for fulness of inspiration from the gods; to the heroes for a magnanimous, serious and sublime state of soul; in short, I beg all the divine classes to form in me a perfect disposition for participating in Plato's thoroughly epoptic and mystical doctrine, which he himself reveals to us in the *Parmenides*, as deeply as is appropriate to the realities he is handling, and which was developed after him, by one who, using his purest intuitions, truly imbued himself, along with Plato, with dionysiac inebriation, who was filled with divine truth and who has become for us the master of this doctrine and the true hierophant of these divine revelations. I would gladly say that this man [Syrianus] has come to represent among men philosophy for the sake of procuring the well-being of souls here below, to replace devotional statues, sacred ceremonies, and the whole of worship itself, and as a guide to salvation, at least for men of today and for those who will be born after them. (1.617.1–618.13)

If in "that which is most luminous within Being," one recognizes the first god, the Good/One, according to the exegesis of Proclus himself (*Platonic Theology* 2.7), one discovers in this fine text the complete classification of those gods that Proclus discovered in the first and second hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. To each of these divine classes, Proclus addresses his prayer, asking each one to bestow on him a specific virtue directed to the supreme knowledge of the first god.

Oracles and Theurgy

For Proclus, mystical knowledge and the masters of religious philosophy have taken the place not only of devotional statues but of all worship itself.

As already mentioned above, to read the *Parmenides* is to perform the true religious act, and the practice of philosophical virtues is real ritual purification. The ideal of the Neoplatonic philosophers thus becomes the celebration of divinity through the creation of scientific theology. In other words, the celebration of divinity has become an entirely intellectual process; it is the *religio mentis*.

At the origin of this movement and of utmost importance was the need to obtain the principles of philosophy from oracular-type revelations. This need goes back to the second century, when the Platonic orator Maximus of Tyre—asking himself the question: Who is god, according to Plato?—cried out: "Oh why have I no oracle to consult, be it Zeus's or Apollo's, so long as I obtain an answer which is neither obscure nor ambiguous?" It is worth noting here that it was during the second century that large collections of oracles were compiled, in which the gods not only answered questions about everyday life but revealed, above all, their nature and properties. The second century was indeed one of theological oracles, the most famous of which are the *Chaldaean Oracles*,¹ which probably appeared for the first time in Syria and which transmitted revelations through a medium who was understood to interrogate Plato's soul.² No wonder Plato recited his own philosophy in these oracles! They remained unheard of for one or two centuries, but then, thanks to Iamblichus, they became famous. Indeed, in his falsely titled *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus turned them into the ultimate theological authority, and he wrote an enormous commentary on them, which unfortunately is lost to us.

The entry of the *Chaldaean Oracles* into the domain of philosophy brought with it two important consequences. The first concerned spiritual life itself. Indeed, not only was theological speculation now nourished by an element infinitely rich in varied interpretations, but day-to-day life and personal piety were also transformed. The *Oracles*, by teaching that every living creature possessed a symbol or character trait that came directly from the gods, gave virtually everyone a means of recapturing this divine origin. Indeed, in order to conform to divinity, conscious beings could liberate the divine character within themselves or make use of material things that bore the mark of some specific divine symbol. Thereafter, all they had to do was to cultivate, manipulate, and adore these symbols so as to encounter the divine and possess it. This new esoteric practice, called "theurgy,"³ was first developed by Iamblichus and his disciples, whose feats the historian Eunapius recounts. Iamblichus knew how to bring statues to life and bring about divine apparitions. His disciple Maximus of Ephesus, who became Julian the emperor's chief adviser on religious matters at a time when Julian was trying to restore pagan religion, used magic formulas to make the statue of

the goddess Hecate smile and to light up the torches she held in her hands (Eunapius *Lives of the Sophists* 7.2.7–12, Giangrande). Indeed, the Neoplatonic philosophers were well versed in horoscopic methods, in arts of divination and the like. Proclus himself was favored with apparitions of Hecate; he could, at will, bring about rain and avert earthquakes; he practiced soothsaying by means of the tripod and called up oracles for himself! (Marinus *Life of Proclus* 28, Boissonade).

At the same time, the “theology of characters” sums up Proclus’s entire mystique; indeed, he claims:

There are three true characters which fill divine beings and extend across all the divine classes: goodness, knowledge, and beauty; there are also three true characters which bring together what has been filled; they are inferior to the first, but they extend across all the divine worlds: faith, truth, and love. Through them the world is preserved in existence and joined to the primordial causes by an intermediary, whether it be love’s madness, divine philosophy, or theurgic power, which is better than all wisdom and all human knowledge, because it concentrates within itself the advantages of divination, the purifying forces of rites carried out, and, in short, all the operations performed when one is possessed by the divine. (Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.25)

Theurgy is thus the surest means of attaining union with god.

The second consequence is perhaps even more important. The utilization of the *Chaldaean Oracles* as theological authority in fact gave the Neoplatonists a new way of reading and interpreting the Platonic texts. Since the *Oracles* were Platonic, Plato himself became a god capable of proffering oracles; his writings thus became the revelation of a sublime doctrine, a truly “holy scripture.” Proclus is certain that

the truth about the gods is spread throughout virtually all the Platonic dialogues and that in them are scattered, more obscurely in some, more clearly in others, the venerable, luminous, and supernatural concepts of the very primary philosophy, which awaken the consciousness to an understanding of the immaterial and transcendent existence of the gods, for those who are minimally capable of grasping them. (*Platonic Theology* 1.5)

After this, any reading of Plato becomes a *lectio divina*. One of the actual goals of Neoplatonic theology is thus to put Plato and the *Oracles* into full harmony one with the other: faith in one implies faith in the other! This attitude also explains the tremendous exegetical work on Platonic texts that was carried out, in particular, by the Neoplatonists of the school of Athens. Indeed, most of their philosophy consists of interpretations of Platonic texts, and these very interpretations resulted in their explication of “scientific theology.”

Contemplation and Prayer

Thus shaped by a constant reading of the ancients, Proclus attained contemplative wisdom. Marinus tells us:

He [Proclus] used to experience a dionysiac ecstasy for the first principles and to contemplate face to face the truly blessed visions of the Beyond. . . . [And then] not only did he grasp without any difficulty all theologies—Greek theology, Barbarian theology [that of the *Chaldaean Oracles*] and that theology which is hidden in fictional myths [the Orphic poems], but he brought them to light for those who wished to and were able to understand them, explaining all things under inspiration from the gods and making all theologies agree. (*Life of Proclus* 22)

He meditated and prayed, not only by day, but by night as well.

Even when he allowed himself a little leisure after the labours of the day and finally gave his body over to sleep, perhaps even then his intellect did not stop thinking. In any case, as soon as he could, he always chased away this light sleep, considering it a kind of laziness of the soul, and since the hour of prayer had not come as yet, because only a small part of the night had elapsed, meditating on his bed, he composed hymns, or else, examining some point of doctrine, he found the solution and, rising at daybreak, he put it down in writing. (*Life of Proclus* 24)

Neoplatonic philosophers were contemplative people who meditated and prayed. Their practices in prayer are known to us not only from the hymns they composed that have come down to us but also from the theory of prayer that they formulated. This theory is well explained by Proclus at the beginning of book 2 of his commentary on the *Timaeus*. He reminds us here that Iamblichus used to explain that praying was principally the activity “of beings capable of being saved by Those who save the whole universe,” that is, by the gods and their providence. Because prayers must accompany rites to explain their meaning, “they perfect worship and bind us in an indissoluble way to holy communion with the gods” (Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 5.26). And Iamblichus continues:

The first stage in prayer is to bring about contact: it puts us into contact with the divine and acquaints us with it; the second stage binds this agreement into a joint action, asking the gods to send us gifts from Above, before we have even spoken; and even before we have had a chance to think, the entire operation has taken place. In the last stage, the ineffable union is sealed; its entire efficacy relies on the gods and our souls are laid to perfect rest in them. (Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 5.26)

Proclus puts into practice his theory that the gods have stamped divine characters onto everything that exists when he shows us that praying itself

consists of seeking these characters out and using them in order to ascend to their authors. He says:

Thanks to the ineffable signs of the gods, which the Father of souls has sown into our souls, prayer attracts the benevolence of the gods: on the one hand, it unites those who are praying to the gods to which they are addressing their prayers; and, on the other hand, it unites the intellect of the gods to the reasoning of those who pray; it moves those who contain abundant good within themselves to a desire to distribute it generously; in general, it is through prayer that we persuade the gods and that we place in their hands all that pertains to us. (Proclus *On Plato's Timaeus* 1, Diehl)

These different stages of prayer are analyzed more completely by Proclus than by Iamblichus. First there exists the knowledge of the gods; then there exists the act of making oneself resemble the divine through personal purity, chastity, education, and good behavior; then comes the act of entering into contact with the divine essence through the summit of the soul; then one comes into close encounter with the gods; and, finally, one unites oneself with them. Proclus advises as follows:

He who really wants to give himself over to prayer should do the following: render the gods propitious and, in general, activate within himself his notions of the gods; devote himself to the continuous cult of divinity; keep constant the order of divine works; strive for those virtues which free us from the earthly element and guide us up to god—not only that admirable triad, faith, truth, and love, but also the hope of true good unchanging receptivity to the divine light; lastly, the ecstasy which frees us from all other preoccupations so that we can unite ourselves to god alone. (*On Plato's Timaeus* 1)

The idea of uniting oneself to god alone is at the very heart of Proclus's mystique, and we can almost imagine Proclus composing his hymns in the middle of the night to celebrate the feasts of both Greek and barbarian gods. He held vigils of prayers for them, and John Lydus even refers to Proclus's "book of hymns" (*De mensibus*, Wuensch)

Hymns

From this book of hymns, only eight have come down to us. They are dedicated to the Sun, to Aphrodite (the mother of spiritual and physical love), to the Muses, to the gods of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, to Lycian Aphrodite (Proclus's origins were in Xanthos, in Lycia), to Hecate and Janus, to Athena of Good Counsel, and to Ares.⁴ These hymns are all composed in the same manner. They are divided into two parts: the first is an invocation to the specific god or goddess, who is designated by name and by his or her traditional attributes, all of which are derived from the most learned

20. A Divine Contest and Attendants. Detail of three-sided relief (Boston Throne). Found in Rome. Ca. 470–460 B.C.



mythology; the second is a prayer of request, in which one is struck by the personal sincerity and tender devotion of its author. For example, Proclus's hymn to the Muses, the goddesses of intellectual life:

We sing of the light which leads mortals to the mountain-tops; we sing of the nine daughters of Great Zeus, goddesses with extremely sweet voices, who, through the immaculate rites conveyed by the books which give life to the spirit, deliver souls wandering in the depths of existence from worldly and mortal sufferings; by raising them up from above the deep tides of oblivion, they teach them to hasten to follow their footsteps and to ascend, completely pure, to the star which is related to them and from which they separated themselves the day they fell onto the shores of becoming, captured by a mad desire for material destiny.

Therefore, Goddesses, cause this urge in me towards worldly agitations to cease and inebriate me with the intellectual myths transmitted by the Sages; do not allow the race of men who do not know the fear of God to lead me to stray from the most divine, most bright, most fruitful path; and endlessly draw my wandering soul out of the pitiful confusion of becoming, towards pure light, loading it with the produce of your hives, food for the intellect, so that it ever preserves the glory of a beautiful song, filling the heart with enthusiasm. (Proclus *Hymn 3*, Vogt)

Proclus makes a special request to each of the divinities, in accordance with their specific natures. For example:

To the Sun:

Image of the Supreme Generative God, you who lead souls upwards, hear me, keep me pure at all times from all faults; receive my prayer which is full of tears; deliver me from wretched stain, preserve me from the avenging goddesses, by softening the sharp glance of Justice, which sees all. By your aid, which turns away evil, ever continue to grant my soul pure light in rich abundance and dissipate the poisonous clouds, destroyers of mortals, which obscure me. (*Hymn 1*)

To Aphrodite:

Hear me, and with your infallible arrows guide the sorrowful course of my life, O Sovereign, causing the icy urge of unholy desire to cease. (*Hymn 2*)

To Athena of Good Counsel:

Hear me, you whose face glows with pure light; grant to me, a wanderer on earth, a blessed port; grant my soul, in return for holy hymns composed by me in your honor, pure light, wisdom, love; breathe into my soul, through love, enough power and of a kind which will draw it out of the hollows of the earth and return it to Olympus, to the home of its Father. (*Hymn 7*)

The personal character of these hymns is striking; what also strikes one is Proclus's nostalgia for the region of pure light, for the kingdom of the divine.

Damascius gives us an idea of what constituted the "philosophical way of life," according to customs of the most rigorous piety, when he describes the life of Sarapion, an Egyptian friend of his master Isidorus:

He lived alone in a very small house where he led a truly solitary life, and he only had dealings with certain of his neighbours for indispensable necessities. He lived, essentially, in prayer, and dressed as a common man, he made the rounds of sacred places, wherever traditional feast days led him. But most often, he spent his time at home, leading not a human life, but an absolutely divine one, while he continually proffered prayers, praises of divine marvels, either to himself, or directed to the gods; but on the whole, he pondered in silence. He was endlessly in pursuit of the truth and he was a natural contemplator. He refused to bother himself with the more technical points of philosophy, but concerned himself with broader questions leading to the state of divine possession. That was why he owned and read practically nothing but Orpheus. (Damascius *Life of Isidorus*)

Another collection of hymns that attests to this tradition of "prayer through hymn" in philosophical circles is the collection of so-called Orphic Hymns.⁵ This collection appears to have been the "choir book" of a religious community in Asia Minor that in its religious devotion intermingled Orphic divinities and Dionysus. Each of these hymns is headed by the name of a god or goddess to which the hymn is addressed, and an indication is given of the kind of incense that should be offered up to the deity at the same time as the hymn is being sung. The idea that incense is offered at the same time as a hymn is sung is typical of pagan worship in late antiquity. This collection of Orphic Hymns begins with two hymns: one to Hecate (the goddess of the *Chaldaean Oracles*) and the other to Artemis (the patron goddess of Asia—in particular, of Ephesus); these two initial hymns are followed by a series of hymns addressed to the gods of Orphic theology—the Sky, the Stars, the Moon, and Nature; these, in turn, are followed by a series of hymns addressed to the gods of Olympian mythology—Pan, Heracles, Cronos, Zeus, and, above all, Dionysus, in honor of whom seven individual hymns are addressed. One wonders how this "choir book" of hymns came down to us in the first place. There may be some indication, perhaps, in the fact that Proclus's hymns are contained in all the manuscripts of the Orphic Hymns. Moreover, we know from Marinus that Proclus was forced to go into exile in Asia for a whole year. As Marinus says:

The gods provided him with the opportunity to make that journey so that he would not fail to be initiated into the more ancient rites as well, which are still kept up among the peoples there. In fact, he learned about their practices in detail and they, in turn, accepted his teaching because some of

their ceremonies had been neglected due to the passage of time; and the philosopher explained to them, in a more complete way, what divine worship consisted of. (*Life of Proclus* 14)

This important text shows the Neoplatonic philosopher as both one who collects ancient traditions and one who teaches those who are neglectful of their religious practices. The philosopher is thus not a mere armchair theoretician but also a sort of teacher or educator of the pious.

After Proclus and up until the end of paganism, there were other philosophers who composed hymns. Isidorus, a pupil of Proclus, for example, did a fair amount of composing; another of Proclus's pupils, Asclepiodotus, "increased the corpus of hymns," which is a further testimony to the fact that hymns were composed and collected in the school of Athens.⁶ A generation later, Asclepiades, who was a pupil of Isidorus, composed a series of hymns in honor of the Egyptian gods, and it is possible that two acrostic hymns in honor of Dionysus and Apollo, which are preserved in the *Palatine Anthology* (book 9, nos. 524, 525), are related to this type of collection. Finally, attention has never been drawn to the fact that in Proclus's commentary on the *Cratylus*, one line is probably quoted from a hymn in honor of the goddess Hestia:

Young men, hail Hestia, most ancient of the goddesses.
(*In Cratylum* 138, Pasquali)

This fact is to be considered in connection with the official cult in the cities, where the goddess played the role of guardian of the prytaneum—in other words, of the town hall—for example, at Ephesus.⁷ In Egypt, too, she appears on that extraordinary piece of tapestry, now kept in Washington, that actually represents "Hestia, full of blessings."⁸ This portrayal is something like an "icon" of the goddess and of her gifts: light and fire, riches, joy, good reputation, the celebration of official banquets, virtue, and progress—in short, everything that a well-educated, good citizen could wish for. Hestia had always been the goddess of the family hearth, but with time she became also the goddess of the communal hearth of the whole city, on which the immortal or permanent fire was burning. Perhaps we are touching on a tiny but real trace of the influence of Neoplatonic spirituality on the urban citizens, which might even have played some sort of role in the resistance to the movement to christianize the empire.

Devotion

Devotion to traditional Greek divinities is thus a basic part of the spirituality of the Neoplatonic philosophers. Proclus is the one we know most

about, in this respect, because of a funeral oration that Marinus composed in praise of him (a funeral oration falsely titled the *Life of Proclus*). We know from Marinus that Proclus considered his philosophical vocation to have come from the goddess Athena. Proclus was born in Constantinople, and the guardian goddess of Byzantium happened to be Athena. Of course, Proclus was born there purely by chance, because his father, a lawyer, happened to be there at the time of Proclus's birth—but, nevertheless, Marinus says: "I think that this fact led to his great affinity for the goddess [Athena], so much so, that he not only made a point of celebrating her feasts, but he also performed her rites with utmost enthusiasm" (*Life of Proclus* 6). Years later, when Proclus returned to Constantinople with his professor of rhetoric, Athena appeared to him there and "urged him to study philosophy and visit the schools of Athens" (*Life of Proclus* 9). When Proclus finally arrived in Piraeus, he made his way to the acropolis and arrived there just as the doors were about to be closed. The custodian said to him: "I was actually going to close up, if you had not arrived" (*Life of Proclus* 10). Proclus, of course, interpreted this as meaning that before it was too late, he should take up the heritage of Athena's spirit, which still reigned in the Parthenon. Finally, several years later, when the cult statue of the goddess Athena was removed from her temple by the Christian emperors, Proclus heard the voice of the goddess telling him that she vowed to live with him evermore. Proclus's home thus became Athena's sanctuary (*Life of Proclus* 30). A closer or more intimate bond between a man and his god cannot be imagined. Indeed, Proclus considered himself a child of Athena.⁹

After Athena, the god probably most revered by Proclus was Asclepius. In general, this savior god was universally revered, and the cult of Asclepius, even more than that of the emperors, presented a challenge to Christianity. Marinus devotes two entire chapters to Proclus's relationship to Asclepius (*Life of Proclus* 30, 32), and he tells us how Proclus's prayers cured little Asclepigeneia:

Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Archiadas and Ploutarche, the wife of our benefactor Theagenes, while still a little girl being brought up by her parents, was suffering one day from a serious illness which the doctors could not cure. Archiadas, whose hopes for posterity lay with her alone, was in great distress and, as one can imagine, in a pitiful state. While the doctors were despairing, he, as had been his custom in the most serious of circumstances, sought out the philosopher as his only hope, as his only savior, and with persistent supplications, he asked him to pray immediately for the recovery of his daughter. Proclus took along with him the great Pericles of Lydia, a man who was a great friend of wisdom, and together they went up to the Asclepieion, to pray to the god there, on behalf of the ailing girl. In fact, at the

time, the city still had the good fortune of benefitting from the presence of the god and the temple of the Savior had not as yet been pillaged. And while Proclus prayed, according to ancient rite, a sudden change took place in the little girl and she immediately felt easier: the Savior, inasmuch as he was a god, had truly cured her with ease. Having completed these ceremonies, Proclus visited Asclepigeneia and found her completely healthy, although she had just been relieved of the evils which were besieging her body. (*Life of Proclus* 29)

The philosopher cures diseases in hopeless cases; the theologian is truly a mediator between god and worshiper. This is the image that Marinus so admirably depicts in his *Life of Proclus*.

Another chapter in Marinus is devoted to Proclus's friendship with the god Pan and with the mother of the gods (*Life of Proclus* 33). In yet another chapter, Marinus tells us that "each month, Proclus observed the feast-days of the Mother of the gods, which were honored among the Romans,—even earlier, among the Phrygians; he observed the Egyptians' unlucky days better than the Egyptians themselves, and, in addition, he fasted on certain days for reasons peculiar to himself, namely, divine visitations." Marinus admirably depicts Proclus when he says: "Our most pious hero always had the following saying on the tip of his tongue: that the philosopher should not only be the priest of a single city or of certain particular peoples, but that he should be the universal hierophant of the whole world" (*Life of Proclus* 19). This was an admirable project indeed, and Proclus fulfilled it entirely, seeking throughout his life a constant harmony between the religious traditions of the entire universe.

Other Gods

To complete our description of Neoplatonic piety, we need to mention here that from the middle of the fifth century until the end of the school of Athens (529) the survival of pagan piety was clandestine because of the constant surveillance of the Christian authorities. An episode in Proclus's life that dates to the year 430–431 is highly symptomatic of this. The young Proclus had just arrived in Athens, and when he presented himself to Syrianus, the latter led him to the philosopher Plutarch, who was the head of the school of Athens at the time. Marinus tells us:

Also present at their meeting was Lachares, a man completely imbued with philosophical doctrines and who had been a pupil of philosophy under Syrianus himself. He was present, as I was saying, at their meeting. It was the twilight hour. They were still engaged in conversation when the sun set and the moon made its first appearance after its conjunction with the sun. They were trying to dismiss the young man, after having greeted him,

inasmuch as he was a stranger, so that, once alone, they would be free to worship the goddess. But when Proclus started to move away from them, he too saw from the house that the moon was appearing and there, on the spot, he took off his shoes, and before their very eyes, he began greeting the goddess. Lachares, struck by the young man's daring, then said to the philosopher Syrianus exactly what Plato had said under divine inspiration on the subject of exceptional beings: "either this young man will be a great good or else he will be exactly the opposite" (*Republic* 6.491E1–6). (*Life of Proclus* 11)

This episode is most revealing of how cautious pagans had to be when practicing their religion. Indeed, they both wanted and had to be wary at all times of any actions or attitudes that could have been seen as provocation of Christians.¹⁰

In conclusion, we ask ourselves a very basic question, one that is bound to arise in the minds of modern thinkers: How were Neoplatonic philosophers capable of reconciling their worship of traditional Greek gods with their philosophy, which is somewhat monotheistic, in the sense that it leads everything back to the One. This "monotheistic" tendency needs, of course, to be correctly understood. For the Neoplatonists, the One is not actually the only god; rather, he is the first god, the one through whom all the others are gods as well. Furthermore, the multitude of different gods that exist within Platonic theology makes up a far larger and richer group than that which is represented in the Olympic Pantheon of the classical era. This is because it comprises all the henads of the classes of intelligible gods, intelligible-intellectual ones, and purely intellectual ones. And this rich hierarchy of gods is a sort of ladder which allows a soul seeking the divine to ascend its rungs and unite itself at the top with the first god, the One/Good. In general terms, the gods, placed as they are between the One and us, form classes, series, planes, orders; and we use them as a golden chain stretched out between the One/Good and ourselves, to lift us gradually toward the One/Good. Each of these steps is indispensable, and the philosopher, who knows both their nature and their hierarchical position, worships each of them in a fitting manner. But each god is not only a rung of the ladder leading up to the One/Good; to each one is also attributed a portion of the universe that is appropriate to him and that allows him to exercise his particular providence. A specific patron must be invoked, so that a specific effect can be obtained within a specific order of things. As such, even though the spirituality of the Neoplatonists is inspired by a certain "monotheism," this monotheism in no way excludes traditional polytheism; rather it assumes and confirms it.

In this article, we have quoted Proclus more than any other Neoplatonic philosopher. This is simply because, of all the Neoplatonists, he is the one

we know best. Not only have a large number of his works come down to us, but, thanks to Marinus, we have a very lifelike portrait of Proclus and his work. Proclus, moreover, lived for over seventy years, over most of the fifth century, whereas Syrianus died at a young age. Yet it is through Proclus that we know Syrianus, who seems to have had a truly creative mind. After Proclus, Damascius is the most important of the Neoplatonists, and he presents himself as a critic of the works of Proclus. His works refute various positions in Proclus by returning to certain principles of Iamblichus. Whatever the case, Proclus seems to have been the strongest personality in the Neoplatonic school of Athens: it was he who organized the studious life as a kind of monastic life; it was he who organized the program of study as part of a true life of contemplation and prayer; it was he who viewed the philosophy of Plato as a "mystagogy," as an "initiation into the holy mysteries themselves, raised up in purity onto a sacred pedestal and installed, for eternity, in the home of the gods on High" (Proclus *Platonic Theology* 1.1). That is why, in our opinion, the spirituality of Proclus heralds the spirit of medieval philosophy.

Notes

1. See A. D. Nock, "Oracles théologiques," *Revue des études anciennes* 30 (1928) 280-90 (reprinted in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph Stewart [2 vols.; Oxford: University Press, 1972] 1:160-68).
2. See H. D. Saffrey, "Les néoplatoniciens et les Oracles Chaldaïques," *Revue des études augustinienne* 27 (1981) 209-25.
3. See Anne Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982) 212-24.
4. See M. L. West, "The Eighth Homeric Hymn and Proclus," *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970) 300-304.
5. The essential works on the Orphic Hymns are those of Otto Kern and Wilhelm Quandt, used by A. N. Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).
6. Damascius *Life of Isidorus* 61 (for Isidorus), 209 (for Asclepiodotus), 164 (for Asclepiades).
7. See J. Keil, "Kulte im Prytaneion von Ephesos," in *Anatolian Studies*, ed. W. H. Buckler (Manchester: University Press, 1939) 119-28; and D. Knibbe, "Der Staatsmarkt, Die Inschriften des Prytaneions," in *Forschungen in Ephesos* 9.1.1 (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1981) 101-5.
8. See P. Friedländer, *Documents of Dying Paganism*: vol. 1, *The Hestia Tapestry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945) 1-26 (reprinted in *Studien zur antiken Literatur und Kunst* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969] 488-510). It will be noticed, however, that our interpretation of the document is not that of Friedländer.
9. On Proclus's devotion to Athena, see A.-J. Festugière, "Proclus et la religion traditionnelle," in *Mélanges André Piganiol* (Paris: Centre de Recherches historiques, 1966) 1581-90 (reprinted in *Études de philosophie grecque* [Paris: J. Vrin, 1971] 575-84).

10. See H. D. Saffrey, "Allusions antichrétiennes chez Proclus, le diadoque platonicien," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 59 (1975) 553-63.

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