

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## Christian Platonism

**M**AY I begin by being somewhat autobiographical? From 1934 to 1936 I read for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of Edinburgh. In the second of those academic years there was a room vacant in the Divinity Students' Hostel of the Church of Scotland and I became its tenant. Not all my fellow-tenants were ordinands, but many were. At this time Karl Barth had become a major factor in life at the ordinand level. Hitler had been two years in power in Germany and it was the Confessional Church—that part of German Protestantism that acknowledged only Scripture (and Scripture as understood by the Reforms) as of supreme authority—which was offering real and sustained opposition to the Nazis, while the greater part of the German Protestant Church was calling itself German Christian and acclimatising itself to the Third Reich. Emil Brunner on the calm side of the Lake of Constance in Zürich had written an essay which was very tolerably orthodox by most twentieth-century Lutheran and Calvinist standards, but he left room for some element in man which was not so corrupted by the Fall that it was incapable of response to the Word of God; and Brunner also acknowledged that even fallen man recognised certain ordinances of creation and preservation which made some ordered social life and an ordered system of human justice possible. To this Barth (a Swiss pastor himself once) replied from Bonn in the midst of the German tension with a terrific onslaught headed by the single word "*Nein.*" Nothing in man offered firm ground on to which to throw a bridge from the beyond. In the saving of man from drowning man could not boast that he had swum a few strokes himself: all was of the rescuer.

Edinburgh in 1935 was vastly different from Bonn and somewhat different even from Zürich. But the Scots ordinands were to a man on Barth's side against Brunner. The two wings of the Church of Scotland had come together in 1929: here was a new dynamic for those tied to cumbrous ecclesiastical machinery. Barth's German was terribly difficult, but Sir Edwyn Hoskyns had recently translated his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, and more translations were to follow. So the Scots became Barthians, and an early symptom was their suspicion of one of their recently appointed Professors, because Plato came into his lectures so often. The Professor is still happily with them, so I must give him an oriental name to disguise him; but I will quote the verse in which they lampooned him:

So-so, So-so,  
 Give us your answer, do;  
 Why ain't Plato  
 There in the Canon too?  
 His doctrine of transmigration  
 Is better than *Revelation*  
 His style is neater  
 Than *Second Peter*  
 And he wasn't a dirty Jew!

The Professor, as I said, is still happily with them: he was not to be easily moved, even when the winds of doctrine assumed the force of a tornado. I am inclined to think that this was all to the good in Edinburgh—but suppose he had held a chair in Bonn? I meanwhile was devoting my whole time to this same Plato whom the Professor was quite unfairly supposed to be attempting to smuggle into the Canon of Scripture.

The autobiography is only intended to give precision to a live-issue within Christianity which still remains live—the question whether and in what sense an understanding of Greek philosophical thought, and in particular of Plato's thought, is an asset to a Christian. Two men who might fairly be called Christian Platonists have died recently: Dean Inge and Clement C. J. Webb. A very great Plato scholar who was also a Christian philosopher was my own teacher in Edinburgh, A. E. Taylor, who died about ten years ago. And now we ask: "Have the conditions in which these men were young—the atmosphere of Jowett's Balliol, the Cairds and F. H. Bradley—gone for ever, and is it not better so? If Hegel standing on his feet leads to the state absolutism of the Germans of both wars and standing on his head leads to the systematic dialectical materialism of Marx, are we not better off without him and the Platonism he claimed to interpret? Must not Hegel, Plato and Christ part company?" And apart from the implications of all this for Christianity, there has been a reaction to it all at Oxford as intense and as sustained as the Barthian movement itself. There has been popular political criticism of Plato as a Fascist by R. H. S. Crossman and K. R. Popper. But behind all this has been the attack on any speculative philosophy and especially on any kind of metaphysical system. Significant utterance, it is said, can only be made about verifiable physical events or in tautologies. Here logical analysis is possible; but statements about the universe or about God are nonsensical in the strict sense. Thinking is an act of attending to collocations of occurrences, not a poetical exploitation of the dream-like and subconscious masquerading as intellectual activity. The study of the use of words and of the use of syntax is the way to philosophic definition. A reviewer in the current number of *Mind* sums up the linguistic movement in English philosophy as "an amalgam of two tendencies: an empirical study of good English

usage and an attempted nullification of traditional metaphysical problemising based on such a study." But the same reviewer points out later on that the linguistic philosophers themselves are finding by taking wider and wider samples of human talking and trying to analyse them that "different philosophic languages are rivals for the total job of furnishing a medium for empirical description and that some sort of criteria should be forthcoming for choosing between them, or for discarding them all but retaining some kind of insight from each." What this amounts to is, he goes on to say, that these philosophers are not now thinking of linguistic analysis as a weapon with which to fight the metaphysical urge, but as a tool to help it achieve some degree of satisfaction and clarity.

So :

*naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret  
et mala perumpet furtim fastidia victrix*

*natura* here being the metaphysical urge in man. But of course it does not follow that Oxford will return either to Hegel or to Plato. And the long anti-metaphysical campaign must be allowed to have gained some important ground. It shows that the decision to accept, or accept tentatively, one metaphysic rather than another implies an act of faith; for to say that your choice of metaphysic is wholly conditioned by the state of your liver is in itself to make an affirmation of faith in a materialist metaphysic. If man were only an intellect, he could be only a sceptic. But if philosophy is a term only properly applied to the sceptical intellect acting sceptically, then scarcely any of the Greek philosophers were philosophers. Most of them were, however, concerned with the intellectual implications of casting a vote for one or other kind of picture of the nature of all being, and in this sense they were metaphysicians.

Plato has clearly shown himself to be aware of this in an interesting passage of the *Timæus* which I give in Taylor's translation (slightly modified) (*Tim.* 51 c, d).

"Are we talking insignificantly whenever we speak of the existence of the various intelligible Forms, and do our words prove to be nothing but verbiage? Well, it would be as improper to make confident assertion without bringing the issue to judgment and examination as it would be to insert a long digression in an already lengthy discourse. It would be most timely if we could here determine this grave question in a few words. My personal judgment, then, I deliver in this sense" (Cornford says here: 'My own verdict, then is this.' The Greek says, 'My own vote I cast thus,' but the reference is no doubt to a jurymen voting rather than to voting in an assembly). "If understanding and true opinion are two and distinct, these Forms, which we cannot perceive by sense but can only have as objects of thinking, assuredly exist in themselves; but if, as is held by some, true opinion is in no way different from understanding, then whatever we apprehend by bodily sense must be assumed to be our most certain reality."

Note here that Plato frankly admits that he is casting a vote and giving a verdict. In that sense his metaphysic rests on an act of faith. He believes that the vision of all reality as a interrelated whole above and beyond space and time, the vision which breaks in on the whole personality of the student who has worked through the preliminary mathematical disciplines, is not a cheat and is not self-produced by the student. In it the beholder is united with reality in real intercourse and only then is his long travail at an end, for Plato, like the mystics, uses erotic imagery; but he uses it in speaking of the supreme intellectual and moral fruition of man; and he does not, incidentally, use it very accurately; for the travail of the soul precedes the intercourse and fruition. However, the vision of reality is for Plato something final. Not only can he say,

Now I have found the ground wherein  
Safe my soul's anchor may remain,

but he can claim now to have all knowledge and to understand all mysteries. He will, however, neither wallow in the security of his soul nor feel entitled to spend the rest of his days seeing how everything hangs together and reading the map of ultimate reality. He will realise that he beholds Ultimate Value as well as Ultimate Reality—in fact the Form of the Good is the sun of that upper world, giving it its very life and being. But he will also have a sense of a duty to work what he there sees into the lives of others as well as into his own. The Christian apostle challenges his brethren with the saying: "Brethren, if these things are so, what manner of men ought we to be?" The Platonic Guardian says: "Brethren" (for so he too would address all within the community) "since things are as they are, this is the manner of men ye ought to be," and the non-philosophical brethren are to be expected to have the self-control to accept his precept and personal example and work them into their daily practice.

It is necessary to consider briefly why Plato came to this particular affirmation of metaphysical faith. The Ionian physicists had taken for granted that man was part of a total visible universe and believed that he and it were explicable in terms of the development of an underlying physically real substance. Objective reality was distinct from appearances—all things, and not only seas and rivers, were water for Thales; but objective reality was not of a higher order of being. Parmenides of Elea, a disciple of Pythagoras who struck out for himself, challenged this Ionian assumption. The senses gave specious evidence and suggested specious solutions to the problems of the origin of things: the mind gave quite a different result. The object of the mind, what could be thought, was alone real. Note that even here the emphasis is objective. Reality is there: the mind is such that it, and it alone, cognises Reality. Plato's meta-

physic accepts the absolute distinction between sense-object and mind-object which Parmenides laid down, but it modifies it by saying that the object of mind is a Manifold not a One—it is a world of forms; and secondly that there is a definite correspondence between sensible objects and Forms: a single Form has in the sense-world many reflections or imitations.

But the fifth-century B.C. proved to be the age of the sophists, and it was Protagoras, probably a contemporary of Parmenides, who issued a challenge both to Ionian Physicists and to Parmenidean intellectualists by stating that "Man is the measure of all things." It was Protagoras, not Socrates, who brought down philosophy from the clouds. Gorgias said there was no ultimate reality; if there was it was unknowable; if it existed and could be known it could not be communicated to others. Scepticism and relativism developed, and the verbal antithesis between nature and convention was used to urge the doctrine of the superman who had a natural right to ignore or circumvent the legal conventions erected by the weak to defend themselves. In the midst of this breakdown of standards and while Athens lost the war with Sparta, a queer local product of Athens, Socrates, son of Sophroniscus the stonemason, affirmed a personal mission to care for the souls of each of his fellow-Athenians and to cure each of them of conceit of wisdom. He would not accept that there could be one justice in Thebes and another in Athens. He was too scrupulous to take as much part in politics as ordinary Athenians were expected to take. His story is familiar, but his importance apart from his great personal influence is that he gave to the Greek word *ψυχή* a sense it had not previously borne, and which we can still understand without commentary: a responsible moral agent, a personality capable of good and evil. Plato, his devoted disciple, could no longer think of metaphysics as a purely intellectual problem. Ethical universals must be found a place among the eternal prototypes of physical and mathematical objects. Furthermore, the soul could not be purely contemplative. Intellect and morals coalesce in a moral intellectualism: to know right issues in doing right. Virtue is knowledge and no man sins willingly.

To the Socratic doctrine of the soul Plato added his own important doctrine of the soul—fixing the sphere in which it exercises moral choice and responsibility. Soul not only knows but is the principle of motion. All motion in nature is motivated by soul. The physical world in general, and our bodies in particular, provide soul with material into which to work order and beauty by looking away to the eternal patterns in the Form-world or disorder by turning its vision down to the sensible alone. Judgment and banishment to a lower sphere or promotion to a higher depend on the voluntary choice of the controlling soul. Yet not altogether, for the universe itself has a soul and is a *θεὸς αἰσθητός*, a god present to sense. The

soul of the universe and all other souls derivatively were fashioned by the Demiourgos or Fashioner. It would seem that he may be identified with the "altogether good soul" called God in a unique sense in Plato's latest work, the *Laws*. So then man is a creature within a creature and yet the highest part of his soul comes from his creator. The creator did not create from nothing; matter pre-existed, the Forms-world pre-existed. His task was to fashion in matter a likeness of the Forms. Such is this universe in spite of its imperfections.

All this is in Plato himself—and so is a great deal more, of course. What would we expect a Christian to be interested in here? Here is a Greek philosopher who teaches an unseen reality independent of our minds, though our minds are 'akin' enough to it to rise to contemplate it after laborious training. It is a reality which embodies a purpose of God. We are responsible agents who must control our own bodies and not be controlled by them. We are creatures dependent for life on the will of our creator, but he is good and wills good.

In fact the first bridge between Platonism and Christianity was built by a Jew, Philo, at Alexandria in our Lord's lifetime. In Alexandria Greeks, Egyptians and Jews met and lived together, though each in his own quarter. The Jews were not citizens but could and did have their own law courts for civil cases and in them administered Jewish law. The Jews of the Dispersion in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean tended to become Hellenised in varying degrees. Philo had a first-rate Graeco-Roman education as well as the orthodox Jewish training in the law. He lived from about 30 B.C. to A.D. 45 and as head of the Jewish community in Alexandria went to Rome in A.D. 39 to explain the reluctance of the Alexandrian Jews to the worship of the emperor Caligula, and to ask exemption for them. Philo makes much of the *Timæus*, Plato's dialogue about the fashioning of the world and the world-soul, and in his interpretations of the Scriptures uses the allegorical method to make philosophers of the patriarchs. Even the moderate Rabbi Hillel, grandfather of Gamaliel, would hardly approve Philo; much less would the straiter sects of the Pharisees, who remembered the days of the Maccabees and the supposedly Greek Antiochus Epiphanes. Yet Philo's attempt to use his Greek learning to systematise and explain the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of an intermediary *Logos* is an important link with the later developments in the Christian church. He was making too rapid a reconciliation of Moses and Plato, but he was not necessarily in this being unfaithful to Moses.

It is quite impossible to trace here the story of Platonism and Christianity historically. There have always been those in the Church who cry with Tertullian: "Let them look to it who have produced

a Stoic and a Platonic and a dialectic Christianity," but there have also been those who approved the saying that Plato was Moses speaking Attic Greek. Any real appreciation of Platonism was in fact rendered almost impossible before 200 A.D. by the various forms of Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics held in common a belief in an esoteric Christian illumination not available to simple Christian believers, though they differed widely as to its content. Their elaborate doctrines of intermediary beings might find some support in Philo, but little in Plato himself. Plato, however, is guilty of confining the dialecticians' knowledge of reality to the caste of the trained few, and this (in spite of the vast differences) makes him a dangerous ally for the Church fighting Gnosticism. It was, however, a blessing both for the Church and for Platonism when there arose a new school of Platonic teachers at Alexandria,<sup>1</sup> the so-called Neoplatonists. It was a blessing for the Church, in spite of the fact that Plotinus and his pupils Porphyry Iamblichus and Proclus provided the last assailants of Christianity in the name of pagan philosophy. For Ammonius Saccas, founder of the Neoplatonist School, had among his pupils both Plotinus, the last great Greco-Roman philosopher, and Origenes Adamantius, commonly called Origen, the first great systematic Christian theologian. There was before the Neoplatonists' time already a Christian Catechetical School at Alexandria; Pantæus and then Clement were its heads. Clement was a phil-Hellene who just fell short of being a Gnostic, but in that he did fall short of it was able to give Gnosticism its quietus from the orthodox Christian side. He taught sometimes that the Greeks borrowed or stole from the Hebrews, but at other times that the Greeks had philosophy for their pedagogue while the Jews had the Law. But he was, relatively speaking, a dilettante and unsystematic, failings (if they are failings) which are probably responsible for denying him a remembrance in the Church's calendar. However the systematic philosophic training Origen received in Alexandria makes a marked contrast to Clement and tells in a different way altogether. He does not argue the apologists' questions of the relation of Platonism and Christianity; rather he takes into the service of the faith a mind trained to think in the Platonic system: he makes a defence for the rule of Christian faith which is different from the kind of fence the Rabbis built about the Jewish Scripture. They worked by midrash, a mixture of elaboration and casuistry. They went on with it faithfully even after the fall of Jerusalem and the end of temple worship. No doubt there is a place for Christian midrash, but the Church is indebted to those who dare a wider apologetic as Origen did: the need to commend Christianity to every man's conscience in the sight of God by manifestation of the truth needs the capacity for synoptic vision

<sup>1</sup> Plotinus gave his main teaching in Rome, not Alexandria.



and systematic thought that philosophy and especially the Platonic philosophy ought to give. This does not mean that Plato solves all problems. Nor does it mean that we should emulate Abelard, who according to a remark in one of St. Bernard's letters (quoted by Shorey in his Sather Lectures) "sweats dreadfully in the attempt to make Plato a Christian." We have better historical perspective than Abelard and longer experience, and we freely grant to Barth and anyone else that it cannot be done. The disciple of Plato must unlearn certain things after Baptism: he has generally little chance nowadays to do so before it! He must learn that saving knowledge may be given and is given apart from all training for it and to all who will simply receive it. He must learn that to know is not to will, and that neither his intellect nor his moral strength can meet the desperateness of his real situation. In particular he must own that eternal reality has entered temporal in a supreme particular example: here there is much to challenge him. Augustine in a crucial passage of the *Confessions* points to the vital differences between Platonism and the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> But when the Cross becomes mercy and not folly to a thinking man he does not stop thinking there will be continuity with his pre-Christian understanding, even though his thinking and phrasing change notably. Augustine sheds his youthful excesses after Baptism but not his Platonic training. After all, the Rabbinic and Pharisaic alternatives to all this do not in fact save a man from pride. What is folly to the Greeks is a stumbling-block to Jews, and there is something of Greek tragic irony in the words of St. Paul at Antioch (Acts xiii. 27):

For they which dwell at Jerusalem and their rulers, because they knew him not nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath day, fulfilled them by condemning him.

Jew and Greek alike have to admit defeat, but once they have done so each has his particular contribution. The 'Greek' contribution may be simply a feeling for the views of the next man and his difficulties and an attempt to meet them from some systematic position of his own—an appeal to reason and conscience based on but not directly enforcing the authoritative utterances. But when the 'Greek' within the Church weighs up the various metaphysical positions argued out and defended in ancient times, he is likely to feel a special respect for Plato's daring in asserting, with no divine word to guide him, that we live in two worlds and that the unseen really dominates the seen.

We do not want clerics who regard Platonism as an aristocratic thing and Christianity a vulgar one. Christianity is *not* Platonism

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions*, VII, ix. 13, 14 (*Ibi legi . . . ibi non legi*). For a valuable statement of the matter see P. Henry, *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. xxxviii (1937), p. 1-23.

for the people as Nietzsche supposed. We have proved the limitations of a theology based entirely on the view that the spirit of man is the candle of the Lord. But there still is in Christian Platonism the power to revive an awareness of another dimension.<sup>3</sup> In this broader sense of Platonism there is something that can reach through into the ordinary faith of Christian people and heighten its consciousness. To take a familiar example from Dean Alford's processional hymn, a stanza about the celestial city including the lines,

Flash the streets with jasper  
Shine the gates with gold

is followed by one which is not exactly Platonist but in which all Platonists will feel particularly able to join. It needs to be sung in the magnificence of Durham's aisles for its meaning to be felt :

Nought that city needeth  
Of these aisles of stone;  
Where the Godhead dwelleth  
Temple there is none.  
All the saints that ever  
In these Courts have stood  
Are as babes and feeding  
On the children's food.  
On through sign and token,  
Stars amid the night,  
Forward through the darkness,  
Forward into light.

There lies a pattern city set up in heaven, Plato said, and that city whosoever will may see and seeing begin to inhabit.

J. B. SKEMP

<sup>3</sup> For a useful brief history of Christian Platonism in England see W. R. Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*. Isaac Watts had a strain of the Platonic in him, but little Platonism has penetrated the present hymnal. Perhaps 428 is the most Platonic hymn in the revised B.C.H., though 781 is a close second.

(This article reproduces almost verbally a paper read to a University group in Durham: the remark that few unlearned things before Baptism was, therefore, made for the benefit of the Paedo-baptists!)