Panagiotis G. Pavlos, Lars Fredrik Janby, Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, and Torstein Theodor Tollefsen (eds.), *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity. Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity*. London and New York, Routledge 2019, 315 p.[1]

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Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity (henceforward PCTLA) is an edited volume, produced by the joint efforts of P. G. Pavlos, L. F. Janby, E. K. Emillson and T. T. Tollefsen. The book is divided into four parts that bear the titles "Methodologies", "Cosmology", "Metaphysics" and "Ethics" respectively. Parts I, II and IV are comprised of three chapters each, while Part III contains twice as many, i.e., six.

Part I has its opening with Sébastien Morlet's contribution (chap. 1), which aims to demonstrate how some early Christian authors – starting with Justin Martyr (cca. 100-165) and ending with Eusebius of Caesarea (cca. 260-340) – perceived the status and value of Platonism from the confines of their own theological convictions. Beside these two luminaries, Morlet also explores the opinions of Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Unlike other early Christian authors (mentioned are Tatian, Theophilus, Tertullian, Hippolytus) the former had somewhat positive attitude towards Platonism and took Plato to be "the philosopher who best approached the truth" (p. 17). Although, as mere mortals, Plato and his followers (as well as the other "enlightened" Greek philosophers) were ultimately bound to remain misguided, their approximations to and affinities with the Christian doctrine are explained by the conjectures that they either a) have had access to the Scripture, or b) might have participated in the same Logos as the Christians, or c) might have been, at moments, divinely inspired. This chapter also offers a very neat and informative overview of what the Christians thought were points of agreement between the Revelation and Platonism. Christina Hoenig (chap. 2) focuses on what St. Augustine saw as Plato´s prophecy of Christ´s divinity, incarnation and his mediating role between the temporal and eternal realms. St. Augustine not only found an anticipatory Christological account in the *Timaeus* 29c, but also, as Hoenig discloses, utilized it in the attempt to rebut both the anti-Christian arguments of some later Platonists and the Homoian (or Acacian) heresy. One of

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the upshots of St. Augustine argumentation is the claim that later Platonism actually distorted the Master´s teachings. Christine Hecht (chap. 3) explores Eusebius' attitudes to Porphyry's daemonology and oracular interpretations, by examining the passages of the latter's lost work *Philosophia ex Oraculis*, quoted in the former's *Preparatio Evangelica*. Hecht argues that Eusebius purposefully misrepresented Porphyry's ideas, in order to demonstrate the superiority of the rising Christian religion over the pagan one. His strategy boils down to the contention that Porphyry's gods are not only not divine, but even positively evil entities.

Part II of the volume commences with Enrico Moro's survey of the Patristic reception of some eminently Greek philosophical concepts, i.e., those of prime matter and beginningless sensible world (chap. 4). The author acknowledges that there is a great divide between the rival (Neo)platonic and Christian cosmological models, with emanationism and creationism on the opposing sides, but also points out that the Early Church Fathers' approach – at least on the issue of prime matter – was not as clear-cut as one could surmise: although rejecting what they thought have been the Platonic view, they nevertheless extensively used the notion of matter as a formless, qualityless substratum. This chapter illuminates the reflections on matter and creation of Origen, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose and Augustine. Chapter five is authored by Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson and contains a discussion on Plotinus's stance on matter as the origin of evil. The author delineates Plotinus' theory of evil (as given in *Enn*. I.8), presents the gist of Proclus' criticism from *De malorum subsistentia*, and offers a defense of the Plotinian position. His conclusion is that Plotinus furnished a consistent theory of matter-evil and that at least the regular Proclean objections against it miss the mark. Torstein Theodor Tollefsen (chap. 6) treats a question that had been a subject of heated debates for Plato's immediate successors and the Middle Platonists – whether his cosmos had a beginning in time or not. By the advent of Plotinus and the latter Neoplatonic the question was settled, and in favour of the adherents to the allegorical reading of the *Timaeus*' creation story. Tollefsen contrasts the result of this ancient dispute with the Christian doctrine of creation in time, and, after noting that both theories share a common denominator – i.e. the acceptance of an eternal paradigm of the universe present in the divine *nous* – proceeds to explicate John Philoponus' and Maximus the Confessor's reactions to Proclus' arguments for the eternity of the world.

Part III of the volume opens with Lars Fredrik Janbi's discussion of St. Augustine's reflections on the nature of number, against the backdrop of some Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic metaphysical claims regarding the

same subject (chap. 7). The author establishes that Augustine's philosophy of number, especially in his early period, was rather penetrating. It gravitated around the (inherited) problem of unity and multiplicity and the associated one concerning the divide between intelligible and sensible realities. Augustine also held that the Bible speaks of a cosmos organized by number, and even associated the later with the figure of Christ. Daniel J. Tolan (chap. 8) brings to the fore the similarity between Platonism and Christianity by focusing on the notion of paradigmatic causality of the divine Ideas shared by both systems, as well as on their common struggle against materialism and Gnosticism. The author explores the theories of divine exemplarism as given by Plato, Philo Judaeus, Clement, Origen, Plotinus and Athanasius, and argues that both Platonists and Christians position the divine Ideas in the Mind of God. His probably most provocative claim is that not only Christianity, but also Platonism is essentially a monotheistic school of thought. Chapter 9, authored by Panagiotis G. Pavlos, delves into the intricacies of Pseudo Dionysius' concept of theurgy. In it, the author argues that, despite similarities of terminology and language (mostly borrowed from Proclus), Dionysius should not be read Neoplatonically. This assertion is especially applicable to his theurgy, which is radically different from the one cultivated in the Iamblichean tradition. For Dionysius, the word "theurgy" refers "to the works of Christ in His earthly historical presence, and … to the whole divine providential, creative … work of God." (p. 158). Dimitrios A. Vasilakis (chap. 10) discusses Pseudo Dionysius' understanding of the term "hierarchy", as developed in the latter's *Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*. The author demonstrates that Dionysius utilizes the word with a meaning that is different from the common one of order of subordination and superiority; instead, with Christ as the supreme hierarch, the hierarchical arrangement is meant to invite everyone to approach God. Sebastian Mateiescu´s input (chap. 11) turns to the rather difficult issue of universals, and focuses on the doctrine of immanent realism, as developed by Maximus the Confessor. Before proceeding with Maximus, the author gives an overview of the ancient views on universals, of the Cappadocian theory of immanent realism, as well as of the disparate opinion of John Philoponus. He points out that the novelty of Maximus' theory consists in reinterpreting the Aristotelian notion of differentia in both logical and metaphysical way and applying the results on Christian cosmology and the dispute regarding Christ's two natures. Jordan Daniel Wood (chap. 12) discusses the difference between the Platonic notion of participation (*methexis*), and the concept of mutual interpenetration, or indwelling (*perichōrēsis*), as applied by Maximus the Confessor to the Trinitarian dogma, as well as to his Christology and eschatology. After dwelling for a while on Maximus' primary source of

inspiration – which is Cappadocian Trinitarian theology – Wood shows that the disparity between *methexis* and *perichōrēsis* is indeed vast: while the former is an asymmetric relation, the latter implies simultaneous identity, interpenetration and distinction of the participating entities, even when those are God and the perfected and deified human.

The final, Fourth Part of PCTLA, commences with E. Brown Dewhurst's essay on the topic of knowledge of the Divine in Neoplatonism and Christianity (chap. 13). Examining the cases of Proclus and Maximus the Confessor, Dewhurst calls attention to the vast divergence between the two coryphaei. Although both hold that the ability to know is rooted in the knower's nature, they differ on many crucial issues, like the understanding of providence, apophaticism, Divine Grace, and, of course, the mediating role of Christ. Adrian Pirtea, in chapter 14, compares Porphyry's and Evagrius Ponticus' theories of the origin of human passions (but also their teachings on degrees of virtues). After examining some important aspects of both, Pirtea points out the common elements, and concludes that they are indeed very similar. Furthermore, he claims that Evagrius' approach shares Porphyry's obvious rootedness in Platonic psychology, and that therefore it is very likely that the former was directly influenced by the latter. Tomas Ekenberg (chap. 15) argues that St. Augustine's views on eudaimonia were much more contiguous with the ancient Greek ones. However, instead of finding Augustine's source of inspiration in the Stoic or Peripatetic ethic, Ekenberg turns to Epicurus. Noting the obvious discrepancies, like Augustine's otherworldly directedness and his belief that true happiness is not to be found in pleasure or absence of pain, the author points out that he and Epicurus still shares some common views. Such are the ideas that happiness is a state of mind and the highest good, that virtue is the means to happiness, etc., which are absent from the Stoic thought. Therefore, so far as he is a eudaemonist, Augustine is allied to the Epicureans.

After this somewhat longish report on its context, it is my pleasure to state that PCTLA is indeed a fine and engaging compendium on an exciting subject matter – the mutual relationship of Platonism and Christianity. I also believe that at this juncture it is proper to share some thoughts on this book that go beyond mere praise and appreciation. As complex and nuanced the mutual social and intellectual interplay of the rising Christianity and its pagan cultural receptacle must have been, and despite some recent cries to the contrary,[2] it seems that nowadays many scholars take very seriously the assertion that the impact of Greek thought in general, and Neoplatonic

[2] See: Cornelia Johanna De Vogel, "Platonism and Christianity: A Mere Antagonism or a Profound Common Ground?", in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 39/1 (1985), p. 1-62.

in particular, on the early Christian authors was of a significant nature and went beyond mere appropriation of philosophical lexicon.[3]

Of course, there are not many theses or claims in history of ideas, or in philosophy, that may be taken as conclusive and beyond doubt or emendation. PCTLA professes to raise certain issues with regard to the above conclusion,[4] and accomplishes this task, among else, by presenting several interesting case-studies which demonstrate that beneath the superficial similarity there lies a wide gulf of difference between the Platonist and the Christian philosophers with regard to the usage, sense and aim of the allegedly shared Greek ideas and terminology. Or else, one could argue that the volume rather explicates more precisely the modalities within which the Platonic ideas came in contact with Christianity, and were modified by, but also to a significant degree modified in return, the philosophical pursuits of the early Christian thinkers.[5] That much about the overall aim and scope of the volume, as one may find them expressed in the Introduction.

Passing on to the individual chapters, we shall proceed by following their order of appearance in the series. I have only one, extremely minor, comment to make on Morlet's excellent chapter: when he lists the points of agreement between Christianity and Plato, as identified by Origen (p. 20), he proposes that the latter's remark on resurrection (*C. Cels*. 5.21) might have been inspired by Plato's Myth of Er (while labeling his proposal with a question mark, as a sign of doubt). Indeed, it seems to me that no reference

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[3] See, e.g., Abraham J. Malherbe, *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity, Collected Essays 1959-2012*, Leiden, Brill 2014; Christopher Stead, *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity: Arius, Athanasius, Augustine*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2000.

[4] See "Introduction", p. 1-2. The editors choose to talk about "transformations" of Platonic ideas effectuated by the early Christian thinkers, instead of "transmission" or "influence" of the former on the latter.

[5] Needless to say, I do not deny the obvious, namely that the Platonic material was thoroughly reevaluated, reinterpreted and integrated into the novel Christian ontology before being appropriated to a certain degree. In other words, I do not reject the assertion that "[w]e can … not speak of *uniform* transmission from Platonism to Christianity …" ("Introduction" p. 2, emphasis added), or even that there never was "Christian Platonism" *per se* (see p. 10), in the sense of uncritical acceptance of Platonic doctrine by the Christians; nevertheless, there is little doubt in my mind that certain Christian luminaries owed a debt to their Platonic predecessors so considerable, that it might be rightfully characterized as "direct influence". Such was, I dare say, the intellectual relation between Dionysius and Proclus, to point out only one of the most obvious cases. Regarding the same point, John Dillon, having primarily Clement and Origen in mind, is adamant: "On one system of paramount importance Platonism had a most powerful influence, that of Christianity". See: John M. Dillon, *Middle Platonists: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press 1996, p. 396. I also believe that certain passages and chapters included in PCTLA may be used in support of the aforesaid. Be that as it may, this humble text is a book review, not a polemical rejoinder, and I shall therefore let the matter rest and proceed with my exposition.

to the Myth has been intended there; if anything, Origen might have had in mind Plato's "perfect year" (*Timaeus* 39d), and some rather unorthodox interpretations of the notion.

As for Chapter 2, it might have been useful for the readers if the author had emphasized that the actual purport of the *Timaeus* 29c is predominantly epistemological, as well as that the distinction between the two different accounts (*logoi*) and their respective ontological objects presented there has its origin in the *Republic* 510a-b. The passage, of course, has nothing to do with Christ.

A single remark is due on Chapter 4 as well. Namely, the author would have done no harm if he had mentioned that the term "prime mater (*prōtē hylē*)", although (at least conceptually) probably traceable all the way back to Plato's *Timaeus* and its Receptacle, actually owes its existence to Aristotle.[6] Of course, whether Aristotle actually subscribed to the doctrine of prime matter remains a matter of controversy.[7]

Chapter 5 represents a valiant attempt to defend Plotinus' theory of evil against Proclus' objections, and the author makes the best possible case on this difficult task. Still, a couple of rather minor remarks are in order. First, although the statement that the problem of evil "[f]irst presents itself with full force in Stoicism" (p. 78) is widely accepted among scholars, it could be argued that there is sufficient material in Plato's dialogues to demonstrate that already he had a solid grasp on the issue, as well as that he came up with some well-thought-out answers (e.g., *Theaetetus* 176a-b, *Republic* 379c1–7, 617d1-e5, substantial portions of the *Timaeus*, *Laws* 903b–905d); so much so, that many of the Stoic solutions to the problem are possibly traceable back to him.[8] Second, on p. 85 the author writes: "Plotinus does not use these exact phrases, 'the cause of badness' or 'the principle of badness'…". This does not seem to be entirely correct: a) in I.8.3.3-12 Plotinus proposes that the evil, which is a specific kind of non-being, belongs to sensible objects either accidentally, or as their principle, or as one of their elements – while in the remainder of the text he makes it crystal clear that option one and three are not viable; b) a very strong indication to the same effect is given in I.3.8.20-24, as well as in I.8.3.35-40, where the *hypokeimenon* of all badness is designated as primary evil and evil-in-itself (*kakon prōton*

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[6] See: *Phys*. 192a31, 193a10, 193a29; *Met*. 1014b32, 1017a5, 1029a20-26, 1044a23, etc.

[7] See, e.g., Howard M. Robinson, "Prime Matter in Aristotle", in: *Phronesis* 19/2 (1974), p. 168-188; William Charlton, "Prime Matter: A Rejoinder", in: *Phronesis* 28/2 (1983), p. 197-211.

[8] See: Viktor Ilievski, "Stoic Influences on Plotinus' Theodicy?", in: *ELPIS filozófiatudományi folyóirat.* Special issue: The Stoic tradition, 19/2 (2018).

kai kath' hauto kakon); c) the same goes for I.8.4.12-14, where Plotinus asks what is it that produces evil in the soul, as well as how is it connected with the former's *principle and cause* (*archē kai aition*), which is, of course, matter.

In chapter 7, p. 119-120, Augustine's early identification of the origin of evil with the indefinite dyad is mentioned, for which Manichean and Neopythagorean influences are deduced. I would dare to propose cautiously a much earlier source for this theory, which would be Aristotle: Augustine seems to have been acquainted with Aristotle's work, and the latter was the first philosopher who put in writing that Plato took the One and the Indefinite Dyad to be the respective origins of good and evil.[9]

As far as the otherwise well-written and informative Chapter 8 is concerned, I would object to the following points: the author's use of the phrase "Platonic orthodoxy" (pp. 130, 136, 141, 142) does not seem fully justified. The doctrines of the Old Academy, of the Skeptical one, of the Middle Platonists and the Neoplatonists, were all characterized by sometimes substantial philosophical differences; even the members of a same divide, naturally, used to disagree on many issues–like the cases of, e.g., transmigration or theurgy in Neoplatonism demonstrate. To be fair, the particular doctrine of the Form' relation to *nous* presented in this chapter seem to have been a widely accepted one since the very early stages of the development of Platonism,[10] but the author does not make it absolutely clear that "Platonic orthodoxy" refers exclusively to it. Another rather bold statement is that Platonism and Christianity shared the commitment to monotheism (pp. 129, 130, 142). Of course, one could argue that certain aspects of Plato's theism are in affinity with the Judeo-Christian vision of God;[11] however, this is far from a common trait of Platonism: e.g., Plutarch's ontology could be labeled as dualistic, while Plotinus was obviously professing monism, and not monotheism. Finally, it should be mentioned that the statement "[b]oth orthodox Christianity and Platonism maintain that the archetype of creation is internal to the highest principle…" (p. 142) does not fully correspond to the factual state of affairs. As for Plato himself, we cannot be sure; the Middle Platonists did hold this opinion, and so far as they are concerned, the above claim is true; Plotinus and the Neoplatonists, however, put the Paradigm within *nous*, the second hypostasis, above which the One sovereignly reigns.

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[9] See: *Met*. 988a8-16. In this, he was followed by his disciple Theophrastus (*Met*. 11b3-5), as well as by the members of the Old Academy.

[10] See J. M. Dillon, *Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1993, p. 94-95.

[11] See: A. E. Taylor, "The 'Polytheism' of Plato: An Apologia", in: *Mind* 47/186 (1983), p. 180-199.

In his erudite contribution (chap. 9), Pavlos writes the following with respect to Dionysius' "Neoplatonism": "[a] vocabulary, a linguistic quiver does not bear any *a priori* qualification. It is just a language. And, indeed, Greek language, which supplies the Neoplatonic vocabulary, is a common achievement of Late Antique culture shared by people who may well adhere to different traditions…" (p. 152). Now, the author is right in claiming that the adoption of Neoplatonic vocabulary does not make Dionysius a Neoplatonist; he also makes a strong case and clearly demonstrates that the above quotation is applicable to Dionysius' alleged appropriation of the Iamblichean term "theurgy". Nevertheless, the same is not valid for the Dionysian corpus as a whole. Once again, he cannot and should not be labeled as anything else except a Christian thinker, but it must be acknowledged that his dependence on Proclus goes far beyond mere linguistic borrowings; it is true that the appropriated material was Christianised and thus heavily transformed, but that does not beat the fact that Dionysius used to paraphrase and include into his writings sometimes substantial chunks of Proclus' texts and Neoplatonic ideas, as undeniably proven by several scholars.[12]

Chapter 11 is a fine take on the theory of universals and its implication on Christology and Christian cosmogony, and I would have only a single marginal remark to make. On p. 212, the author discusses the doctrine of being as the-capacity-to-act-and-be-acted-upon – found in the *Gigantomachia* section of Plato's *Sophist* – and lists Aristotle and the Neoplatonists as its heirs. It should be noted, however, that those most affected both by this particular idea and the whole *Sophist* section, were probably the Stoics, who remain unmentioned in the chapter.[13]

Finally, in Chapter 15, p. 284 (and fn. 19), Ekenberg expresses his doubts whether the Epicurean *hēdonē* is supposed to arise exclusively from the indulgence in bodily pleasures and seems to leave the question open. I beg to submit that for the founder of the school, the answer to this query was in the negative. Epicurus states explicitly in his *Letter to Menoecues* 131.8-132.6:

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[12] See, e.g. Istvan Perzel, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Platonic Theology*: A Preliminary Study", in: Alain-Philippe Segonds, Carlos Steel (eds.), *Proclus et la Theologie Platonicienne*, Leuven, Leuven University Press 2000. It seems to me that my little comment is not very much divorced from what Vasilakis writes in Chapter 10, p. 181 of *PCTLA*: "Dionysius is a Christian author, but his philosophical background is pagan Neoplatonism. A fundamental scheme he has critically borrowed from the Neoplatonists … is the triad of immanence, procession and reversion." etc.

[13] An excellent overview and discussion of the arguments for (and against) the Stoic appropriation of the ideas elaborated in the *Sophist* is given in John Sellars, "Stoic Ontology and Plato's Sophist", in: Verity Harte, *et al.* (eds.), *Aristotle and the Stoics Reading Plato*, London, Institute of Classical Studies 2011.

> So when we say that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of the dissipated and those that consist in having a good time … but freedom from pain in the body and from disturbance in the soul. For what produces the pleasant life is not continuous drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and the other dishes of an expensive table, *but sober reasoning* … which banishes the opinions that beset souls with the greatest confusion.[14]

In conclusion, PCTLA is a highly informative and rich book. The individual chapters, dedicated to various relevant issues, generally manage to fulfill the aims set in their introductory paragraphs and provide a glimpse into the exciting times of philosophical debates that shaped Christianity as we know it. The work as a whole succeeds in shedding, so to say, new light on old questions, but also on some less explored subjects, and thus promises to remain an interesting and informative reading for students and scholars of both Early Christianity and Late Platonism, as well as for historians of ideas in general.

[14] As translated by Anthony A. Long, Davis N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Volume I*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 114, emphasis added.