

BOOK REVIEW

Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity. Edited by PANAGIOTIS G. PAVLOS, LARS FREDRIK JANBY, EYJOLFUR KAJAR EMILSSON AND TORSTEIN THEODOR TOLLEFSEN. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xvi + 315. Hardback, \$112. ISBN: 978-1-138-34095-4.

This interesting volume, stemming from a workshop, focuses on a topic that still deserves a great deal of research. Chapters include studies of Patristic and Plotinus' reflections on formless matter (Moro; Emilsson), Proclus, Philoponus and Maximus on the cosmos' paradigm and temporal beginning (Tollefsen) and Augustine's idea of *eudaimonia* (Ekenberg). Acknowledgment of Platonism "was not an acknowledgment of intellectual debt but a purification of the truth from the falsehood of paganism" (4). I find it was a *religious* purification, not an *intellectual* one: the intellectual debt was often acknowledged (including in the *praeparatio evangelica* model, recalled on 4). Augustine, as is correctly noted (6), declared that the agreement between Platonism and Christianity was so large that any disagreement was virtually a matter of words. It was especially a matter of *Christ*—I note—but if Christ is the Logos and God's Mind, this opens up the way to Christian Platonism. Platonism was philosophically useful for Christianity, especially in metaphysics (6): I agree and observe that Porphyry already realized this in the case of Origen.¹ I concur with the editors (5) that Platonism competed with Christianity on universal salvation, especially in the works of Porphyry—who, I add, was likely stimulated by the reflections of Origen in this and other respects.²

¹ Argument in my "Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism," *VigChr* 63 (2009) 217-263.

² Examples and argument in my "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of Hypostasis," *HTR* 105 (2012) 302-350; "Plagues and Epidemics Caused by D(a)emons in Origen and Porphyry and Potential Interrelations," *VoxP* 77 (2021) 89-120; "Origen and Porphyry: Continuity and Polemics between Psychology and Eschatology: Preliminary Remarks," in *Philosophos–Philotheos–Philoponos*, ed. Mikonja Knežević, Gnomon Centre for the Humanities,

Creatio ex nihilo (7) was not supported by all Christians. Origen argued for this, but his doctrine of creation, grounded in a philosophical reading of Scripture, was exemplaristic and he claimed that his version of *creatio ex nihilo* interpreted Plato better than others by contemporary “pagan” Platonists.³ I find the designation “Christian Platonism” (10) useful, for example, for Synesius, the Christian “Gnostics” at Plotinus’ school, perhaps Origen, Dionysius, Eriugena, Ficino and beyond—an etic category we scholars can use, like “Jewish/Gnostic/Islamic Platonism”;⁴ a recent volume on Christian Platonism includes a chapter on Patristic Platonism.⁵ The Editors rightly disagree with Doerrie’s extreme claim of Christianity as “anti-Platonism.” Nevertheless they apparently accept his line (11), which was called into question by Beierwaltes and others, including myself: Platonism “was held at a distance from the truth itself” (11). “Pagan” Platonism was indeed held at some distance from the truth when necessary, I find, and even more other “pagan” philosophies were, but not Plato, and even less Christian Platonism, which aimed at making Plato’s thought true.

The introduction is followed by 15 chapters; in the interest of space, I will discuss only some. No specific chapter is devoted to Origen or Eriugena (possibly excluded because Origen may be before “late antiquity” and Eriugena after it), although Origen is addressed in part by Sébastien Morlet within a good survey of the agreement between Christianity and Platonism, in less than two pages especially on *Stromateis* and *Contra Celsum*. This chapter does not entirely substantiate the Introduction’s line. Morlet is correct that for Justin Platonism is ranked just below Christianity, before all other philosophical currents, and works as an introduction to Christianity, and that Clement insists that Greek philosophy and

2021, 187-211; Michael Bland Simmons, *Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity: Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan-Christian Debate*, Oxford: OUP, 2015 and review *CJ* 2017.05.02.

³ As I argue in “Origen,” in *A History of Mind and Body in Late Antiquity*, eds Sophie Cartwright and Anna Marmodoro, Cambridge: CUP, 2018, 245-266; “The Logos/Nous One-Many between ‘Pagan’ and Christian Platonism,” *StPatr* 102 (2021) 11-44; “Matter in the *Dialogue of Adamantius*: Origen’s Heritage and Hylomorphism,” in *Late Antique Cosmologies*, ed. Johannes Zachhuber and Anna Schiavoni, *APhR* 9, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 74-124.

⁴ E.g. I used it in *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the NT to Eriugena*, VCS 120, Leiden: Brill, 2013; “Origen, Patristic Philosophy”; “Origen and the Platonic Tradition,” *Religions* 8 (2017) 21, 1-20; my conclusions in *Lovers of the Soul and Lovers of the Body: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives in Late Antiquity*, eds. Svetla S. Griffin and Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2022, 397-402.

⁵ Alexander Hampton and John Kenney, eds., *Christian Platonism: A History*, Cambridge: CUP, 2020; my review forthcoming in *The Thomist*.

culture must be used to understand Scripture and sometimes explicitly attributes to Christianity Plato's philosophical doctrines. He presents Plato as divinely inspired when prophesying Christ's death. I agree that *Contra Celsum*—and not only this work by Origen, I add—attests to a personal, direct reading of Plato (21): the same I see testified to by Porphyry in *Contra Christianos* F39, which attests to Origen's "being always with Plato" (besides assiduously reading several "Middle Platonists" and Neo-Pythagoreans). Eusebius and Augustine regarded Plato as the greatest philosopher, the closest to Christian thought. Origen did likewise and studied at the school of Ammonius, the Socrates of Neoplatonism, as Plotinus did. I agree that even Origen admitted some "mistakes" of Plato (25) and have indicated the most important.⁶

Christina Hoenig explores Augustine's use of a *Timaeus* passage on the parallel between the gnoseological and ontological planes, in Cicero's translation-adaptation. She shows how Augustine pits Plato against contemporary Platonists—as Origen did, I add, including in *Contra Celsum*. Christine Hecht presents Porphyry's daemons as a threat for Christians especially through Eusebius' criticism in *Praeparatio evangelica*: this is sound. She is right that Porphyry's theory of daemons "does not entail an anti-Christian intent" (56). She does not take into account Origen's probable impact on Porphyry's daemonology.⁷ Certainly, the identification of "pagan" deities with evil daemons (Christian "demons"), highlighted on 51, is the same as in Origen and the Christian tradition. Lars Janby explores Augustine's early theory of number after 386 and recalls how Christ and Pythagoras were joined in early Christianity—Mara Bar Serapion, I add, also

⁶ In "Plato in Origen's and Gregory of Nyssa's Conception of the ἀρχή and the τέλος," in *Plato in the Third Sophistic*, ed. Ryan Fowler, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, 211-235; "Origen to Evagrius," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity*, eds. Harold Tarrant et al., Leiden: Brill, 2018, 271-291; Marcelo Boeri, *ΠΗΓΗ/FONS* 4 (2019) 171-176; Carl O'Brien, "Middle Platonists and Pythagoreans," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Philosophy*, ed. Mark Edwards, London: Routledge, 2021, 280-292: 289; Sarah Wear, "The Philosophy of the Later Neoplatonists," *ibidem*, 313, 326, 327.

⁷ Travis Proctor, "Daemonic Trickery, Platonic Mimicry," *VigChr* 68 (2014) 416-449; Gregory Smith, "How Thin is a Daemon?" *J ECS* 16 (2008) 485-496; Ramelli, "Conceptualities of Angels in Late Antiquity: Degrees of Corporeality, Bodies of Angels, and Comparative Angelologies/Daemonologies in 'Pagan' and Christian Platonism," in *Inventer les anges de l'Antiquité à Byzance*, ed. Delphine Lauritzen, Paris: Collège de France, Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance - CNRS, 2021, 115-172.

joined them perhaps late in the first century.⁸ Augustine appropriated the Neoplatonic theory of number to explain the problem of the derivation of multiplicity from the One, God—also addressed by Gregory Nyssen, I remark.⁹ Lanby rightly notes that Augustine’s engagement with number declined over time—I suspect along with his becoming more and more suspicious towards philosophy (not just Platonism).

Daniel Tolan interestingly explores the role of the divine Ideas in Christian and Platonic theology, from Plato’s *Timaeus*, a “likely story,” the relation between the Demiurge and the Living Being, to Philo, Plotinus and Athanasius. Origen, I note, identified both the Demiurge and the Living Being with Christ-Logos-Wisdom in an exemplarism shortly preceded by Bardaisan and Clement, and, I suspect, came close to ὁμοούσιον as a Trinitarian tenet, having established the co-eternity and co-divinity between Father and Son.¹⁰ Tolan rightly stresses that “the divine ideas constitute a tenet shared between Christian and Platonic orthodoxy” against materialism and in defense of divine simplicity (141): this is true of Origen and still of Eriugena.¹¹ For Athanasius, as is correctly observed (141), the Logos extends to all creation through the divine intelligibles—this is derived from Origen. Athanasius argues for the essential identity of Son and Father and the ὁμοούσιον, as Tolan rightly observes. This is, I find, what Athanasius praises in Origen as an *ante litteram* supporter of the Nicene line.¹² In the account of creation, the question is not the emergence of mind from matter, but vice versa—this is clear in Nyssen.¹³ Tolan concludes with good reason that both Platonism and Christianity—I would say, Christian Platonism: not all of ancient Christianity—appealed to God as *causa exemplaris* to justify creation; what is “to blame for

⁸ See, e.g., my “Theodicy in the Letter of Mara Bar Serapion,” in *The Syriac Lung: New Trajectories in Syriac Studies*, FS Sebastian Brock, eds Brouria B. Ashkelony, Miriam Hjalms, and Robert Kitchen, Leuven: Peeters, 2022.

⁹ See Gerd van Riel and Thomas Wauters, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Bundle Theory of Matter,” *J ECS* 28.3 (2020) 395–421; my “The Dialogue of Adamantius: A Document of Origen’s Thought? Part One,” *StPatr* 52 (2012) 71–98 and “Matter.”

¹⁰ Argument in my “Sources and Reception of Dynamic Unity in Middle and Neoplatonism, ‘Pagan’ and Christian,” *JBR* 7 (2020) 31–66.

¹¹ See my “From God to God: Eriugena’s Protology and Eschatology against the Backdrop of His Platonic Patristic Sources,” in *Eriugena’s Christian Neoplatonism and its Sources*, ed. Idem, Leuven: Peeters, 2021, 99–123.

¹² Argument in my “Origen’s Anti-Subordinationism and Its Heritage in the Nicene and Cappadocian Line,” *VigChr* 65 (2011) 21–49.

¹³ See n. 9.

Arius' errors" is not Platonism tout court, but one specific form of Platonism, which never became orthodox Platonism (142). Tolan is right to emphasize the kinship between Platonism and Christianity (129 and passim). I contributed much scholarship to this and will continue with new arguments.

Pavlos studies theurgy in Dionysius and rightly remarks that terminological identity joins a fundamental difference between Christian liturgy and "pagan" theurgy.¹⁴ For Dionysius the only θεουργός is Christ (158), which I note makes sense, since Christ "works on God" for the salvation of humans, being also God; and, as human, he instituted the Eucharist, the "archetypal meal." The "theurgic" terminology, I suspect, was purportedly chosen by Dionysius to highlight the metaphysical difference between "pagan" theurgy and Christian liturgy. This is consistent with the double-reference scheme he often uses to refer at once to Christian and "pagan" Platonism, also replacing "pagan" terminology with Christian lexicon (e.g. ἀποκατάστασις for ἐπιστροφή) or Christian with "pagan" (theurgy-lexicon for liturgy-lexicon).¹⁵ Dionysius was not a "Neoplatonist" (152). I agree—he was a Christian Platonist.

The same is the case with "hierarchy" in Dionysius, plausibly styled a Christian author with Platonism as a philosophical background by Dimitrios Vasilakis. "Pagan" Triads were hierarchic, unlike the Christian Trinity, at least from Origen and especially the Cappadocians onwards.¹⁶ The -αρχία terminology in Dionysius, I suspect, comes from Origen's Trinitarian notion of ἀρχή.¹⁷ Dionysian hierarchy is not rank: "Relating hierarchically is not merely or mostly to outrank someone, but to invite someone to move up to God" (190).

Sebastian Mateiescu examines how Aristotelian logic impacted Christological controversies, particularly immanent realism in Maximus.¹⁸ Jordan Wood

¹⁴ On the latter, see John F. Finamore, "Ethics, Virtue and Theurgy: On Being a Good Person in Late-Neoplatonic Philosophy," in *The Reception of Greek Ethics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, eds Sophia Xenophontos and Anna Marmodoro, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 69-82.

¹⁵ "Pagan' and Christian Platonism in Dionysius: The Double-Reference Scheme and Its Meaning," in *Byzantine Platonists 284-1453*, eds Frederick Lauritzen and Sarah Wear, Steubenville: Franciscan University—Washington: Catholic University of America, 2021, 92-112.

¹⁶ Argument on differences between the Christian Trinity and pagan hierarchic Triads in my "Dynamic Unity."

¹⁷ My "Hypostasis"; "Origen, Evagrius, and Dionysius," in *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Mark Edwards, George Steiris and Dimitrios Pallis, Oxford: OUP, 2022, 94-108.

¹⁸ See Mark Edwards, *Aristotle and Early Christian Thought*, London: Routledge, 2019; my review *JTS* 71 (2020) 882-885.

explains how perichoresis differs from participation in Maximus: I concur and suspect this is mainly because the Neoplatonic Triad is hierarchic, as mentioned, while the Trinity in the Cappadocians and Maximus is not, and creation differs from emanation, although Origen claimed to interpret creation consistently with Plato and posited an eternal creation of Forms-*logoi* largely acceptable to “pagan” Platonists too.¹⁹ Maximus’ application of perichoresis to humans in the telos (226) is linked with the debate about Maximus’ support of the apokatastasis theory. God interpenetrates those who are worthy once they are made worthy of restoration and deification.²⁰

Brown Dewhurst analyses knowledge of the divine in Maximus and Proclus. Relying on Demetrios Bathrellos, he compares Proclus and Maximus arguing that love is a key difference between Neoplatonic and Christian epistemology. This is the case with these authors—less so perhaps with Origen, Nyssen and Dionysius, who characterized the love of God as both ἔρως and ἀγάπη.²¹ There are differences in the conceptions of providence, cosmology and gnoseology, especially on Christ’s role in knowledge and the possibility of becoming God by grace in θέωσις and know as we are known by God (241, 245). I agree that πρόνοια in Proclus is impersonal and lacks Christian connotations of care, as it appears in *ET* 122: it derives from nature, not will. I add that for Origen, God is good by *nature*, and God’s *will* is to save all humans (1 Tim 2:4–6): both operate in divine πρόνοια. In *ET* 122 I also see many parallels with Origen, from the principle of providence received by creatures according to their deserts—related to the tenet πάντα ἐν πᾶσι ἀλλ’ οἰκείως—to that of doing good as a mark of goodness. I concur that the difference between Proclus’ and Maximus’ notions of Providence passes through Christ (248)—available only to Christian thinkers. In *Ambigua ad Iohannem* 7.24, the idea of creation is unsurprisingly different from that of Proclus—I do not know of anyone who argues for their sameness—in that it is freely willed by God. God created by will and knows creatures as divine wills (although he can “not know” some bad creatures due to their choices). This notion, I observe, reflects that of Ammonius Saccas (“God’s will is sufficient to the coming into existence of beings, for he made each of the creatures by wanting it. God knows the existing beings qua his own wills, since he has created these beings by wanting them”), and Pantaenus, reported by Maximus himself: “Scripture usually

¹⁹ See my “Logos/Nous.”

²⁰ Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 738–757.

²¹ Argument in my “Origen Evagrius, and Dionysius.”

calls the *logoi* ‘divine wills’ (θεῖα θελήματα) ... How does God know the existing beings? ... He knows the beings as his own wills; for, if God has created all things by means of his will, God knows his own will.”²²

Adrian Pirtea concentrates on ἀπάθεια and the origins of passions in Evagrius,²³ pointing to the influence of Porphyry—which is certainly possible in this Christian Platonist who knew Porphyry directly and through Nyssen, an important source of Evagrius in turn—and other readings.²⁴ In this light, given the many elements that Evagrius absorbed, I am not surprised by the conclusion that in this respect, too, Plotinus and Porphyry influenced Evagrius, including in the idea of ἀπάθεια. I detect an influence from Origen, who in turn was fellow-disciple of Plotinus and well known to Porphyry.

The notes at the end of each chapter make them difficult to read, but not by the editors’ decision. There are typos, e.g. “at the same period” for “in” (17), *Resp.* “361e4-a1” for “362a1” (19), ποιητής for ποιητής (138). “Hieronymus” should always be corrected into “Jerome” (259). Some readers might perhaps feel a loose degree of coherence and somewhat contrasting perspectives about the “Christian Platonism” category, but this makes for a highly engaging reading that will surely elicit further research in Patristic Platonism, which needs keen competence and serious investigation.

ILARIA L. E. RAMELLI

Durham University; Sacred Heart University; Cambridge University
(i.l.e.ramelli@durham.ac.uk)

²² On both see my “Divine Power in Origen of Alexandria: Sources and Aftermath,” in *Divine Powers in Late Antiquity*, eds. Anna Marmodoro and Irini Fotini Viltanioti, Oxford: OUP, 2017, 177-198.

²³ Now see on Apatheia in Evagrius the first monograph: Monica Tobon, *Apatheia and Anthropology in Evagrius Ponticus*, London: Routledge, forthcoming.

²⁴ Argument in my “Gregory Nyssen’s and Evagrius’s Biographical and Theological Relations: Origen’s Heritage and Neoplatonism,” in *Evagrius between Origen, the Cappadocians, and Neoplatonism*, ed. Idem, Leuven: Peeters, 2017, 165-231.