

Chapter 5: Alexandrio Syriac Thought

Alexandrio Syriac Thought by C.A Qadir

The Neo –Pythagoreans

The great conquering sweep of Alexander the Great eastwards not only destroyed the old, intense and narrow life of the self-contained Greek City States but also marked a decisive change in the intellectual and spiritual life of Greece.

With the spread of Greek civilisation over the Near East, the horizons of the individual Greeks were greatly enlarged; but the break-up of the old City-States engendered a sense of isolation and rootlessness which made people look inward for stability and security, rather than outward as hitherto done.

Another and a more potent reason for this shift in Greek thinking can be discovered in widespread scepticism after the death of Aristotle. True, scepticism also prevailed when Socrates was born, but the metaphysical speculations of pre-Socratic thinkers led them into the inextricable confusion of doubt.

Socrates asked people to look at man instead of nature, for in the domain of human problems the competence of reason could be demonstrated more easily than in that of the physical or the metaphysical. But the protest which scepticism made after Aristotle was more devastating. It was declared by the sceptics that the entire philosophical venture of their predecessors was hopelessly wrong and also that their error was without a remedy.

This was indeed very saddening. It amounted to the confession that not only were the solutions of the so-called perennial problems of philosophy nonsensical but also that no satisfactory solution was possible, at least with the techniques and methods hitherto pursued.

Reason thus assailed could find refuge only in faith. In the period that follows we find philosophy renouncing its independence and becoming merely an instrument of theology.

Ritter says, “The feeling of alienation and the yearning after a higher revelation are characteristics of the last centuries of the ancient world; this yearning was, in the first place, but an expression of consciousness of the decline of the classical nations and their cultures, the presentiment of the approach of a new era, and it called into life not only Christianity but also before it pagan and Jewish Alexandrianism and other related developments.”¹

No longer finding Greece a cordial home for philosophy, the philosophers went over to Egypt and Rome, carrying their doctrines with them. They delivered courses of lectures which were attended with great zeal and enthusiasm by the populace. But the venture did not succeed so well in Rome as it did in Alexandria. In Rome philosophy could lend its weight to poetry, oratory, jurisprudence, and some topics of conversation, but it was in Alexandria that it produced men who gave it originality, vigour, and drive.

Alexandria was not simply a centre of Greek culture and scholarship, but also and more significantly a meeting-place for Greek and Eastern thought. It took a cosmopolitan character and showed a marked leaning towards Oriental thought. The result of this interpretation of Greek and Semitic cultures was the synthetic civilization known as Hellenism in contradistinction to the Hellenic or purely Greek civilization. Hellenism rose to supremacy not only in Alexandria and Syria but throughout Western Asia.

It would be incorrect to identify the present geographical boundaries of Syria with its old ones. In Roman days, at the beginning of the Christian era Syria denoted the country west of the Euphrates and north of the Arabian Desert, including Palestine and Palmyra and extending north to the Taurus. The usual language of Syria was Aramaic, a language akin to Hebrew.

The Hebrew word “Aram” is rendered as “Syria” and originally the words Aramaean and Syrian were synonymous. After the Hellenization of the country, the Greek language was used by the ruling class and the officials with very little influence on the masses who continued using their dialect. This state of affairs continued till the first/seventh century when after the Muslim conquest Syriac gradually gave way vernacularly and to some extent liturgically to Arabic, though it had great influence on the vocabulary, pronunciation, and even the grammatical forms of Arabic which supplanted it.

For purposes of studying Alexandrian and Syriac philosophy, for the two run together and interpenetrate, we can divide our subject into:

- (1) Neo-Pythagoreanism,
- (2) The Jewish-Alexandrian Philosophy,
- (3) Neo-Platonism, and
- (4) Early Christianity.

To all these speculations what is common is the dualistic opposition of the divine and the earthly; an abstract conception of God excluding all knowledge of the divine nature; contempt for the world of

sense, on the ground of the Platonic doctrines of matter and the descent of the soul of man from a superior world into the body; the theory of intermediate potencies or beings through whom God acts upon the world of phenomena; the requirements of an ascetic self-emancipation from the bondage of sense; and faith in a higher revelation to man when in a state called Enthusiasm.”²

Both Neo-Pythagoreanism and the Judaic-Alexandrian philosophy are found together in the beginning of the Christian era. The Neo-Pythagoreans who were fundamentally religious in their outlook and practices were represented by P. Nigidus Figulus, Sotion, and particularly Apollonius of Tyana, Moderatus of Gades, and, in later times, Nicomachus of Gerasa and Numenius of Apamea.

The Neo-Pythagoreans were highly eclectic in character. They were greatly influenced by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, not to speak of ancient Pythagoreans whose doctrines they attempted to revive.

Neo-Pythagorean doctrines could not flourish in Rome, where, Seneca says they could not find a professor to teach them, but gained a stronghold in Alexandria. The Neo-Pythagoreans combined monotheism with the fatalistic cult of gods and demons but transformed it at the same time with the help of Platonic-Aristotelian teachings into a reverence for God as a pure spirit who is to be served not by outward sacrifices but by silent prayers and with wisdom and virtue.

Like Plato and Aristotle, the Neo-Pythagoreans distinguished between unity and plurality and also between the divine and the earthly. Several attempts were made to get rid of this dualism. There arose consequently a great diversity of opinion with regard to the nature of God and the relation He bears to the world. Some identified God with the world-soul of Plato.

Others thought of Him as an ineffable “Monad” from which flowed both unity and plurality. Still others considered Him immanent but free from all contacts with matter which might pollute Him. It was, therefore, imperative for the Neo-Pythagoreans, especially the last ones, to introduce a Demiurge as a mediator between God and matter.

The metaphysics of the Neo-Pythagorean school required four principles. viz., God, the world-reason, the world-soul, and matter, out of which the first three helped in formulating the Christian conception of triune God, while the fourth one paved the way for the doctrine of emanation.

The Neo-Pythagoreans gave a deeper metaphysical meaning to Number. The ultimate ground of all good as well as the order of the universe was provided by the Monad while the Dyad was held responsible for all disorder and imperfection. The Monad became the symbol for Godhead and the Dyad for matter. The gulf between the two, viz., the Monad and the Dyad, was bridged by the introduction of the idea of a world-soul which was built upon the Stoic, Aristotelean, and Platonic conceptions.

Certain numerological conceptions of the Neo-Pythagoreans appear grotesque to the modern mind. It was held by them that the movements of the heavenly bodies were harmoniously adjusted by number—an idea of Egyptian origin—and so certain numbers were regarded as having a sacred

character, particularly number 10 which represents the sum of a pyramid of four stages, 4+3+2+1=10.

In such conceptions, their imagination ran riot to such an extent that one can gain the impression that Neo-Pythagoreanism is nothing more than astrology, occultism, and twaddle about the mysterious properties of numbers.

In epistemology they closely followed Plato, classifying knowledge into spiritual perception, discursive reason, opinion, and sensuous perception. Science, we owe to discursive reason; inference, to opinion; and beatific vision, to spiritual perception.

Nicomachus of Gerasa who lived about 140 A.D. was one with Plato in holding that ideas were temporally prior to the formation of the world and also in holding that ideas were numbers. But, whereas Plato had accorded an independent existence to ideas, Nicomachus was content with giving them dependent role. He conceived of ideas as existing in the divine mind and so acting as patterns according to which the things of this world are fashioned.

Another thinker who attempted a synthesis of Plato and Pythagoras was Maximus of Tyre who taught in the first half of the second century. He was a Sophist and a rhetorician besides being an eclectic. Like other Platonists he opposed God to matter and made demons play an intermediary role between God and man.

A long hierarchy of demons and angels was instituted by him which served as ministers to God and guardian-angels to man. He identified God with pure reason and considered matter to be a source of imperfection of the universe. Sins were due to the misuse of free-will by man and were not the result of any evil agency acting from without. Maximus did not believe in any evil world-soul, to whom human lapses could be attributed.

Maximus thought, very much like Rumi and other Muslim mystics that the soul is temporarily imprisoned in the human body and is ever yearning for release and reunion with the Divine Source.

Still another eclectic thinker from Syria by the name of Numenius of Apamea, who lived in the second half of the second century, is by many regarded as the real founder of Neo-Platonism. Hitti says

“Plotinus the Greek philosopher of Egypt, credited with that distinction, was popularly accused of basing his teachings on those of this Apamean and of strutting around in his feathers.”³

In his writings, Numenius combined Pythagorean and Platonic opinions in such a manner that while granting Pythagoras the highest authority and even accusing Plato of borrowing from him, he yet gave a predominant place to Platonic ideas. He traced the philosophy of the Greeks back to the Orientals and called Plato an “Attic-speaking Moses.”

Numenius, however, was not simply a camp follower of Plato. He differed from him too, since he distinguished the world-builder as a second god from the highest Deity. The basis of this distinction is to

be found in his metaphysics where God who is identified sometimes with the Reason of Aristotle, sometimes with the Monad of Pythagoras, and sometimes with both, stands against the creation which because of its imperfections is far inferior to Him.

The universe is created by a second god, the Demiurge, who is good by participation in the essence of the first. He acquires knowledge by gazing at the supersensible archetypes and brings the world into being. The universe which is created by the second god is regarded as the third god by Numenius. Thus considered, God becomes a cosmic triunity comprising three divinities: Father, Creator, and Creature, which Numenius termed father, son, and grandson.

The psychology of Numenius is as dualistic as his metaphysics. Man, being both spiritual and corporeal, participates in both the world-souls. Numenius was wise enough not to condemn body outright. It had to be condemned only when it stood in the way of reason and served as a cat's-paw in the hands of the evil world-soul.

But in spite of his better thinking Numenius could not completely shake off the influence of the prevailing mode of thinking. He held that the encasement of the rational part of the soul in the human body did indicate a fall for the soul and that the liberation of the soul could be effected through a long series of reincarnations:

Hence the present life should be one of self-denial and renunciation, that is to say, a life of reason devoid of passions. In his stress upon transmigration as a means of liberation, Numenius betrays, like his teacher, Pythagoras, the influence of Hindu thought.

A passing reference may be made to P. Nigidius Figulus for his interest in the Pythagorean philosophy and also to Apollonius of Tyana who distinguished the one God from other gods. The First being ineffable and absolutely pure could not come in contact with earthly things on account of their material constitution.

Apollonius did not like offerings to be made to the one God these he reserved for the lesser gods. We may also briefly mention Moderatus of Gades who incorporated Platonism and non-theological doctrines into Pythagoreanism. Number one he regarded as the symbol of unity and two as that of difference and inequality.

The Jewish-Alexandrian Philosophy

Among the precursors of Neo-Platonism are to be counted Neo-Pythagoreanism and Jewish-Alexandrian philosophy in addition to a host of other tendencies which cannot be discussed here for want of space. Even out of the Jewish thinkers we shall pick out Philo, leaving other luminaries altogether, again for want of space.

Philo, a Jew, was born at Alexandria a few years before Christ. His philosophy is an attempt to find an

adjustment between the traditions of Israel and those of the Greeks. Philo felt that the aesthetic elements in Greek culture were repugnant to some of the elements involved in Jewish religion. To smooth out differences and to show the concordance between the two systems of thought and practice, Philo adopted the allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures already in use among the Alexandrian Jews.

On this interpretation, circumcision, for example, would signify and hence serve as a symbol for the cutting off of passions and ungodly opinions. Philo often criticized the literalists for their word-picking habits. But Philo was not a thoroughgoing symbolist. He knew that if once you defend an external practice on the ground that it is useful as a symbol, it is very hard to assert that it is obligatory for all times to come.

Philo, therefore, recognized that the literal sense is often accompanied by a more profound sense and that both the senses have to be accepted since both go together. "Although circumcision properly symbolizes the removal of all passions and sensibility and impious thoughts, yet we may not, therefore, set aside the practice enjoined, for in that case, we should be obliged to give up the public worship of God in the temple and a thousand other solemnities," says he in *De Migratione Abrahami*.⁴

Philo was primarily a religious preacher rather than a philosopher. He had no desire to propound a theory of the universe which could stand the scrutiny of logical reason. He was essentially concerned with the life of soul and its attaining the beatific vision. Keeping this objective in view he demarcated the mystical experience from all other psychical experiences on the ground that while the former lifts you out of the ordinary plane of life and brings you in direct contact with some tremendous reality, the latter keeps you earthbound and sense-bound.

In this Philo was following in the footsteps of Plato who exhibits a religio-mystic vein in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, with the difference that Philo being a Jew first and last could not identify God with the impersonal divine reason of Plato. However, in suggesting methods for "soul-cultivation," he again turned his attention to the Greeks, borrowed their psychology, and on its basis framed rules for the systematic training of the soul to receive the vision of God.

The theology of Philo is a blending of Platonism and Judaism. The Jewish doctrine shows God as intimately concerned with the world; the Platonic, though insisting upon the divine governance and divine formation of the world, does not hold that the relation which God has to the world-is necessary or automatic. The Middle Platonism recognized a hierarchy of divine beings, insisted upon the transcendence of God, and regarded the visible world as being governed and made by lower intermediary divine powers. Philo had to reconcile these two conceptions.

Philo believed in one God, eternal, unchanging, passionless, far removed above the world of phenomena as the First Cause of all that exists. Causation, however, implies change and so God could not be regarded as directly creating the universe. Intermediary powers are, therefore, needed to explain

the governance and formation of the world and what it contains. These powers Philo described very confusedly. Sometimes he talked of powers, sometimes of two powers, sometimes of one.

The problem before Philo was that of the development of multiplicity from absolute unity. The solution was sought in the inability of the contemplating mind to reproduce the absolute unity in itself. Philo gives an account of the “multiple” apparition of God to human intellect in the *De Migratione Abrahami*. When the soul is illumined by God, it sees Him triple, one with a double shadow; but at the highest point, the shadow vanishes and God is seen as One.

In the *Quaestiones in Genesim*, Philo says that the mind “sees God triple” due to the weakness of its vision. “Just as the bodily eye sees a double appearance from one light, so the eye of the soul, since it cannot apprehend the one as one, makes a triple perception, according to the appearance of the chief serving powers which stand beside the One.”⁵

The highest of all the divine forces is the Logos (Word). Sometimes Philo, in common with Aristobulus and other earlier commentators gave to it the name of Sophia, but the more commonly used word by him is the Logos.

In some of his writings he gives to Sophia the highest of the parts into which the Logos is divided. Logos has a dual nature. In man it is reason and also the spoken word. In the All it divides itself into the incorporeal and archetypal ideas of which the intelligible world consists, and the copies of these incorporeal ideas constitute the world of perception.

In other, passages Philo has called Sophia the mother of the Logos—ordinarily he calls it divine Logos without qualification or distinction—the mediator between God and man. It is so to say the instrument by which God makes the world and the intermediary by which the human intelligence after being purified ascends to heaven.

Philo is not clear on the independent existence of the Logos: On all accounts it seems that in Philo's mind the powers had little or no existence apart from their function. “His conception of them is affected by contemporary Greek ideas, but perhaps they really belong to that mysterious class of instrumental and subordinate quasi-beings which accompany the Divinity in Semitic and Persian thought, the Angel, the Wisdom, the Breath of God in the Jewish Scriptures, the Uncreated Law of the Rabbis and the quasi-personified Divine Virtues or the attributes of Persian (Zoroastrian) theology, the Amesha Spentas.”⁶

Anyhow Philo was not clear on this subject. As Ueberweg says in his *History of Philosophy*, Philo wavered between, the attributive and the substantive conception of the Logos. He both hypostatized the Logos into a person and reduced it to a mere attribute or function of the first person.⁷ What is, however, important for subsequent thinking is not the nature of the Logos as such but the identification of the Logos with the Platonic world of forms and the use of this conception in explaining the creation of this world.

This led to a very great development in the thought of the medieval theologians. Philosophically speaking, the Philonian Logos is nothing but the principle of unity in diversity, of the separating and uniting of contraries in the material world. But perhaps Philo would not like to be judged philosophically.

The idea of Logos was not a metaphysical necessity for him; it was psychologically needed for coming in contact with God.

Philo's doctrines of "pneuma" and mystical union are equally important. The former is a free creative in-breathing by God, becoming the image of God in man and constituting thereby the highest part of man's soul, superior to the "psyche."

Other schools outside Jewish circles were also emphasizing one God, eternal and invariable, as the Source and the First Cause of the universe. The Gnostic sects which were of philosophic origin accepted God as the First Cause, above the imperfections and variations of the mundane world and, therefore, requiring an intermediary or an emanation to explain the production of an imperfect and variable world.

Neo-Platonism

Plotinus

The ancestry of Neo-Platonism can be traced to Neo-Pythagoreanism, Jewish Gnosticism, and other tendencies including Christianity, which so to say had become the Weltanschauung of most of those who had any living religion in the world of Greek culture: cruder and more superstitious forms of it in the lower strata of society, more refined and Hellenized forms among the educated.

The founder of Neo-Platonism was Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus. Saccas means the sack-bearer and as a surname indicates the occupation by which Ammonius earned his living. Nothing definite can be asserted with regard to his philosophic convictions. Some have asserted that he proclaimed the identity of Aristotelian and Platonic doctrines and also the immortality of the soul.

But there is no historical evidence to decide one way or the other. Nor is there any justification for holding that Ammonius was the first to formulate the doctrine that the One is exterior to the world of ideas—a doctrine of fundamental importance in the system of Plotinus.

Plotinus was an Egyptian of Greek speech and culture, born probably in 205 A. D. About his race and parentage nothing is certain, for he was, as Porphyry says, "like a man ashamed of being in the body."

At the age of twenty-eight he went to Alexandria to receive philosophical training. He was surely disappointed till at last he came to Ammonius whose teachings satisfied him completely. With Ammonius he remained for eleven long years and left him only to accompany the Emperor Gordian in the hope of studying Persian and Indian philosophy.

The mission proved unsuccessful and Plotinus had to flee for his life to Antioch. At the age of forty, he went to Rome where he succeeded in winning the king and queen over to his doctrines. With the approval of the king he wanted to found a Philosopher's City, where the inhabitants should live according to the teachings of Plato.

The timely intervention of the nobles dissuaded the king from accepting such a silly proposal. In Rome he established his own school and taught there for the rest of his life. A painful death, probably cancer of the throat, marked in 270 A. D. the end of his illustrious career.

It is certain that Plotinus was conversant with the principal doctrines of all the philosophical schools of the Greeks, particularly Aristotelian and Platonic. He had read very assiduously the works of Numenius and came under his influence. This probably accounts for the complexities and tensions that one finds in his writings. It was not an easy task to synthesize the extremely complicated traditions that Plotinus had inherited.

There is a double purpose in his philosophy, the cosmic and the religious. He purports to give a complete account of reality which should also serve as a guide to spiritual life. These two strains go together and can be kept apart for theoretical purposes only. However, there is no denying the fact that the double task put a great strain on Plotinus' philosophical endeavour and led him to say much that sounds bizarre to the modern ear.

Reality, for Plotinus, is an ordered hierarchical whole comprising two movements, one of descent and the other of ascent. The first is an automatic creativity by which the higher generates the lower, while the second is a movement of return by which the soul attains reabsorption in the Divine Source.

The first is a movement from unity to multiplicity, the second is a reverse movement, that is to say, from multiplicity to unity. Plotinus sometimes emphasizes the one and sometimes the other and says things which are hard to reconcile. It is evident from his writings that he imposed upon himself a task which by its very nature was impossible to accomplish.

At the head of his system stands a transcendent First Principle, the One which is ineffable and incomprehensible to the discursive as well as the intuitive reason. Below the One lie the two hypostases which are the universal correlatives of the whole range of human life, physical and intellectual.

These are Nous, Aristotle's active intellect, and the world-soul whose function is to contemplate as well as to direct the material world. The hypostases are united with each other and with the One, first, by emanation which is the radiation of the lower from the higher and, second, by return in contemplation by the lower upon the higher.

Plotinus' conception of the One is very complicated and has been variously interpreted. The One may be regarded as the Neo-Pythagorean Absolute Unity from which all plurality proceeds. The One cannot be said to have a being, for this way of thinking introduces a duality between subject and object and there

can be no duality in Pure Unity. In the absolute state, in its first and highest hypostasis, the One is neither existence nor thought, neither moved, nor movable; it is simple unity or, as Hegel would say, the Absolute Nothing, the Immanent Negative.

There is a tendency in Plotinus derived from the Platonists and Middle Stoics to deny all predications to the One for fear of compromising Its unity. This tendency is, however, corrected by another much more positive approach. If the One is called God, then God is God not because He is nothing but because He embraces everything. He is, however, better than the reality of which He is the source.

The ideas no doubt form the content of His mind but they are nevertheless imperfect images as compared to the one Good, and receive radiance, “a grace playing upon their beauty” from the Primal Source. The positive aspect of the One is stressed so much at places that it seems to contradict Plotinus basic assumptions.

The One, he says, is pure will, loves Itself and is the cause of Itself. This characterization conflicts with his earlier stand and justifies the use of human language for the basic reality.

In Plotinus, the negative and positive aspects go together. The positive aspect is, however, more pronounced. The One may be transcendental, but if It is a reality, It should not simply be a Great Denial about which nothing positive can be asserted.

This point can receive further clarification from an examination of the religious life of Plotinus. There is no doubt that he had a genuine mystical experience. Porphyry bears testimony to it and the whole spirit and the tenor of the *Enneads* lends weight to it. But what is the nature of this experience and what is its goal? Some make Plotinus a pantheist and an anti-rationalist, for whom the goal is dissolution of the self into nothingness.

Some think that he was trying to realize his pre-existing identity with the One through his own efforts, while others think that his experience was genuinely mystical, akin to that of the great Christian and Muslim mystics. The first interpretation is absurd, the second is partially true. It is, however, the third one which truly explains his viewpoint.

Plotinus was torn so to say by the conflicting traditions he had inherited.

The One was both transcendental and the Unity-Absolute. Again, the One was both inaccessible and also the goal of our own self-realization. Plotinus contradictions and tensions are the product of these irreconcilable strains in his *Weltanschauung*. In both cases the positive aspect predominates. But it should not be ignored that the tension is real and fundamental.

How did the world originate from the One? Thinkers before Plotinus had assumed dualism; they had distinguished the world from its creator. But dualism was no answer to the problem. If the creator and the created differ in essence the question whence came the world remains as unsolved as ever. Plotinus

answered the question by saying that the world is distinct from God in act rather than in essence. The world is God but God is not the world. To explain it Plotinus had the theory of emanation.

Plotinus found it very hard to explain emanation except through metaphors. Both Nous and soul are produced by a spontaneous and necessary efflux of life from the One. They leave their source undiminished. The relation between the One and the other hypostases is described as being like that of the sun and its light or “in similes from the radiative effect of fire, snow or perfumes.

Can any philosophical meaning be given to this conception? It is difficult to see what meaning can be attached to emanation or radiation when attached to spiritual beings. Again, why, if the process is eternal, can one emanation be inferior to another? These are points which pass comprehension.

Plotinus has another way to explain his theory of emanation. He represents the One as a root or seed, the potentiality from which all things evolve into actuality. This comparison is used to describe the relation of the lower hypostases to the higher. About the soul, he says, it has potentialities which can only be actualized in the material world. Plotinus writes, “If then it is necessary that not only the One should exist . . . in the same way it is also necessary that not only souls should exist in the absence of those things which come into being through them; that is supposing that every nature has this inherent quality of making that which comes after it and of unrolling itself as if proceeding from a sort of partless seed as a beginning to the perceptible end.

The prior being remains always in its proper place and that which comes after is as it were generated from an ineffable power (or potency).”⁸ This will show that the comparison to a seed is applied to all the hypostases including the One Itself. But it will be evident to every student of Plotinus that the comparison sets up an impossible contradiction to the rest of the Enneads.

The One may be the beginning of everything, but it cannot be the spermatic beginning. The system of Plotinus is teleological rather than evolutionary: the main thrust of the universal forces is upwards and not downwards.

The second hypostasis, the first emanation of the One, the Nous, is a very complicated notion. It is an image of the former and turns towards It to grasp and comprehend It. Through turning, it becomes Nous (reason) – sensory perception when the object of comprehension is sensible, and rational apprehension when the object of comprehension is supersensible. The Noun includes in itself the world of ideas. Consequently, the ideas are immanent in the Nous and do not exist as external to it.

It is clear that Plotinus needed an emanation in order that the First Cause should remain unchanged. It is the Nous which is the reality behind the world of phenomena; the things perceived are only the shadows of the real ones.

From the Nous proceeds the third hypostasis, viz., Psyche, the principle of life and motion, the world-soul, which is in the universe and is shared by every living creature. The whole world is alive, he

held, and seems to participate in a life similar to our own. Further, life requires a cause which must be found in intelligence, for everywhere one finds intelligent activities. Plotinus maintains that the intelligent activity is nothing but a soul.

Porphyry

The most important of the disciples of Plotinus was Porphyry, born in 232 A.D., probably at Batanaea in Syria. He was altogether a lesser man but all the same a very loyal disciple and a devout follower, who by his pleasing diction brought within the range of understanding of all men the doctrines of Plotinus, which in the language of its author had seemed difficult and obscure. Porphyry was more practical and religious than his master.

He declared the end of philosophizing to be the salvation of the soul. The cause of evil is the desire for the low and the base, and the means of deliverance are self-purification, asceticism, and philosophic cognition of God. While in Sicily, he wrote a book in which he criticized the doctrines of Christianity, especially the divinity of Christ.

He is the first among the successors of Plotinus to defend Hellenic paganism against Christianity. His interest in demons as intermediaries between God and man is very much pronounced and he has a great deal to say about them.

Iamblichus

Iamblichus was a native of Chalcis in Coele Syria and a pupil of Porphyry. Like his master he taught at Rome after the death of Plotinus but retired in later life to Syria where he died in 330 A. D.

The philosophy of Iamblichus is marked by an inrush of Syrian theology with its grosser conceptions, its wild and nonsensical trick of playing with numbers, and its craving for the baser forms of the supernatural. Iamblichus put faith above history and revelation, renounced the later Greek philosophy, and asserted that God could do everything.

After Plotinus, the Neo-Platonists were up against the mighty surge of Christianity. To stem it, they worked to bring about a complete and thorough theology based on the Dialogues of Plato, Chaldaean oracles, and the ancient myths: Greek, Egyptian, or Near Eastern. They were also concerned with elaborating the system of Plotinus and making it absolutely complete.

Iamblichus assumes still another absolutely ineffable and indeterminate first One above the One of Plotinus. The latter has produced the intelligible world, out of which the intellectual world has emanated. The objects of thought belong to the intelligible world while thinking belongs to the intellectual world. Then there is further splitting up, sub-division, or classification which makes the whole system nonsensically abstract and hopelessly unreal. Plotinus had distinguished Being, Life, and Intelligence, but had never gone so far as to break the complex unity into three hypostases. This was done by Iamblichus.

chus and his followers.

Hence complications arose not because their philosophical principles were fantastic—which indeed they were—but because they tried to accommodate every god, demon, and hero of the pagan mythology into their system. The motive behind this attempt was a genuine desire to explain the emergence of multiplicity from unity which was accomplished by the interpolation of the intermediate terms.

It was, however, forgotten that no such attempt was destined to succeed as there can be nothing intermediate between the Absolute and other things. Increase in the number of deities, demons, and spirits cannot, philosophically speaking, solve the old riddle of the One and the many.

In the hands of Iamblichus and his followers philosophy became a conglomeration of mythical beings, an amazing metaphysical museum with entities labelled and classified, leaving no room for any free intellectual and spiritual quest.

The philosophy of Iamblichus and his followers was the last Neo-Platonic attempt to provide an alternative scheme of thought and life to Christianity which was forging ahead among the masses and the intellectuals. After a brief success Neo-Platonism failed to capture the imagination of the common man, with the result that the centres of its teaching in Syria, Alexandria, and Athens were closed by a royal edict in 529 A. D.

Early Christianity

A great part of the Christian belief was formed of notions current in the Hellenic world. When the early preachers of Christianity explained the position of Jesus in the totality of things, they did so in terms which bore a close resemblance to conceptions already current in the pagan and the Jewish worlds. Christianity had to assimilate elements from its Hellenistic environment. Its theology was influenced by gnosticism, which has been aptly termed as Hellenistic theology.

It was common to all forms of Hellenistic theology that the material world accessible to senses is evil and consequently very much inferior to the transcendental world; further, that the soul which has divine origin could win its way back through self-denial and purification.

While talking of evil the gnostics primarily thought of the material world and evils connected with sensual passions and not the injustice of the actual state of things or the inequality in the distribution of economic goods or the pains of poverty, disease, and oppression which are ordinarily associated with evil by the modern man.

With regard to the person of Jesus, there is a difference of opinion in the Hellenistic theology. It is argued that in Jesus a pre-existing heavenly being was present upon earth, but as to the manner of his corporeal manifestation, there is a variety of speculations. All alike regard Jesus Christ as a compound; they differ, however, with regard to the nature and mode of the combination of the human and divine

elements in his person.

All these beliefs and controversies were taken over to the Christian Church and formed a basis for their understanding of the Testament. The Christians had their own philosophers too who endeavoured to reconcile philosophy and Christian theology. The prominent among them at Alexandria were Clement and Origen.

The former was a Platonist of the older type who shows in his *Stromateis* how the general body of the Christian doctrine is adapted to the theories of Platonic philosophy. The latter also undertook a defence of the Christian faith against the objections of a Platonist. He was first among the Christian theologians to set forth the doctrines of the Christian faith in a systematic form.

Both Clement and Origen founded the Christian school of philosophical theology. But the attempt did not find favour with the people. The same Justinian who closed the school of the Neo-Platonists in 529 A. D. condemned Origenism in nine anathemas in about 540 A. D.

Having been made to quit Alexandria, Origen returned to Palestine and founded a school at Caesarea, on the model of that in Alexandria. It did not succeed like the original one but nevertheless exercised a potent influence on the Syrian Church. A rival school was set up at Antioch by Malchion. Fifty years later another school was established at Nisibis, right in the heart of the Syriac-speaking community. It was here that the text-books studied at Antioch were rendered into Syriac.

The Church had no philosophy of its own. It had to adapt itself to the Alexandrian philosophy, particularly to Neo-Platonism and Aristotelian metaphysics and psychology. This led to senseless controversies as the Arian doctrine shows. Both the Alexandrian and the Syrian Churches agreed that Christ was an emanation, eternal like God, but differed in their interpretation of eternity.

The school of Antioch thought that God being the cause, there was a time when God existed but not the Son. This was denied by the Alexandrians who maintained that eternity does not admit of before and after. If God is Father He is so from eternity and the Son should for ever be issuing from the Father as the source.

The Arian controversy died by the fifth century A. D. giving place to another which concerned the person of the incarnate Christ. It was largely a question of psychology. In *De Anima* Aristotle had defined soul as the first actuality of a natural body having in it the capacity of life “and described its four faculties as the nutritive, the sensible, the locomotive, and the intellectual.

The first three are common to men and animals, being concerned with the intake of food and with knowledge through sense and desire. The fourth one which is the intellect, *Nous*, or the rational soul is peculiar to man. It is independent of the body and the presumption is that it has its source not in the body.”

Man is therefore a compound of psyche and the rational soul, the first signifying the first three functions of the soul, the second, the fourth one which later philosophy regarded as the emanation of Logos or the Agent Intellect. Difficulty arose about the co-presence of these elements in the personality of Christ. What would be the relationship between the Logos and psyche, its own emanation, when they come together in the same person? The question was discussed by the gnostics too.

They regarded human nature, that is, the psyche of Jesus Christ, either as a mere illusion or so detached from the divine that we have really two persons. On the second view the man Jesus is regarded as having been originally distinct from the heavenly Christ. The latter descended into him at his baptism and the compound Jesus Christ came to be. Some people put the coalescence of the two at an early date.

Both these positions were taken by the Church. The Alexandrians thought that the psyche and Logos fused in the person of Christ, while the school of Antioch headed by Nestorius rejected the hypothesis outright. Nestorius conceived of Christ as uniting in himself two persons, the Logos and a man although the two persons were so united that they might in a sense be deemed one.

As the controversy became acute a council was held at Ephesus in 431 A. D. where the Alexandrians succeeded in getting Nestorius and his followers condemned as heretics. They were persecuted and forced to migrate from Egypt. Accordingly, they founded a school in Edessa, a Syriac-speaking district. The school became the resort of the Nestorians and centre of the vernacular speaking Syriac Church. This school was also banned and the scholars had to take refuge in Persia.

The Nestorians had to support their theories by the prevailing philosophy and so every Nestorian missionary was to some extent a propagandist of Greek philosophy. They translated into Syriac the works of Aristotle and his commentators, and also the works of the theologians.

The Nestorians had no sympathy with the government which had persecuted them. Consequently they spurned its language and celebrated the sacrament only in Syriac. They promoted a distinctly native theology and philosophy by means of translated material and Syriac commentaries.

The advocates of the fusion theory, the Monophysites or Jacobites as they were called, the rivals of the Nestorians, fared no better at the hands of the government. They were also persecuted and expelled. Consequently, they too boycotted the Greek language and began using Coptic and Syriac. In philosophy they were inclined more towards Neo-Platonism and mysticism than the Nestorians.

Ibas who led the Nestorian migration to Persia translated Porphyry's *Isagoge*, a manual of logic, into Syriac, while Probus produced commentaries on this book as well as on Aristotle's *Hermeneutica*, *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, and *Analytica Priora*. Sergius, a Jacobite, wrote about the *Isagoge*, the "Table of Porphyry," Aristotle's "Categories" and *De Mundo*. He also wrote treatises on logic in seven volumes.

Ahudemmeh composed treatises on the definition of logic, on free-will, on the soul, on man considered

to be a microcosm, and on man as a composition of soul and body. Paul the Persian produced a treatise on logic which he dedicated to a Persian king.

The Jacobites produced works no less than the Nestorians. Their productions are enormous no doubt but, all the same, they lack originality. For the most part they are only the transmission of received texts with their translations, commentaries, and explanatory treatises. But it cannot be denied that they fulfilled a genuine need and became a means of spreading Greek philosophy and culture far beyond its original home.

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