

CPC Church History I  
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Neo-Platonism

**Plotinus**

Neoplatonism is a philosophical school of thought whose founder is considered to be Plotinus (c. 204-270 AD). Plotinus likely studied under the same teacher as Origen (whom we studied earlier), a man named Ammonius. Ammonius was probably influenced by eastern philosophies (through Persia), and was almost certainly not a Christian. Plotinus also was not a Christian, although his philosophy has influenced Christian, Jewish, Islamic, pagan, and Gnostic philosophies. The major features of his thought are:

- In Plato, the form of the Good was the highest discernible reality. In some writings, it seems to be joined by the form of the Beautiful and the form of the True. But these three forms, called the transcendentals, seem to form an interpenetrating unity. This led Plotinus to emphasize that above all reality was the One, the source from which all being derives, itself outside of and beyond being. This is the major feature of his thought, and as such there are several important things to attend to here.
  - The One is called the first “hypostasis.” It is noteworthy that *hypostasis* was the Greek word the Church ultimately settled on to describe what there are 3 of in the Trinity (Latin *persona*).
  - The process by which all that exists come from the One is called “emanation.” In this emanation, the One remains unchanged and undiminished, even while Being goes out from it to create the universe.
  - The first emanation, and therefore the first thing to come into existence, is Mind, where the Platonic forms reside. This is the second *hypostasis*. It is likened to Plato’s Demiurge, the craftsman who is responsible for creating the universe (but not *ex nihilo*, like the Christian God).
  - The third *hypostasis* is Soul. Soul includes both rational souls as well as that soul which is the principle of all other movement in things (the growth of plants, the tendency of a rock to go down and fire to go up, etc.).
    - It would be tempting to see an image of the Trinity in the One and the first two emanations. However, it must be emphasized that for Plotinus, the emanations are hierarchical—that means that Mind is less noble than the One, and Soul less noble than Mind. Further, Mind and Soul are created, because in this view, emanation is the process through which creation occurs. Thus, to try to see the Trinity in this would be to create a subordinationist (in fact, Arian) view of the Trinity, which the Church condemns (Nicea, 325).
  - Therefore, although matter is considered to be so far from the One as to be evil, ultimately everything that exists emanates from the One, and so the universe taken as a whole is good. Everything that exists is an outpouring of the One (which could call “the divine”), and so all of reality is permeated with the presence and goodness of God.
  - The destiny of everything is ultimately re-absorption into the One, a return to that primal unity from which everything took its start.

- If everything is an emanation of the One and ultimately flows back into it, the question might rightly be asked: “In what way is it different from the One?” Ultimately, the question is about how God and creation differ from one another, if the creation is at its essence an emanation of God. *This is the central question of Neoplatonism with which Christianity must contend, and with which we continue to struggle to this day.* Two dangerous consequences follow from the normal understanding of Plotinus’ views:
  - The first is that individuality as such is at best temporary, at worst an illusion. For in the return to the One, individuality is erased as we flow back into that great unity from which we came. It is at this point that the Eastern influence is quite pronounced.
    - If there is no individuality beyond the return to the One, then the idea of a final judgment makes no sense.
    - Nor do the doctrines of Heaven and Hell, for such differentiation (even of the blessed from God in Heaven) is erased.
    - It will be impossible under such a scheme to assign any meaningful role to Christ’s death on the cross, for all things will ultimately and necessarily be folded back into the One, so what is the point of atonement?
  - The second is that the world is not really other than the divine. I stated above that in Plotinus’ view, “all of reality is permeated with the presence and goodness of God;” this isn’t strictly true. Rather, all of reality *is* God, though God as having emanated into a lower form. Only in this way could it be taken back up into him at the end of all things.
    - Therefore, the answer to the question: “what is the relationship between God and creation” for Neoplatonism is that they are identical. The theological problems of such a pantheism are legion, and I will not enumerate the various reasons why the Church has continually had to rule this out as a valid theological option.

### **Christian Neoplatonism: Pseudo-Dionysius**

In Acts 17:34 we read of Dionysius, a member of the philosophical society of Mars Hill (Areopagus; therefore, he was called the “Areopagite”) who converted to Christianity after St. Paul’s discourse there. At some point during our period, works began to circulate which claimed to have been written by this Dionysius. The deep dependence on Plotinus evident in these works makes it highly unlikely that they were written nearly two centuries before by the Dionysius of Acts (thus, their author is referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius); nevertheless, they were believed by most of the early theologians to have been penned by a disciple of Paul. Thus, while they were not Scripture, they were about as authoritative as anything not Scripture could be. This circumstance set Christianity up for what will turn out to be a lifelong struggle with the ideas of Neoplatonism. Important features:

- Perhaps the most obvious idea inherited from Plotinus is a hierarchical structure of the universe. Pseudo-Dionysius, as a devout Christian, believes the notion of a hierarchy makes sense, and will also structure these hierarchies in triadic structures wherever possible, to image the Trinity. For him, a hierarchy is “a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine” (*Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1). The goal of hierarchy is, in his view, “to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him” (*ibid.* 3.2).

- Thus, the basic hierarchy is God-angels-humanity.
- Within the angels, he distinguishes 3 ranks, each of which further has three ranks, making up 9 total angelic orders.
- A similar division is to be found in the Church.
- At each level, the ranks are differentiated according to their function: the first rank deals with perfection or union with the divine, the second with illumination (revelation), the third with purification. It will be seen that these functions map fairly well onto the persons of the Trinity, as well.
- All of this becomes the basis of a mystical theology whose impact on Christianity has been massive, and which continues to this very day.
- Another major idea inherited from Plotinus is the notion of emanation. Pseudo-Dionysius will describe God as “self-diffusing goodness,” that is, as the highest Good which spontaneously and because of no other reason than because the Good would wish to share itself emanates others.
  - This is a necessary emanation, and therefore, properly speaking, this is to be understood to be the processions of the persons within the Trinity: God becomes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit because, being Good, God wishes to share what God has.
  - It doesn’t stop there, though, for God chooses to go on and emanate angels, and humans, and the whole created hierarchy. Each level gets further and further from God, becoming less and less noble, such that a man is not as glorious as an angel, a dog not as glorious as a man, and a stone not as glorious as a dog. But they are all emanations of the divine, and all possess within themselves something of his goodness. Matter is not evil, it is just the least good of all created goods.
  - It is unclear how Pseudo-Dionysius would answer the question of the relationship between God and creation on such a scheme. It is the single most important question he must be asked, and yet it is one that has rarely been put to him in the history of Christianity. The texts are able to be understood in several ways, and so it is the duty of the one drawing inspiration from these texts to ensure that the relationship is not conceived of in terms of identity, which would end up with the problems discussed above.